THE EDUCATION TO EMPLOYMENT PIPELINE IN INDIA: WHY THE BRIDGES BUILT SO FAR DO NOT REACH THE OTHER SIDE

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ABSTRACT

India now produces more employable graduates than it did a decade ago on almost every measure the government and industry track, and this paper takes that improvement seriously rather than treating it as noise to be explained away. National graduate employability, as measured by the Wheebox India Skills Report, has risen from roughly a third of graduates a decade ago to just over half today. The paper's argument is that this aggregate improvement conceals a much more uneven and, in one respect, genuinely counterintuitive picture underneath it: employability gains have concentrated almost entirely in general higher education, particularly computer science, engineering, and management, while the vocational and technical tracks that Indian policy has spent a decade building specifically to close the education to employment gap, namely Industrial Training Institutes and polytechnic diplomas, report employability rates less than half the national average and, on the polytechnic side, less than a third. This is not the result the last ten years of policy design predicted. The paper traces why, working through the fragmented institutional architecture that governs apprenticeship and vocational training in India, in which two separate ministries run two separate apprenticeship schemes under the same amended statute, in which apprentices are defined by section eighteen of the Apprentices Act, 1961 to be trainees rather than employees and so fall outside most labour protections, and in which the National Education Policy's own vocational integration target has been tracked mainly through projections rather than verified outcomes. It examines the Prime Minister's Internship Scheme, launched in 2024, as the most recent and most heavily funded attempt to build a different kind of bridge, and asks what would actually need to change, institutionally rather than rhetorically, for that bridge to hold more weight than the ones built before it.

I. Introduction

Start with a number that should complicate any simple story about India's education to employment problem. According to the India Skills Report 2026, graduates of Industrial Training Institutes, the vocational track Indian policy has promoted for two decades as the direct answer to youth unemployment, have an employability rate of forty-five point nine five per cent. Polytechnic diploma holders, the next rung up the vocational ladder, come in at thirty-two point nine two per cent. Computer science and information technology graduates, by contrast, sit at eighty per cent.[1] If the education to employment pipeline worked the way most policy documents describe it, this ranking should run the other way. Vocational and technical training exists, definitionally, to produce job-ready graduates faster and more reliably than a general degree does. On the numbers India's own annual employability survey reports, it is currently doing the opposite.

This paper takes that inversion as its starting point rather than as an inconvenient footnote to a more familiar story. The familiar story, repeated in enough government reports and industry white papers that it has become close to received wisdom, runs roughly as follows: Indian higher education produces graduates whose curricula have not kept pace with what employers actually need, a mismatch that could be closed by building more vocational training capacity, more apprenticeships, and more structured internships. That story is not wrong, exactly. But it is incomplete in a way that matters for anyone trying to design the next round of policy, because it assumes the vocational and apprenticeship track is already doing its job well and simply needs to be scaled up, when the employability data suggests the vocational track itself has a credibility problem at least as serious as the one afflicting general higher education.

The paper proceeds in five parts. Part II sets out what the employability data actually shows once it is disaggregated by stream, rather than reported as a single national average. Part III examines the statutory and institutional architecture that is supposed to connect education to employment, principally the Apprentices Act, 1961 and the two separate apprenticeship schemes run under it. Part IV looks at the two most significant recent policy interventions, the National Education Policy, 2020's vocational integration target and the Prime Minister's Internship Scheme launched in October 2024. Part V draws out four structural problems that

[1]Shradha Chettri, India Skills Report 2026: CS, IT Engineers Most Employable; Women Beat Men for First Time in Five Years, Careers360 (Nov. 12, 2025).

recur across every part of this architecture, and Part VI closes with what a genuinely more effective pipeline would need to look like.

