



Future of academic work: Redefining job satisfaction in the age of AI and Automation

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Abstract

The rise of artificial intelligence (AI) and automation is transforming the structure, meaning, and satisfaction of academic work. Universities are increasingly adopting digital systems for teaching, research, and administration, reshaping traditional notions of autonomy, collegiality, and professional identity. In India, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and University Grants Commission (UGC) reforms emphasize technology enabled higher education through digital universities and online learning platforms. While AI can enhance efficiency and reduce routine workload, it also introduces challenges related to job security, technostress, and algorithmic control. This review examines how AI-driven transitions influence academic job satisfaction within Indian higher education, focusing on five emerging dimensions-digital autonomy, augmented competence, relational belonging, ethical security, and meaningful impact. Drawing on recent policy developments and global trends, it argues for a human-centered approach to technology adoption that prioritizes teacher well-being, ethical governance, and institutional trust. The future of academic work will depend on how effectively institutions balance innovation with the preservation of academic values and purpose.

Keywords: Academic work, job satisfaction, artificial intelligence, automation, higher education, NEP 2020, faculty autonomy, technostress, India

Introduction

The landscape of academic work is changing more rapidly than ever before. Artificial intelligence (AI) and automation are no longer distant technologies but everyday realities in teaching, research, and administration. From automated plagiarism detection and adaptive learning systems to generative AI tools capable of producing entire research drafts, higher education is at the frontier of digital transformation. In India, these changes are unfolding within a context of policy reform, expansion of higher education, and growing pressure for global competitiveness. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 has placed technology at the heart of its vision, advocating for digital learning, flexible curricula, and improved research quality (Ministry of Education, 2020). These developments bring both opportunities and anxieties for faculty members whose sense of job satisfaction depends not only on pay and conditions but also on autonomy, identity, recognition, and the meaning of their work. Job satisfaction in academia is a complex concept. It encompasses intrinsic factors such as intellectual stimulation, autonomy, and recognition, as well as extrinsic factors such as workload, institutional support, and career progression (Herzberg, 1966; Locke, 1976) ^[11]. When technologies alter these conditions, perceptions of satisfaction can shift dramatically. For instance, AI-driven grading systems may reduce workload but also reduce interaction with students, altering the emotional texture of teaching. Similarly, research automation may increase efficiency but reduce the sense of intellectual ownership. This review explores how AI and automation are redefining job satisfaction in Indian higher education, linking these transformations to broader global trends. The discussion begins with an overview of the traditional nature of academic work and the central determinants of satisfaction. It then examines how AI and automation affect different

dimensions of job satisfaction-autonomy, competence, relatedness, task structure, job security, recognition, and work-life balance. Drawing on self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) ^[9] and recent studies of AI adoption in higher education, the review analyses how these dimensions interact in the changing academic environment. Finally, it reflects on how Indian policy initiatives, including the NEP 2020 and University Grants Commission (UGC) reforms, can shape a more balanced and humane future for academic work in the age of AI (Chattopadhyay, 2020) ^[16].

The nature of academic work: tradition and transition

Academic work has always been characterized by a blend of freedom and structure. Traditionally, university teachers and researchers enjoyed significant autonomy to decide what and how to teach, what to research, and how to contribute to institutional service. This autonomy, combined with intellectual challenge and the opportunity to influence young minds, has long been considered a key driver of job satisfaction (Clark, 1989; Houston *et al.*, 2006) ^[8, 12]. However, the balance between teaching, research, and administrative duties has shifted over time. The massification of higher education, increased accountability, and pressure for measurable outputs have intensified workloads and changed perceptions of academic identity (Altbach and Yudkevich, 2016) ^[3].

