

# From Classrooms to Gigs: Unfolding the Skilling Journey of Academic Consultants

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**Abstract:** *The rapid proliferation of technology, digital connectivity, and platform-based employment models has redefined the very concept of work in the 21st century. Traditional stable, full-time jobs have gradually been replaced by flexible, contractual work arrangements referred to as gig economy. From transportation and food delivery to information technology, design, and education, the gig economy has emerged as one of the fastest-growing employment ecosystems. While much of the global discussion on gig work centres around sectors such as transport, logistics, and delivery, a silent revolution is unfolding in the education sector. After the COVID-19 pandemic, a new set of workers was introduced known as academic consultants which included – subject matter experts, content creators, instructional designer, skilled freelancers, trainers, educators and research guides. They enjoy freedom to choose their projects, clients and schedule. This paper investigates the dynamics of skilling and reskilling among academic consultants in India's gig economy using secondary data from reputable open-source databases. The study explores the scope of gig work in the education sector, identifies the key competencies required for academic consultants, and examines the barriers that hinder continuous professional development. It concludes with recommendations strengthening the skilling ecosystem through digital literacy, public-private partnerships, and AI-enabled micro-credential frameworks.*

**Keywords:** Gig Economy, Academic Consultants, Digital Skills, NEP 2020, Skilling

## 1. Introduction

The rapid spread of technology, digital connectivity, and platform-based employment models has redefined the very concept of work in the 21st century. Traditional notions of stable, full-time jobs have gradually been replaced or supplemented by flexible, project-based work arrangements—commonly referred to as the gig economy. This system, characterized by independent contractors or freelancers offering services through online or offline platforms, represents a fundamental transformation in how labour is organized, valued, and delivered. From transportation and food delivery to information technology, design, and education, the gig economy has emerged as one of the fastest-growing employment ecosystems worldwide.

Globally, the gig economy is projected to reach USD 455 billion by 2025 (Mastercard, 2020), reflecting its increasing relevance to both developed and developing economies. The emergence of digital platforms has enabled millions of professionals to work independently, transcending geographical and institutional barriers. In India, the growth of the gig economy has been particularly remarkable, driven by digital inclusion, a young workforce, and government initiatives promoting entrepreneurship and skill development. The NITI Aayog report (NITI, 2022) titled “India’s Booming Gig and Platform Economy” estimated that India’s gig workforce consisted of 7.7 million workers in 2020–21, a number projected to expand to 23.5 million by 2030, constituting approximately 4.1% of total livelihoods. These statistics underline the scale of transformation underway in India’s labour market.

While much of the global discussion on gig work centres around blue-collar or service-oriented sectors such as transport, logistics, and delivery, a silent revolution is simultaneously unfolding in the domain of knowledge work—particularly in the education sector. India’s education

system, which caters to one of the largest learning populations in the world, has witnessed a paradigm shift toward digitization and platform-mediated instruction. Within this new digital ecosystem, a growing number of professionals have adopted academic consulting as a flexible and sustainable form of employment.

### The Rise of Academic Consulting in Education

The COVID-19 pandemic served as a powerful catalyst for digital transformation in education. The forced lockdown situation, compelled the entire education as well other sectors to immediately shift to online and hybrid working. Right from schools to universities and research centres, online learning was the only available option. This sudden shift created a huge demand for educators to provide with educational content favourable for digital platforms including YouTube, Udemy and other such platforms. A new set of workers was introduced known as academic consultants which included – subject matter experts, content creators, instructional designer, skilled freelancers, trainers, educators and research guides.

Unlike the traditional professors, who preferred working as a full-time employee at one institute, Academic consultants served various institutions and universities as it offered flexibility and choice to take-up the work. They started taking short-term contracts or lecture-based contracts, often juggling from one college to another or Ed-tech firms at once. The role of the academic consultants is not limited to delivering lectures, but also includes syllabi designing, developing contents and new courses, designing assessment tools and mentoring students. Digital platforms such as SWAYAM, EdX, Udemy, Coursera, NPTEL, etc are the preferable platforms for the academic consultants to provide their services.