A note on method and scope. This paper relies primarily on the Wheebox India Skills Report, an industry survey rather than an official government statistic, for its stream-level employability figures, because it is the only publicly available source that disaggregates employability by educational stream on an annual basis; the Periodic Labour Force Survey conducted by the National Statistical Office is more methodologically rigorous and is used in Part II to establish broader employment trends, but it does not, in its published form, break results down by specific stream of education in the way this paper's central argument requires. Where the two sources speak to the same question, this paper notes any material divergence between them rather than treating either as automatically authoritative. The paper also confines itself to central government schemes and central legislation; several states run their own supplementary apprenticeship and internship programmes, and a full account of the pipeline at state level would require a separate study this paper does not attempt.

II. Mapping the Mismatch: What the Employability Data Actually Shows

A. The Headline Number and What It Hides

The headline figure most often quoted in Indian policy discussion is the national graduate employability rate published annually by Wheebox, in partnership with the Confederation of Indian Industry and the All India Council for Technical Education, based on the Global Employability Test administered to several hundred thousand candidates each year. That figure rose from thirty-three per cent a decade ago to fifty-four point eight one per cent in the India Skills Report 2025, a genuinely large improvement that no serious account of Indian higher education should ignore.[2] The trouble with treating this figure as the main measure of pipeline health is that it is an average across streams whose individual employability rates differ by a factor of nearly two and a half. Management graduates lead the field, though their employability actually fell from seventy-eight per cent in the 2025 edition of the report to seventy-two point seven six per cent the following year, a decline the report attributes to industry shifting toward more applied, cross-functional managerial skills than a traditional master's degree in business administration is currently built to teach.[3] Commerce graduates

[2]India Skills Report 2025, at 4 (Wheebox, CII & AICTE, Dec. 2024).
[3]Chettri (n 1).

moved the other way, rising sharply from fifty-five per cent to sixty-two point eight one per cent, a jump the report links to hiring growth in banking, financial services, and financial technology specifically.

A single national percentage cannot hold a stream-level swing of this size, and reporting it as though it can invites exactly the kind of policy response that treats employability as a uniform problem with a uniform fix, whether that fix is a curriculum revision applied evenly across disciplines or a funding formula that allocates skilling money by headcount rather than by where the actual shortfall sits. The gender pattern in the same data cuts against the usual assumption as well: women's employability overtook men's for the first time in five years in the 2026 report, at fifty-four per cent against fifty-one point five per cent, a reversal that had been moving in the opposite direction as recently as the 2025 edition, where women's projected employability was expected to fall while men's rose.[4] Whatever is driving that particular reversal, and the report itself does not fully explain it, it is not the kind of steady, predictable trend that would let a single national number stand in for the underlying reality.

B. The Vocational Paradox: ITIs and Polytechnics

The more troubling disaggregation, for the specific argument this paper makes, is the one between general higher education and the vocational and technical tracks that Indian skilling policy has treated as its flagship instrument since the launch of the Skill India Mission in 2015. Industrial Training Institutes, of which India now has several thousand, both government-run and privately operated, exist specifically to produce trade-certified, job-ready workers in a shorter time frame and at lower cost than a university degree. Their graduates' employability rate of forty-five point nine five per cent, while an improvement on the previous year's figure of forty-one per cent, remains below every general-education stream the India Skills Report tracks except the very bottom of the arts stream in its weakest years.[5] Polytechnic diploma holders fare worse still, at thirty-two point nine two per cent, describing itself in the report's own words as slow but positive growth rather than anything approaching parity with the university-educated cohort the vocational track is meant to offer a faster, cheaper alternative to.

This paradox deserves to be stated plainly rather than folded into a general complaint about

[4]Chettri (n 1).
[5]Chettri (n 1).

skill gaps, because it points to a specific policy failure rather than a general one: India has spent a decade building vocational training capacity on the assumption that the capacity itself was the binding constraint, when the employability data suggests that even the students who do complete ITI and polytechnic programmes are not, on average, coming out job-ready in the way the theory behind the vocational track assumes they should. An oft-cited industry estimate places the share of India's total workforce that has received any formal vocational training below five per cent, a strikingly low base against which the country's under-thirty-five population, which exceeds sixty-five per cent of the total, is meant to be trained.[6] Whether the binding constraint is training quality, employer perception of vocational credentials, or a mismatch between the trades ITIs teach and the trades employers are actually hiring for is a question the aggregate employability figures cannot answer on their own, but the figures at least establish that simply building more of the same kind of vocational capacity, without asking why the existing capacity underperforms, is unlikely to close the gap by itself.