In India, the expansion of higher education has been remarkable. The country now has more than 1,000 universities and 40,000 colleges, employing over 1.5 million faculty members (Misra and Pachauri, 2025) ^[4]. This growth has coincided with increasing digitalization. Initiatives such as the National Programme on Technology Enhanced Learning (NPTEL), SWAYAM, and the National Digital University aim to transform access and quality through online platforms and digital resources. These initiatives

signal a clear move toward integrating AI and automation into academic life. While they promise efficiency and innovation, they also raise questions about how academic labor is valued and what brings satisfaction to educators in a digital age. The traditional determinants of academic job satisfaction—autonomy, recognition, collegiality, and meaningful work—are being redefined in this new context. Academic staff now navigates hybrid environments where algorithms mediate teaching, research, and even evaluation. As these tools reshape daily routines, they influence both the content and the emotional experience of academic work. For example, while AI can assist in designing adaptive learning materials, it can also limit creativity if institutions impose standardized templates. Understanding this tension is crucial to reimagining job satisfaction for the future (Raj *et al.*, 2025) [25].

Autonomy in the age of automation

Autonomy has always been one of the strongest predictors of academic satisfaction. The freedom to pursue one's own research interests, design courses, and manage time independently has been central to the identity of professors and lecturers (Marginson, 2011) [14]. AI and automation are now altering this dynamic. On one hand, automation can enhance autonomy by relieving academics of repetitive administrative duties. Tools such as AI-driven attendance systems, automated feedback generators, and digital scheduling platforms can save time and allow educators to focus on higher-order intellectual work. On the other hand, these same tools can constrain freedom when they impose rigid formats or surveillance-based evaluation mechanisms. Recent studies suggest that the relationship between AI and autonomy depends largely on how technology is implemented. When faculty have control over the choice and use of AI tools, their satisfaction tends to increase. For example, a study by Verboom *et al.* (2025) [2] found that academics who perceive AI as a supportive aid rather than a monitoring mechanism report higher levels of autonomy and engagement. Conversely, when institutions mandate specific technologies without consultation, autonomy decreases, leading to resistance and dissatisfaction. In India, many universities have begun adopting centralized learning management systems (LMS) that standardize course design and grading processes. While these systems promote uniformity, they sometimes reduce teachers' flexibility in designing assessments or course materials, thereby affecting intrinsic satisfaction.

Moreover, automation of research related tasks, such as data analysis, citation management, and even literature synthesis through large language models—raises questions about intellectual independence. Scholars may find themselves relying on algorithmic suggestions rather than their own critical judgment. Over time, this dependency could erode the sense of ownership and originality that is central to academic identity. Thus, the challenge for Indian higher education is to adopt AI in ways that enhance academic freedom rather than undermine it. Policymakers and administrators must view autonomy not as a technical variable but as a human need essential for motivation and satisfaction (Deci & Ryan, 2000) [9].

Competence, skills, and the changing nature of expertise

Competence is another core element of job satisfaction. Academics derive pride from mastering their fields,

mentoring students, and producing high-quality research. However, as AI becomes more capable of performing complex cognitive tasks—such as statistical modeling, text generation, and content summarization—the meaning of expertise itself is shifting. The rapid pace of technological change can create both excitement and anxiety among faculty. Those who adapt quickly to new tools may feel empowered and competent, while others may feel left behind. In India, this divide is particularly visible between institutions with strong digital infrastructure and those with limited resources. Elite universities such as the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) and Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs) have begun experimenting with AI-driven research analytics, virtual labs, and data-based decision-making. Meanwhile, smaller state and private colleges often lack the training and resources to integrate such technologies effectively. This uneven adoption can create disparities in competence and confidence among faculty, leading to unequal job satisfaction (Reddy and Babu, 2024) [22].