The pandemic fast-tracked the widespread adoption of these roles. According to (IBEF, 2025), India’s online education

market, valued at USD 4 billion in 2022, is expected to grow at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 14.6%, reaching USD 10.4 billion by 2027. After this rapid growth, the education sector has become a key player in India's gig economy, creating opportunity for academic professionals who seek flexibility, autonomy and a global outreach. As more people turn to online learning, the demand for skilled educators who can deliver high-quality digital content has surged.

### Academic Consulting: A Blended Career Path

Academic consulting offers combination of traditional academia with flexibility of freelance work. Often called as "Edupreneurs", these professionals use their knowledge, skills and expertise to create, manage and deliver educational services using various digital platforms. Unlike full-time faculty who are bound with the traditional rules, academic consultants enjoy freedom to choose their projects/contracts, clients and Schedule. However, this independence comes with its own set of challenges which includes, limited system support, untimely payments, need to upgrade their skills, instability in getting the projects, inconsistent income, etc.

### The Imperative of Skilling in the Academic Gig Ecosystem

While the gig model presents vast opportunities, it simultaneously intensifies competition and skill obsolescence. Academic consultants, unlike traditional teachers, must continually upgrade their competencies to remain relevant in an environment shaped by emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning (ML), and adaptive learning systems. They are expected to master a diverse skill set that includes digital pedagogy, content authoring tools, data analytics, academic writing proficiency, and AI-assisted evaluation methods.

Educators today face the growing need to continuously upgrade their skills, with lifelong learning now a key priority outlined by the Ministry of Human Resource Development (2020). The National Education Policy (NEP) strongly encourages the use of digital tools in teaching and supports flexible learning paths through platforms like SWAYAM, NPTEL, and DIKSHA. These resources not only benefit students but also offer educators structured ways to enhance their professional skills.

However, for academic consultants working in the gig economy, skill development often comes with hurdles. Many operate independently, without access to formal training programs, funding for professional growth, or recognized certification systems. As a result, most learning becomes a personal responsibility—driven by individual motivation and the ability to afford it.

### Need for Skilling in the Academic Gig Space

While the field is becoming increasingly promising, the sustainability of academic consulting largely depends on

continuous skilling. Academic consultants need to keep updated about evolving pedagogical technologies, global standards of digital communication, and even AI-based tools for teaching and assessment. This paper argues that the success of academic consultants in the gig economy hinges on structured skill development frameworks aligned with India's national education priorities.

## 2. Review of Literature

### 2.1 The Gig Economy and Knowledge Work:

(International Labour Organisation, 2022) defines gig work as income-earning activities outside traditional employer-employee relationships, often mediated by digital platforms. While much of the literature focuses on blue-collar gig work (e.g., ride-hailing, delivery), a growing body of research explores "knowledge-intensive" gig work—intellectual or creative services delivered online. (Upwork, 2023) highlights that 47% of freelancers globally now belong to the knowledge sector, a sharp rise from 33% in 2018.

In India, (NITI, 2022) identifies education, IT, design, and writing as key knowledge-driven gig sectors. This category offers higher income potential but also demands advanced digital and cognitive skills.

### 2.2 Academic Consulting in a Digitalized Education System

With the global digital learning market projected to reach USD 680 billion by 2030, academic consulting has become integral to the online education value chain. Consultants perform tasks such as:

- Curriculum design and instructional development
- Content editing and quality assurance
- Assessment creation and grading support
- Online tutoring and mentorship

This gigified model reflects the rise of Education-as-a-Service (EaaS), where institutions outsource specific academic functions to freelancers. (Coursera, 2024) indicates that Indian learners show strong competency growth in business, technology, and data science, driving demand for domain experts who can guide learners remotely.

### 2.3 Skill Competencies for Academic Consultants:

Skill enhancement is pivotal for sustaining competitiveness in the education gig market. The (World Economic Forum, 2023) lists analytical thinking, creativity, AI literacy, and resilience among the top ten skills of the decade. For academic consultants, required competencies can be categorized as:

Skill Category	Description	Examples of Tools/Platforms
Pedagogical Skills	Designing online courses and engaging learners	Google Classroom, Moodle, SWAYAM
Digital Literacy	Using digital authoring tools and learning management systems	Canva, PowerPoint, Articulate
Research & Writing	Producing plagiarism-free, structured academic content	Turnitin, Grammarly
AI & Data Skills	Integrating AI for assessment or analytics	ChatGPT, Quizlet
Soft Skills	Communication, time management, client handling	LinkedIn, Trello

These competencies align with NEP 2020, which emphasizes “teacher capacity-building through ICT and digital fluency.”