C. Where the Gap Is Widest: Regional Variation

The national figures discussed above also flatten a regional spread wide enough to call into question how much a single national policy instrument, applied uniformly, can be expected to achieve. Maharashtra leads the India Skills Report's state rankings with eighty-four per cent graduate employability, followed by Delhi at seventy-eight per cent and Karnataka at seventy-five per cent, while several other states report employability closer to seventy per cent even among their general graduate population, before any disaggregation by vocational stream is applied.[7] A vocational or apprenticeship scheme designed and funded centrally, with uniform stipend rates and uniform reimbursement caps regardless of where in the country a trainee is based, is being asked to close a gap that looks structurally different depending on whether the relevant Industrial Training Institute sits in a state with an eighty-four per cent general employability baseline or one considerably below it. This paper does not have the state-by-state vocational employability breakdown needed to say precisely how much of the ITI and polytechnic underperformance documented in Part II.B is concentrated in particular states rather than spread evenly across the country, and that absence of disaggregated data is itself worth flagging as a gap in what is publicly available, since a national policy response calibrated

[6]See National Apprenticeship Promotion Scheme, Hyring HR Glossary (2026) (collecting the widely cited industry estimate that formal vocational training reaches under five per cent of the Indian workforce, against comparator figures frequently quoted for economies such as Germany and South Korea).
[7]India Skills Report 2025 (n 2) at 5.

to a national average risks either overcorrecting in states where the underlying problem is smaller or undercorrecting in the states where it is largest.

III. Statutory and Institutional Architecture

A. The Apprentices Act, 1961 and the National Apprenticeship Promotion Scheme

The Apprentices Act, 1961, substantially amended in 2014, is the primary statute governing structured, on-the-job training in India, and its 2014 amendment was deliberately designed to make the apprenticeship obligation easier for employers to meet. Establishments with thirty or more employees, including contract employees, are required to engage apprentices at a rate of between two point five and fifteen per cent of their total workforce, a range the 2014 amendment introduced specifically to replace the more rigid, trade-by-trade quota system the original 1961 Act had used.[8] The amendment also decriminalised non-compliance, replacing imprisonment with fines as the only available penalty, and it introduced so-called optional trades, letting an employer design its own apprenticeship curriculum for a role the government's designated trade list does not already cover, a change aimed squarely at sectors such as information technology, retail, and business process outsourcing where the pre-2014 trade list was of limited use.

Financial support for employers engaging apprentices comes through the National Apprenticeship Promotion Scheme, notified in August 2016 and administered by the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, which reimburses twenty-five per cent of an apprentice's prescribed stipend, capped at one thousand five hundred rupees a month, along with a contribution toward the cost of basic training for apprentices who have not completed any prior structured training.[9] That subsidy structure is worth pausing on, because a twenty-five per cent reimbursement capped at fifteen hundred rupees covers a genuinely small share of an employer's total cost when the prescribed minimum stipend for a trade apprentice already runs to nine thousand rupees a month or more; the cap has not moved with the rise in mandated stipend levels, which means the effective subsidy rate, as a proportion of total stipend cost, has been quietly shrinking even as the scheme's headline reimbursement percentage has stayed the

[8]Apprentices Act 1961, No 52 of 1961, INDIA CODE, as amended by the Apprentices (Amendment) Act 2014, No 29 of 2014.
[9]National Apprenticeship Promotion Scheme, Press Information Bureau (2016).

same on paper.