At the same time, AI offers opportunities for skill enhancement. Digital research environments allow Indian scholars to participate in global collaborations, access massive datasets, and engage with interdisciplinary research that was previously inaccessible. Studies have shown that exposure to AI can stimulate continuous learning and innovation, increasing intrinsic motivation. However, this potential can only be realized if institutions provide proper training and support. Without such investment, many educators may experience “technostress”—a feeling of overload, insecurity, or inadequacy caused by constant technological change. To sustain satisfaction, higher education institutions must help faculty redefine competence in broader terms. Instead of viewing AI as a competitor, teachers can see it as a collaborator that amplifies human creativity. For example, using AI for preliminary literature reviews can save time for deeper analysis and interpretation, which remain distinctly human strengths. Similarly, automating grading for objective questions allows faculty to focus on qualitative feedback and mentoring. Thus, the key lies in balancing automation with opportunities for intellectual growth, so that competence remains a living and evolving source of satisfaction (Al-Zyoud, 2020; Upadhyaya and Vrinda, 2021) [5, 23].

Relatedness, collegiality, and professional identity

Job satisfaction is not only an individual experience but also a social one. Academics derive meaning from relationships—with students, colleagues, and the larger scholarly community. The sense of belonging to a profession grounded in shared norms of inquiry, debate, and mentorship forms an important part of their identity. AI and automation have complex effects on this relational dimension. The shift toward digital platforms has expanded collaboration possibilities. Faculty can now co-author papers across continents, conduct virtual conferences, and build global networks through research-sharing tools like ResearchGate and Google Scholar. In India, the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the use of such technologies, leading to a more connected academic ecosystem. For some, this digital collegiality has enhanced satisfaction by fostering broader engagement and recognition. However, others report feelings of isolation, especially in hybrid or remote

work settings where informal interactions decline. The absence of in-person academic dialogue can weaken the sense of community and mentorship that sustains motivation (Lahiri-Roy and Whitburn, 2023) [17].

Another issue concerns professional identity. As AI begins to handle functions traditionally associated with human expertise—such as writing summaries, evaluating essays, or generating research questions—academics may question what distinguishes their work from machine outputs. This identity tension can reduce job satisfaction, particularly among senior faculty who built their careers on pre-digital methods. Studies indicate that maintaining a coherent professional identity amid technological change requires ongoing reflection and institutional support. Faculty development programs that encourage dialogue about ethical use of AI, authorship, and academic integrity can help preserve confidence and pride in one's role. In India, where teaching is often seen as a vocation rather than just a profession, relatedness and identity carry deep emotional significance. Students frequently view their teachers as mentors or role models. Automation risks diluting this bond if digital systems replace personal feedback and conversation. However, when used thoughtfully, AI can actually strengthen relationships. For instance, predictive analytics can help teachers identify struggling students and provide timely support, enhancing both performance and emotional connection. The future of academic satisfaction thus depends on how institutions balance technological efficiency with human empathy (Nelson, 2024) [10].

Task structure and workload in a digital university

Workload has been a recurring concern in higher education worldwide, and India is no exception. Faculty members often juggle teaching, research, examination duties, and administrative work with limited institutional support. Automation was initially expected to reduce such burdens, yet evidence suggests that it can sometimes have the opposite effect. The introduction of new technologies often brings additional responsibilities, including training, troubleshooting, and constant content updating. In many Indian universities, the push toward blended and online education has multiplied the number of tasks rather than reducing them. Teachers must now design both in-person and digital materials, record lectures, monitor online discussions, and adapt to continuous system upgrades. These demands can create what researchers call “workload creep,” where efficiency tools paradoxically expand the volume of work. While AI-based grading or scheduling may save time on routine duties, the saved time is often consumed by new reporting or compliance requirements (Vuori *et al.*, 2019) [20].

Nevertheless, AI can improve task structure if integrated strategically. Automation can handle repetitive tasks such as attendance tracking, plagiarism checks, and data entry, allowing educators to focus on research and mentoring. Studies show that when automation reduces low-value work, satisfaction improves because faculty perceive their labor as more meaningful. The key lies in aligning AI implementation with the academic mission rather than using it merely for managerial control. The NEP 2020 envisions a more flexible and multidisciplinary higher education system supported by digital technologies. If implemented wisely, this framework could help rebalance workloads by encouraging collaborative teaching, sharing of digital

resources, and better time management. However, if automation is used primarily for surveillance or quantitative assessment of faculty performance, it may increase stress and reduce satisfaction. Therefore, Indian universities must distinguish between technologies that empower teachers and those that burden them (Chattopadhyay, 2020; Langove and Khan, 2024) [16, 6].