**2.4 Challenges in Skilling Gig Academics**

Despite their growing relevance, academic consultants face barriers to continuous skill enhancement:

- Lack of institutional affiliation, resulting in limited access to formal training programs.
- Absence of standardized certifications, making it difficult to benchmark skills.
- High costs of advanced online courses and limited access to scholarships.
- Digital gender divide- women, despite forming a substantial portion of gig educators, face infrastructural and socio-economic barriers.

(International Labour Organisation, 2022) and (NSDC, 2024) both highlight the lack of recognition and protection mechanisms for gig professionals. The resulting “skill fragmentation” limits employability and professional growth.

**3. Research Methodology**

This study adopts a descriptive research design using secondary data from open-access and government sources. The data were extracted from:

- (NITI, 2022)– *India’s Booming Gig and Platform Economy*
- (International Labour Organisation, 2022)– *World Employment and Social Outlook*
- (Coursera, 2024) – *Global Skills Report*
- (World Economic Forum, 2023)– *Future of Jobs Report*
- (NSDC, 2024)– *Skill Development Dashboard*
- (SWAYAM, 2025) – *platform enrolment statistics*

The data were synthesized using a thematic analysis approach focusing on three dimensions:

- (1) Growth of gig-based education work;
- (2) Skill competencies and pathways; and
- (3) Challenges and policy gaps.

Graphical and tabular representations are included using publicly available data to support trends and interpretation.

**4. Data Analysis and Discussion**

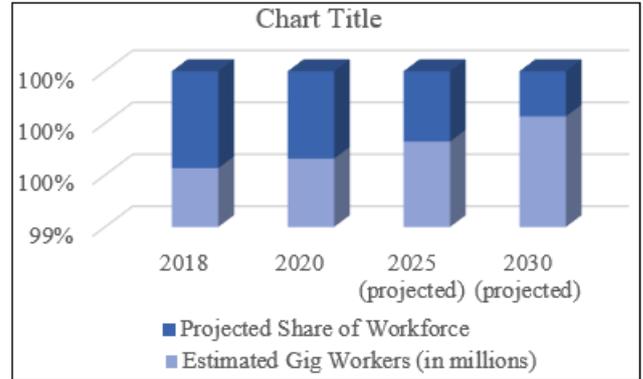
**4.1 Growth of Gig Work in Education**

The gig economy in India has expanded rapidly over the past five years. According to NITI Aayog (2022):

**Table 4.1**

Year	Estimated Gig Workers (in millions)	Projected Share of Workforce
2018	4.0	1.5%
2020	7.7	2.6%
2025 (projected)	12.5	3.4%
2030 (projected)	23.5	4.1%

Source: (NITI, 2022)



Within this workforce, the education and professional services sectors have recorded one of the fastest growth rates, driven by increased demand for flexible learning and academic outsourcing. According to (IBEF, 2025), India’s online education market is set to hit US\$ 7.57 billion (Rs. 65,458 crore) in 2025, growing at 25.76% CAGR to US\$ 18.94 billion by 2029, with 309.1 million users and 15% penetration.

This expansion directly correlates with the rising number of independent academic consultants working as freelancers, adjunct educators, and content specialists.

**4.2 Skill Competency Trends**

Based on (Coursera, 2024), Indian learners rank within the top 10 globally in business and technology skills, but only 43% proficiency in digital communication and data literacy. The implication for academic consultants is clear: digital pedagogy and AI-assisted content design are critical growth areas.

Moreover, (SWAYAM, 2025) data indicates over 13 million active learners across 2,000+ online courses, underscoring the scale of open-access skilling. The platform’s most popular categories include education, social sciences, and data analytics—the same areas where academic consultants frequently operate.