A separate and, for present purposes, more significant feature of the Act is section eighteen, which provides that an apprentice undergoing training in a designated or optional trade is a trainee rather than a worker, and that the provisions of labour law do not apply to that person by virtue of the apprenticeship.[10] The consequence, spelled out in guidance issued under the Act, is that apprentices fall outside the Employees' State Insurance and Provident Fund schemes, cannot organise or join a trade union in that capacity, and have no statutory entitlement to conversion into permanent employment once the apprenticeship period ends, notwithstanding that many apprentices spend a year or more performing work that is, in substance, indistinguishable from that of a regular employee doing the same job at the same workstation.[11] This is not, on its own, evidence of a defective scheme; a training relationship that carried the full weight of employment law would plausibly discourage exactly the kind of employer participation the scheme is trying to encourage. But it does mean the apprenticeship route, as currently structured, asks apprentices to absorb a meaningful share of the risk that the training investment does not lead to a job, without the ordinary legal protections that would otherwise attach to a year of full-time, employer-directed work.

B. A Second Scheme, a Second Ministry: NATS and Institutional Fragmentation

A detail that rarely makes it into policy commentary, but that matters considerably for anyone trying to understand why the pipeline underperforms, is that NAPS is not the only central apprenticeship scheme operating under the same amended Act. Engineering graduates, diploma holders, and general stream graduates are instead routed to a separate scheme, the National Apprenticeship Training Scheme, administered not by the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship but by the Department of Higher Education within the Ministry of Education, while NAPS covers everyone else.[12] The government's own communications acknowledge that this division has created enough duplication and confusion that convergence between the two schemes is an active policy goal rather than an achieved state of affairs. A graduate trying to work out which scheme applies to their own qualification, which portal to register on, and

[10] Apprentices Act 1961 (n 8) s 18.

[11] FAQs, Apprenticeship under the Apprentices Act 1961, Question 55 (Directorate General of Training, Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship).

[12] National Apprenticeship Promotion Scheme, Press Information Bureau, Department of Skill Development and Employment (2024) (describing NATS and NAPS as parallel schemes administered by different ministries, with government efforts under way to bring the two into convergence).

which ministry to approach if something goes wrong is navigating a division that has nothing to do with the underlying economics of training and everything to do with the historical accident of which government department happened to run which programme first.

C. The National Council for Vocational Education and Training and the Standardisation Attempt

The most recent institutional response to this fragmentation is the National Council for Vocational Education and Training, established in 2018 to bring the accreditation of vocational training providers and the setting of skill qualification standards under a single regulatory umbrella, replacing what had previously been a patchwork of separate sector skill councils and state-level bodies operating with limited coordination between them. The Council's mandate covers grading and accreditation of training providers, approval of qualification standards under the National Skills Qualification Framework, and recognition of prior learning, functions that had been distributed across multiple agencies with inconsistent standards before its creation.

A single accrediting body is a sensible institutional response to a genuinely fragmented landscape, and this paper does not suggest otherwise. But an accrediting body standardizes the quality signal a vocational qualification sends to employers; it does not, on its own, change whether employers actually value that signal once they receive it, and the ITI and polytechnic employability figures discussed in Part II were recorded well after the Council's standardization work was already under way. Standardization appears to be a necessary step toward closing the vocational employability gap. Nothing in the currently available data suggests it has so far been a sufficient one.

IV. Recent Policy Responses: NEP 2020 and the PM Internship Scheme

A. The National Education Policy 2020's Vocational Integration Target

The National Education Policy, 2020 set a specific, widely quoted target: that by 2025, at least fifty per cent of learners in the secondary and higher education system should have exposure to vocational education, up from a base the policy itself describes as under five per cent at the time of drafting. Industry reporting on the target's status, as the target year arrived, framed it consistently as a projection rather than a verified achievement, describing more than half of

secondary and tertiary students as anticipated to engage in vocational training by 2025 rather than reporting that this had, in fact, occurred.[13] The gap between a policy target stated as an aspiration in 2020 and a subsequent industry report still describing that same target in anticipatory rather than confirmed terms five years later is itself a useful data point about how this particular reform has actually proceeded, independent of whatever the eventual verified figure turns out to be once the relevant survey data is published and audited.