Job security and professional stability in an automated era

Job security is one of the most tangible determinants of job satisfaction, and its meaning is changing fast in the age of AI. In academia, job security has traditionally been associated with tenure, permanent positions, and predictable promotion paths. However, automation and data-driven management are introducing new dynamics that affect stability. AI-based performance analytics, student feedback algorithms, and research-output metrics are increasingly used to evaluate faculty productivity. While these systems promise objectivity, they also create a sense of constant surveillance. Faculty members may feel that their future depends more on algorithmic assessment than on professional judgment, leading to anxiety and reduced satisfaction (Singh and Hiran, 2022) [17].

In India, many universities still rely on contract-based or temporary faculty appointments. According to recent data, nearly 40% of college teachers work on short-term or ad-hoc contracts (Misra and Pachauri, 2025) [4]. The introduction of automated performance monitoring could exacerbate this insecurity if used to justify short-term hiring or algorithm-based appraisals. The UGC's move toward a performance-based appraisal system, linked with Academic Performance Indicators (APIs), has already changed how teachers perceive their roles (UGC, 2010) [24]. When combined with AI-assisted analytics, such systems risk valuing numerical indicators over educational quality. However, automation can also contribute to security when used to streamline administrative processes and reduce bias in evaluations. For example, AI-driven recruitment systems can help identify qualified candidates more transparently, provided that algorithms are designed ethically and monitored for fairness. Similarly, automated workload tracking can make faculty contributions more visible and reward consistent efforts. The future of job satisfaction in academia will depend on whether these technologies are used to enhance fairness or to enforce managerial control. For Indian institutions, striking this balance will be essential, especially as NEP 2020 calls for a “merit-based but equitable” academic culture (Chattopadhyay, 2020) [16].

Recognition, rewards, and evaluation in the digital university

Recognition and reward are central to job satisfaction because they affirm the value of one's contribution. In academia, recognition comes in many forms—promotion, publications, citations, awards, or even simple appreciation from peers and students. AI and automation are transforming how recognition is generated and distributed. Academic performance is increasingly quantified through metrics such as h-index, citation counts, or student ratings, often computed automatically by platforms such as Scopus, Google Scholar, and institutional dashboards. While these systems offer convenience, they can also narrow the meaning of excellence to measurable outputs, neglecting

teaching quality, mentorship, or social impact. In India, the use of digital metrics is becoming common in research assessment and institutional accreditation. The UGC's new frameworks emphasize measurable performance, often relying on automated data collection. This shift aligns with global trends but also risks producing a "publish-or-perish" culture intensified by algorithms. Faculty may focus on optimizing metrics rather than pursuing meaningful research questions, which can undermine intrinsic satisfaction. Moreover, automated recognition systems can reinforce inequalities, as well-resourced institutions have greater access to visibility tools and citation networks. At the same time, automation can democratize recognition if implemented inclusively. AI tools can track diverse contributions such as open-source teaching materials, community engagement, or interdisciplinary collaboration. For instance, India's National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) increasingly considers outreach and inclusivity parameters, which could be supported by automated data systems. When faculty feel that their full range of work is acknowledged-beyond narrow publication metrics-satisfaction rises. Institutions should therefore design evaluation systems that blend quantitative efficiency with qualitative judgment, ensuring that AI enhances rather than replaces human appraisal (Chattopadhyay, 2020; Chakraborty *et al.*, 2024; Donald, 2025) ^[16, 21, 15].