**Table 4.2: Skill Competency and Learning Trends Among Indian Learners (2024–25)**

Parameter	Indicator / Metric	Value (2024–25)	Interpretation
Global Rank in Business Skills	Performance percentile	8th	Indicates high competitiveness in management and commerce education.
Global Rank in Technology Skills	Performance percentile	9th	Reflects strong adaptability to EdTech tools among Indian learners.
Digital Communication Proficiency	Average learner proficiency score (%)	43%	Highlights a skill gap in online teaching and virtual learner engagement.
Data Literacy & Analytics Skills	Average learner proficiency score (%)	46%	Indicates a need for upskilling in evidence-based academic design.
AI and Automation Tool Familiarity	Emerging tech adoption rate (%)	59%	Suggests moderate use of AI-driven pedagogy and assessment tools.

Total Registered Learners (SWAYAM)	Count (in millions)	13.2 million	Shows massive participation in open-access education.
Total Courses Available (SWAYAM)	Number of courses	2,074	Reflects broad subject coverage supporting gig-based academic roles.
Active Instructors (SWAYAM)	Number of instructors	3,800	Demonstrates growing freelance/consultant participation in education.
Most Popular Course Domains	Categories	Education, Social Sciences, Data Analytics	Aligns with core consulting sectors for academic freelancers.
Parameter	Indicator / Metric	Value (2024–25)	Interpretation / Relevance
Global Rank in Business Skills	Performance percentile	8th	Indicates high competitiveness in management and commerce education.

Source: (Coursera, 2024) (SWAYAM, 2025)

### 4.3 Skilling Pathways and Platforms

India’s skilling ecosystem for gig workers is supported by several initiatives:

Skill India Mission (MSDE) – promoting modular employable skills and digital learning.

SWAYAM & NPTEL – free MOOCs offering micro-certifications for educators.

NSDC Programs – focusing on industry-linked short-term skilling.

These initiatives have created multiple learning pathways. For academic consultants, SWAYAM’s instructor-led MOOCs serve as both a learning and earning opportunity—educators design content while also upskilling through peer networks.

**Table 4.3: Open Learning Platforms Supporting Academic Consultants:**

Platform	Type	Focus Area	Enrolment (as of 2024)
SWAYAM	Govt. (MOOC)	Teacher education, ICT	4.03 million+
Coursera	Private	Business, technology	168 million+ (global)
NPTEL	Govt. (IIT-led)	Engineering, science	43.4 million+
Udemy	Private	Creative skills, training	77 million+

(Sources: (SWAYAM, 2025); (Coursera, 2024); <https://nptel.ac.in/>)

### 4.4 Challenges in Skilling Academic Consultants

Despite digital advances, structural gaps persist:

- 1) Financial Insecurity: Most academic consultants lack regular income or access to institutional funding for courses.
- 2) Fragmented Recognition: Skills acquired through MOOCs are not uniformly recognized by employers.
- 3) Limited Mentorship: Unlike university faculty, gig consultants lack communities of practice for shared learning.
- 4) Technological Divide: Many educators, particularly women in semi-urban areas, face infrastructural barriers (International Labour Organisation, 2022).

with projections suggesting continued double-digit growth through 2030.

However, this expansion is uneven. Structured skilling programs for academic consultants- such as instructional design, digital pedagogy, or AI-based content development-remain concentrated in urban and metro cities such as Bengaluru, Pune, Delhi, and Hyderabad.

According to (NSDC, 2024), over 70% of online education freelancers are urban-based, while only 14% of rural respondents reported access to digital teaching or content creation opportunities. This urban bias reflects disparities in internet infrastructure, exposure to EdTech ecosystems, and institutional linkages. Consequently, while demand for academic freelancers continues to grow, the narrow geographic scope of training limits inclusive participation.

## 5. Findings and Discussion

The analysis of secondary data from multiple sources, including (NITI, 2022), (International Labour Organisation, 2022), (Coursera, 2024), (NSDC, 2024), reveals three critical findings concerning the skilling landscape and participation of academic consultants in India’s gig economy. These findings highlight both the potential and the structural gaps that characterize the evolving academic gig ecosystem.