None of this is to say the target was poorly chosen. A policy that names a specific number and a specific deadline is, in the ordinary case, easier to hold a government accountable to than one that speaks only in general terms about improving vocational access. The difficulty is narrower: a target measured by exposure to vocational education says nothing about the employability question that is this paper's central concern, and the ITI and polytechnic data in Part II suggests that exposure, without more, is not obviously translating into the outcome the target was presumably meant to serve as a proxy for.

B. The Prime Minister's Internship Scheme: A Different Kind of Bridge

The most significant new intervention in this space is the Prime Minister's Internship Scheme, announced in the Union Budget for the 2024 to 2025 financial year and launched, in pilot form, on October 3, 2024. Its scale is unusually large by the standards of previous skilling schemes: the government has committed to one crore, or ten million, internships over five years, placed with India's top five hundred companies by average corporate social responsibility expenditure over the preceding three years, with the pilot phase alone targeting one point twenty-five lakh internships in its first year at a cost of roughly eight hundred crore rupees.[14] Each internship runs for twelve months, with participants required to spend at least half of that period on genuine, hands-on work rather than observation or classroom-style training, and each intern receives a monthly stipend of five thousand rupees, of which four thousand five hundred is paid by the central government directly to the intern's bank account and five hundred is contributed by the host company from its own corporate social responsibility budget, alongside a one-time joining grant of six thousand rupees.[15]

[13]India Skills Report 2025, at 6 (Wheebox, CII & AICTE, Dec. 2024) ("more than half of secondary and tertiary students are anticipated to engage in vocational training by 2025").
[14]Prime Minister Internship Scheme Aims to Provide 1.25 Lakh Opportunities, All India Radio News (Oct. 4, 2024).
[15]Govt Launches Prime Minister's Internship Scheme, Aims to Provide 1.25 Lakh Internships in FY 2024, DD

Two design choices distinguish this scheme from the apprenticeship architecture discussed in Part III, and both are worth flagging because they suggest the government itself may share some of this paper's diagnosis, even if it has not stated the diagnosis in these terms. First, the stipend is paid directly to the intern by government transfer, rather than reimbursed to the employer after the fact the way NAPS structures its subsidy, which removes at least one layer of the administrative friction that has historically slowed apprenticeship stipend disbursement. Second, participating companies are selected by reference to a corporate social responsibility spending threshold rather than by sector or by any assessment of their capacity to actually train interns well, a selection method that guarantees large, well-resourced companies but says nothing directly about training quality, and that has already drawn criticism for concentrating opportunities among firms with the compliance capacity to participate in a new government portal rather than necessarily the firms best positioned to convert a twelve-month internship into a durable skill.

The scheme's early uptake numbers are large in absolute terms and more modest relative to its own stated ambition. More than six lakh applications were recorded in the first round, and the second round, opened in early 2025, offered a little over one lakh positions across more than three hundred participating companies.[16] Set against a five-year target of one crore internships, a pace of roughly one to one point twenty-five lakh placements a year would need to accelerate very substantially, by a factor approaching eight, to reach the scheme's own headline number on schedule, and whether that acceleration is achievable depends on a question the scheme's design has not yet answered: whether enough companies beyond the initial cohort of large, CSR-compliant firms are willing and able to absorb interns at the pace the target requires.

The scheme's first year also surfaced a practical friction worth recording honestly rather than glossing over, since it bears directly on this paper's broader argument about institutional design. Several participating companies were slower to confirm placements than the scheme's own timeline anticipated, and press coverage during the pilot phase described selected candidates waiting weeks past the scheme's stated joining dates for individual companies to actually process their affiliation, a delay attributable less to any flaw in the underlying policy design than to the ordinary friction of onboarding a large first cohort through corporate human-

News (Oct. 3, 2024).

[16]PM Internship Scheme Opens Round 2: 1 Lakh Paid Internships in Top Companies, All India Radio News (Feb. 20, 2025).

resources systems that were not originally built with a government internship mandate in mind.[17] A scheme that depends on voluntary participation from five hundred of India's largest companies is, by construction, exposed to exactly this kind of onboarding friction in its early rounds, and whether it persists into later rounds, once companies have built repeatable internal processes for the scheme, is a fair test of whether the scheme's design is genuinely more resilient than the apprenticeship architecture it is implicitly meant to improve on.