Work-life balance and the boundaries of digital work

The digital transformation of academia has blurred the lines between professional and personal life. Online teaching, hybrid classes, and constant email connectivity mean that academic work often extends beyond traditional hours. Automation and AI, while designed to make work more efficient, can sometimes increase the expectation of constant availability. Notifications from digital platforms, learning management systems, and research tools create a sense of perpetual engagement. For many Indian faculty members, this digital overload has become a new source of dissatisfaction (Jan *et al.*, 2022) ^[18]. The challenge of maintaining work-life balance is not merely about time but also about psychological detachment from work. Studies indicate that academics who struggle to disconnect from digital tasks experience higher burnout and lower satisfaction (Salanova *et al.*, 2014) ^[19]. AI can either alleviate or worsen this problem depending on its design. Smart scheduling assistants and automated grading can save time, but AI-driven monitoring tools that track response rates or digital attendance can add pressure. In India, where teaching is often emotionally demanding and salaries modest, this additional strain can be significant (Sahni *et al.*, 2025) ^[1].

Nevertheless, AI can support well-being if aligned with humane policies. Adaptive systems can help faculty plan workloads, manage deadlines, and access mental-health resources. Some universities are experimenting with digital wellness dashboards that remind users to take breaks or limit screen time. If such technologies are integrated thoughtfully into institutional culture, they can promote balance and satisfaction. The NEP 2020 emphasizes "teacher well-being and professional development" as a core policy goal. This commitment provides a policy basis for integrating supportive AI rather than surveillance-based systems. The real test will be whether institutions adopt this vision in practice (Chattopadhyay, 2020) ^[16].

The Indian policy context: NEP 2020, UGC reforms, and digital transformation

India's NEP 2020 represents a watershed in reimagining the academic profession. It emphasizes flexibility, multidisciplinary learning, and technology enabled education. The policy envisions an ecosystem where digital infrastructure supports both teaching and research while preserving academic values. AI and automation are expected to play major roles in expanding access, improving efficiency, and promoting lifelong learning (Ministry of Education, 2020). However, the policy also implicitly challenges traditional notions of academic work and satisfaction. The NEP's call for a National Research Foundation (NRF) aims to strengthen research culture, but it also introduces performance-based funding mechanisms. Similarly, the proposed Digital University and Academic Bank of Credits promote mobility and standardization, potentially altering faculty roles. These changes could create tension between flexibility and security. Faculty satisfaction will depend on how reforms balance innovation with institutional support. For example, digital universities may offer new teaching opportunities across regions, but they may also increase workload and reduce local academic communities (Chattopadhyay, 2020) ^[16].

The University Grants Commission has also introduced reforms aligned with the, including the National Higher Education Qualification Framework (NHEQF), Learning Outcome-based Curricular Framework (LOCF), and the integration of AI into administrative processes (Raj *et al.*, 2025) ^[25]. These reforms seek to improve quality and accountability. Yet, from a job-satisfaction perspective, the key question is whether they empower or constrain faculty. If automation is used to facilitate creativity, cross-disciplinary work, and reduced bureaucracy, satisfaction will likely rise. If it is used primarily to monitor, rank, or compare, dissatisfaction may grow. Indian higher education thus stands at a crossroads. On one side is a vision of AI as a tool for liberation-freeing academics from routine tasks, enabling global collaboration, and enhancing student learning. On the other side is a risk of digital managerialism, where algorithms define productivity and erode autonomy. The direction will depend on institutional culture and leadership. Universities that involve faculty in technology governance, provide digital literacy training, and maintain transparent evaluation systems are more likely to sustain satisfaction and motivation (Chattopadhyay, 2020) ^[16].

Redefining job satisfaction: toward a new conceptual framework

As AI becomes embedded in the academic ecosystem, the very meaning of job satisfaction must evolve. Traditional theories such as Herzberg's two-factor model (1966) ^[11] and self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) ^[9] remain relevant but require reinterpretation. Herzberg distinguished between hygiene factors (such as pay and working conditions) and motivators (such as recognition and achievement). In the AI era, digital infrastructure, algorithmic fairness, and data privacy become new "hygiene" factors-basic conditions that must be met for satisfaction to be possible. Meanwhile, creativity, autonomy, and human connection remain core motivators but are now expressed through new forms of interaction.