This concentration also influences quality and consistency. In Tier-II and Tier-III regions, many freelancers rely on self-learning via open-access resources (YouTube, Coursera, SWAYAM), but lack mentorship and certification pathways to professionalize their practice. Therefore, one of the emerging priorities is regional decentralization of skilling ecosystems, supported by government–industry partnerships and institutional training hubs.

### 5.1 Expanding Market but Narrow Skilling Scope

The Indian education gig market is experiencing rapid expansion, primarily driven by digital transformation and the proliferation of EdTech platforms. NITI Aayog’s India’s Booming Gig and Platform Economy report (NITI, 2022) estimated that the gig workforce in the education and training sector grew by nearly 18% annually between 2020 and 2023,

### 5.2 High Digital Dependence and Technology Integration

The productivity and employability of academic consultants today are deeply intertwined with digital fluency. From content design and delivery to analytics and learner engagement, technology defines performance standards in the academic gig space. (Coursera, 2024) revealed that while

India ranks 8th globally in business skills and 9th in technology, digital communication proficiency remains at only 43%—a clear indicator of uneven technological preparedness among educators.

This dependence is amplified by the rise of AI-assisted teaching and learning tools. Platforms such as ChatGPT, Canva, Miro, and Grammarly have become integral to course design and quality assurance. However, their use also introduces new skill demands— data literacy, prompt engineering, and algorithmic understanding— which many educators are still acquiring.

(Burlacu, 2025) suggests that nearly 62% of academic freelancers depend on at least one AI or digital tool for content creation, while only 38% receive any formal training in such tools. This skill–application gap raises concerns about the sustainability and authenticity of digital pedagogy practices.

Therefore, enhancing digital readiness through structured micro-certifications, peer learning, and institutional tie-ups is essential to ensure quality assurance and career progression within the academic gig economy.

### 5.3 Gender and Accessibility Gaps

The gender dimension within India’s academic gig ecosystem presents a paradox. Women constitute a significant share of freelance educators, particularly in humanities, early education, and language instruction. However, gender-based barriers persist in terms of access to technology, training, and financial resources.

According to the (International Labour Organisation, 2022), only 28% of female freelancers in education reported having access to structured upskilling or digital certification opportunities, compared to 46% of their male counterparts. This gap reflects broader societal constraints such as caregiving responsibilities, time poverty, and unequal access to digital infrastructure.

Moreover, (NSDC, 2024) suggests that women’s participation in advanced digital pedagogy or AI-driven content creation remains low— accounting for less than one-third of registered participants in technical teaching certification programs. The resulting “gendered digital divide” not only restricts income opportunities but also limits female representation in higher-value consulting assignments such as curriculum design, e-learning strategy, or academic analytics.

To address this imbalance, targeted interventions such as women-centric digital literacy programs, subsidized access to premium tools, and mentorship networks (for example, via the Skill India Digital Platform) are essential. Policies emphasizing flexible work design, maternity support, and remote learning infrastructure can also strengthen inclusion in this domain.

## 6. Conclusion and Recommendations

### 6.1 Conclusion

The study concludes that India’s academic gig workforce occupies a unique position within the broader gig economy— offering intellectual services that demand both cognitive and digital expertise. However, the sustainability of this model depends on robust skilling infrastructure, inclusive certification, and stronger institutional linkages. Without systematic training and recognition, academic consultants’ risk professional isolation and underutilization.

### 6.2 Recommendations

- 1) National Registry for Academic Consultants (NRAC): A centralized database under NSDC could register and certify gig educators, improving visibility and professional networking.
- 2) AI and Digital Literacy Programs: Collaboration between universities and EdTech platforms to deliver short-term certifications in AI-enabled pedagogy, supported by government subsidies.
- 3) Micro-Credential Frameworks: Integrate micro-credentials issued by SWAYAM, Coursera, and NPTEL into official qualification frameworks.
- 4) Gender-Sensitive Skilling Policies: Offer targeted digital training programs for women freelancers through community centres and digital literacy missions.
- 5) Industry-Academia Collaborations: Encourage partnerships between higher education institutions and gig platforms to co-design course content and skill assessments. Moreover, the syllabi in the institutions should be designed in such a manner, that makes the candidate education sector ready in general and academic gig ecosystem ready in particular.

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