V. Why the Pipeline Still Leaks: Three Structural Problems

Pulling together the statutory architecture in Part III and the newer policy interventions in Part IV, three structural problems recur across nearly every programme this paper has examined, and none of them is specific to any single scheme.

The first is the employment relationship problem already flagged in connection with section eighteen of the Apprentices Act. Every major bridge programme this paper has discussed, apprenticeships under NAPS and NATS alike, and the PM Internship Scheme itself, deliberately structures the trainee's status to fall short of full employment, whether by statutory design, as with apprentices, or by the twelve-month, non-renewable structure of the PM Internship Scheme, which is explicitly not intended to create any expectation of continued employment with the host company. This design choice makes sense from the employer's side of the transaction, since it lowers the cost and risk of participating. It does mean that a young person can complete a formally successful, government-sponsored bridge programme and still be exactly where they started, credential in hand but employment relationship over, unless the host employer independently chooses to make an offer the scheme itself does nothing to require or even to formally encourage.

The second is the institutional fragmentation problem illustrated most clearly by the NAPS and NATS split discussed in Part III.B, but visible more broadly in the sheer number of separate central schemes, state-level Industrial Training Institute systems, sector skill councils, and now the National Council for Vocational Education and Training's standardization layer sitting on top of all of it. A prospective apprentice, intern, or vocational student in India is not choosing among a small number of clearly differentiated pathways; they are navigating a landscape where which ministry, which scheme, and which portal applies to them depends on facts about

[17]See Prime Minister Internship Scheme, Wikipedia (2026) (noting delays during the pilot phase in finalizing placements with several participating companies).

their own qualification, sector, and state that are not always obvious from the outside, and where the government's own public communications, as with the NAPS-NATS convergence effort, acknowledge the fragmentation as a live problem rather than a historical one that has already been resolved.

The third, and the hardest to fix through institutional redesign alone, is the curriculum-market lag problem, which the stream-level employability swings documented in Part II illustrate more sharply than any single anecdote about outdated syllabi could. Management education's employability fell by more than five percentage points in a single year, not because business schools suddenly became worse at teaching, but because employer demand shifted toward a kind of applied, cross-functional skill set that a fixed two-year curriculum, once approved and running, cannot adjust to within a single admissions cycle. Vocational curricula face the same lag in a more acute form, because a trade syllabus approved for an Industrial Training Institute is, by design, more specific and more slowly updated than a general degree programme, which means a mismatch between what an ITI teaches and what local employers are currently hiring for can persist for years before the accreditation and syllabus-revision machinery catches up to it.

The fourth problem is less a design flaw in any individual scheme than a gap running underneath all of them: none of the programmes examined in this paper publishes a systematic account of what happens to participants once their apprenticeship, internship, or vocational course actually ends. NAPS reports the total number of apprentices engaged since its inception, a headline figure of roughly thirteen point thirty-eight lakh as of the most recent public disclosure, but does not publish what share of those apprentices went on to paid employment, with the host employer or elsewhere, once their term concluded.[18] The PM Internship Scheme, still in its early rounds, has not yet had time to generate a full cohort of twelve-month completions, but its public reporting to date has likewise emphasized applications received and placements offered rather than any forward-looking commitment to track and publish what those placements convert into a year later. Every recommendation this paper makes in Part VI depends, in the end, on that outcome data existing and being made public, because without it neither government nor an outside researcher can distinguish a scheme that is genuinely closing

[18]National Apprenticeship Promotion Scheme, Press Information Bureau (n 9) (reporting a cumulative total of approximately 13.38 lakh apprentices engaged since the scheme's inception, without a corresponding published outcome measure).

the employability gap from one that is simply generating a large, well-publicized number of placements that convert into durable employment at a rate no one has yet measured.