A redefined model of academic job satisfaction in the age of artificial intelligence can be understood through five

interrelated dimensions. ‘Digital autonomy’ refers to the degree of control that faculty members have over how technology is integrated into their teaching and research. When educators can decide how and when to use digital tools, their sense of professional freedom increases. ‘Augmented competence’ captures the growing importance of feeling skilled and confident in using AI collaboratively rather than competitively. It reflects the satisfaction that comes from mastering new technologies and applying them creatively. ‘Relational belonging’ emphasizes the need to maintain genuine human connections within increasingly digital academic environments. As work becomes more virtual, fostering collegiality and community remains essential for well-being. ‘Ethical security’ involves trust in the fairness, transparency, and accountability of AI systems used for evaluation, recruitment, and decision-making. Finally, ‘meaningful impact’ highlights the ability to use technology not just for efficiency but for advancing learning, innovation, and social good. Together, these dimensions offer a holistic framework for understanding how job satisfaction in academia is being reshaped in the AI era (Salanova *et al.*, 2014; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Jan *et al.*, 2022) [19, 9, 18].

For Indian academics, these dimensions resonate with cultural and institutional realities. The sense of purpose in education is often tied to social responsibility and nation-building. When AI is aligned with these values-by enhancing equity, expanding access, and promoting indigenous research-it can deepen satisfaction. When it conflicts with them by promoting standardization or depersonalization-it can erode meaning. Therefore, the future of academic work must be guided by human-centered design, ethical reflection, and inclusive policy.

Future scenarios: imagining the academic workplace of 2040

Looking ahead, three broad scenarios can be imagined for Indian academia by 2040.

- **The augmented scholar:** In this optimistic scenario, AI is used as a partner in creativity. Faculty design adaptive courses, use AI for data-driven insights, and focus on mentoring, innovation, and social engagement. Workload is balanced, and institutions support continuous digital learning. Job satisfaction is high because academics feel empowered rather than replaced. This aligns with the NEP vision of “empowered teachers in a digitally enriched ecosystem.”
- **The monitored professional:** In this middle scenario, AI is primarily a management tool. Automated systems measure performance, rank faculty, and allocate tasks. Efficiency increases, but autonomy and intrinsic motivation decline. Satisfaction becomes contingent on compliance rather than creativity. This scenario reflects the global risk of algorithmic managerialism already visible in many sectors.
- **The displaced educator:** In the pessimistic scenario, automation reduces human roles drastically. AI tutors handle most instruction, and faculty perform limited supervisory or administrative duties. Job security and meaning collapse lead to demotivation and attrition. While unlikely in the short term, this outcome could occur if human judgment and mentorship are undervalued.

The path India takes will depend on governance, investment, and the ability to embed ethical reflection into technology policy. Faculty participation in decision-making, ongoing professional development and protection of academic freedom will be crucial safeguards against dehumanization.

Conclusion

The future of academic work in the age of AI and automation is not predetermined. Technology will continue to reshape how universities teach, research, and evaluate. Yet, the essence of job satisfaction remains rooted in human values-autonomy, competence, connection, and purpose. In India, where education carries a moral and developmental significance, safeguarding these values is particularly important. The NEP 2020 provides a forward-looking framework, but its success will depend on implementation that prioritizes teacher well-being and professional dignity. If AI is harnessed to remove drudgery, amplify creativity, and promote inclusion, it can usher in a new era of satisfaction and innovation in Indian academia. However, if automation becomes a tool of control and comparison, it could erode the joy of teaching and discovery. The future, therefore, will not be decided by algorithms alone but by the collective choices of policymakers, administrators, and educators. The challenge is to ensure that the digital university remains a human university-where technology serves learning, and learning continues to serve humanity.

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