VI. What Would Actually Close the Gap

This paper resists the temptation to end with a long list of recommendations disconnected from the three problems just identified, and proposes instead three changes, each addressed directly to one of them.

On the employment relationship problem, the most direct fix within the existing legal framework would be a statutory or scheme-level conversion right, not a guarantee of permanent employment, which would undermine the cost logic that makes employers willing to participate in the first place, but a defined right for an apprentice or intern who completes their term to a documented, reasoned response from the host employer on whether continued employment is being offered, and if not, why not. This would not force employers to hire; it would simply require them to generate a data point, currently missing from every scheme this paper has examined, on what actually happens to participants once their term ends, which is also the single most useful piece of information currently absent from public reporting on both NAPS and the PM Internship Scheme.

On the fragmentation problem, the National Council for Vocational Education and Training's mandate could usefully be extended, by amendment or executive order, to include a single, unified applicant-facing portal spanning NAPS, NATS, and the PM Internship Scheme together, so that a young person's starting point is their own qualification and location rather than a prior, often accidental understanding of which ministry runs which programme. The underlying schemes could remain administratively separate without the applicant-facing experience remaining fragmented in the way it currently is.

On the curriculum-market lag problem, the more difficult structural issue, the most realistic near-term response is not a faster syllabus-revision cycle, which institutional experience elsewhere suggests is hard to sustain, but a formal requirement that vocational and technical qualification standards under the National Skills Qualification Framework include an employer-facing labour market signal, drawing on exactly the kind of stream-level employability data the India Skills Report already collects, reviewed on a fixed annual cycle rather than left to be revised only when a particular trade's obsolescence becomes obvious

enough to prompt an ad hoc response. The data current policy needs already exists and is already being collected every year; what is missing is a formal, binding link between that data and the institutions responsible for keeping vocational curricula current.

On the data problem underlying all three of the others, the fix is comparatively inexpensive relative to everything else this paper has proposed: a standard, published, twelve-month post-completion outcome survey, tracking employment status, wage, and sector for a representative sample of NAPS apprentices, NATS apprentices, and PM Internship Scheme participants alike, reported on a common template so the three schemes can, for the first time, be compared against one another rather than assessed only in isolation. A government that has built the administrative capacity to run a direct-benefit stipend transfer to a million interns within a matter of months, as the PM Internship Scheme's payment architecture demonstrates it can, has almost certainly built the administrative capacity to send that same cohort a short follow-up survey a year later. Whether it chooses to is a question of institutional will rather than institutional capacity, which makes it, of the four problems this paper has identified, the one with the least defensible excuse for remaining unresolved.

VII. Conclusion

This paper opened with a number that runs against the grain of most policy writing on India's education to employment pipeline: that Industrial Training Institute and polytechnic graduates, the products of the very track India has spent a decade building to solve the youth employability problem, report lower employability than almost every general higher-education stream the country's own annual skills survey tracks. That inversion does not mean vocational training was the wrong idea. It means the institutional architecture built to deliver it, split across two ministries and two schemes under a single amended statute, structured around a trainee status that excludes most labour protections, and standardized only recently and only partially, has not yet been built well enough to make good on the idea.

The Prime Minister's Internship Scheme is a genuinely large and, in its stipend-disbursement design at least, genuinely better-built attempt to bridge the same gap, but it is still too early to know whether it will encounter the same underlying problems this paper has traced through the older schemes, or whether its scale and design will let it avoid them. The honest answer, at this point in the scheme's life, is that nobody outside the Ministry of Corporate Affairs currently has the data needed to say either way, and that absence of data is itself the paper's final point

rather than an incidental gap in the available literature. What should not happen, on the evidence this paper has set out, is another decade spent scaling up vocational training capacity on the assumption that capacity was ever the binding constraint. It was not the only one, and on the current data, it may not even be the largest one. A pipeline cannot be judged by how many people enter it. It can only be judged by how many come out on the other side into work that lasts, and that is precisely the number none of the schemes this paper has examined currently publishes.