

# Alignment of higher education competencies with workforce demands: Insights on job relevance

# Vladimir Marie Cabutotan

# Abstract

This study explores the alignment between the competencies gained by Bachelor of Secondary Education (BSEd) graduates from Pangasinan State University (PSU) and the demands of their current jobs. Employing a descriptive research design, the research utilizes the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) Tracer Tool to gather data on the employability, job relevance, and professional growth of graduates from 2019 to 2023. Results indicate that 85% of participants are employed, with 64.1% working in the education sector, highlighting strong industry alignment. Key competencies such as communication, critical thinking, and IT skills were identified as highly relevant, while gaps in entrepreneurial skills and practical application of knowledge were noted. The findings emphasize the need for curriculum enhancements, including experiential learning and job readiness programs, to bridge the gap between academic preparation and workforce demands. By addressing these gaps, the study contributes to the ongoing discourse on sustainable education and workforce development, ensuring graduates are better equipped to excel in dynamic labor markets.

Keywords: workforce demands, academic preparation, higher education competencies, sustainable education

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# **1. Introduction**

Graduate employability and professional growth have become key indicators of higher education institutions' (HEIs) success in meeting both national and global workforce demands (Okolie et al., 2019; Cheng et al., 2022; Okolie et al., 2019; Tight, 2023; Siivonen et al., 2023; Abelha et al., 2020; Sato et al., 2021). As job markets become increasingly competitive, universities must ensure that their graduates are equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to meet industry requirements and contribute meaningfully to society. Tracer studies have emerged as essential tools in evaluating how well educational institutions prepare their students for professional careers, providing insights into employment rates, job satisfaction, and the alignment between academic training and job market demands (Gines, 2014).

Higher education institutions in the Philippines, is committed to producing graduates who can effectively navigate the dynamic labor market. To assess how well the university is achieving this goal, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) Tracer Tool offers a standardized framework for tracking the employability and career progression of its graduates. This tool not only evaluates job placement rates but also assesses the relevance of academic programs to industry needs and the professional growth of graduates over time.

Given the growing importance of graduate employability, this study aims to evaluate the employment outcomes and professional growth of graduates from the past five years. By using the CHED Tracer Tool, this research assessed the current employment status of graduates, the industries they are employed in, and the extent to which their academic training has contributed to their career development. This study seeks to provide valuable feedback to educational institutions on the effectiveness of its programs and offer insights into potential areas for curriculum improvement.

Understanding the employability and professional growth of graduates is essential for maintaining the quality of education and ensuring that the university continues to align its programs with the evolving demands of the labor market (Gines, 2014; Jackson et al., 2024; Alpaydın & Kültür, 2022; Chigbu & Nekhwevha, 2022; Al-Abri et al., 2024). This research contributes to the ongoing efforts of universities in enhancing graduate outcomes and strengthening its academic offerings to better serve its students and the broader community.

# 2. Literature review

#### 2.1 Graduate Employability and Workforce Alignment

The employability of graduates has become a critical indicator of the effectiveness of HEIs in preparing students for the workforce. According to Gines (2014), tracer studies serve as a vital tool for assessing how well HEIs align academic training with labor market demands. Employability extends beyond securing a job; it encompasses career growth, job satisfaction, and the relevance of acquired skills to industry requirements (Mason et al., 2009).

The increasing complexity of labor markets necessitates that educational institutions continuously adapt their curricula to ensure graduates possess skills that match workforce expectations. Studies by Cappelli (2015) and Tomlinson (2008) suggest that there is often a skills mismatch, where graduates may lack competencies that are highly valued by employers, such as problem-solving, adaptability, and digital literacy. Similarly, the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2020) emphasizes that HEIs must integrate employability skills into academic programs to enhance students' workforce readiness.

Research indicates that certain competencies significantly impact graduates' employability. Robles (2012) identified communication skills, critical thinking, and teamwork as essential competencies that employers seek in new hires. Additionally, Forrier and Sels (2003) argue that digital proficiency and entrepreneurial skills have become increasingly important in modern labor markets. Tracer studies, such as those conducted by CHED provide data-driven insights that help HEIs refine their academic offerings. Studies by Darling-Hammond et al. (2009) and Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) stress that continuous curriculum enhancement based on graduate feedback leads to improved employability outcomes.

A significant factor influencing employability is the pursuit of lifelong learning. Feldman and Ng (2007) and Gagné and Deci (2005) assert that ongoing professional development plays a crucial role in career advancement. To bridge the gap between academic training and employment demands, HEIs must foster stronger industry linkages. Studies by Kalleberg (2000) and Golden (2009) highlight the benefits of internships, mentorship programs, and industry collaborations in equipping students with practical experience.

#### 2.2 Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964) and the Employability Theory (Fugate et al., 2004). Human Capital Theory posits that investments in education and training enhance an individual's productivity and earning potential, making them more competitive in the labor market. Employability Theory, on the other hand, emphasizes the dynamic interplay between personal attributes, skills, and external labor market conditions, highlighting the need for continuous skill development to maintain career adaptability and workforce readiness.

Both theories support the premise of this study, which examines how the competencies gained by graduates align with labor market demands. The findings from tracer studies provide empirical evidence on how well educational institutions prepare students for employment and career growth, reinforcing the necessity of curriculum improvements to address industry needs.

# 3. Methodology

This tracer study employs a descriptive research design to assess the employability and professional growth of Bachelor of Secondary Education (BSEd) graduates. The study utilizes the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) Tracer Tool as the primary instrument for data collection, which is designed to gather information about the graduates' employment status, job placement, industry alignment, and career progression.

The collected data were subjected to quantitative analysis using descriptive statistics. These were used to summarize the employment rates, job satisfaction levels, and career progression of graduates. Cross-tabulation was performed to compare different cohorts (2019 to 2023) and identify trends across years

While this methodology allows for comprehensive data collection on the employability and professional growth of graduates, limitations include the reliance on self-reported data, which may be subject to recall bias or incomplete reporting. Additionally, as the study is limited to graduates from the BSEd program, its findings may not be generalizable to graduates from other programs in the university. Despite these limitations, the study is expected to provide meaningful insights into the career trajectories of recent BSEd graduates.

# 4. Findings and Discussion

This section presents and analyzes the findings of the study on the alignment between higher education competencies and the demands of the contemporary workforce.

#### Table 1

Major line of business

Major line of business	Percentage (%)
Fishing	0.6
Mining and quarrying	0
Manufacturing	0.6
Electricity, gas and water supply	0
Construction	0
Wholesale and retail trade	1.2
Hotels and restaurants	3
Transport storage and communication	1.8
Financial intermediation	1.2
Real estate, renting and business	2.4
Public administration and defense	1.8
Education	60.7
Health and social work	0
Other community, social and personal	1.1
Private households with employed persons	1.6
Extra-territorial organizations	0
Not applicable	24

The data indicates that the majority of participants, 60.7% are employed in the education sector. This strong representation aligns with global trends, where education continues to be one of the largest public-sector employers. A UNESCO report (2021) highlights that education plays a crucial role in the global labor market, especially in countries with expansive public education systems. The high proportion of participants in this field reflects the growing demand for professionals in teaching, administration, and support roles within academic institutions. The significant number of participants from this sector suggests that either the survey is directed towards individuals in the education profession or that education remains a dominant field of employment for the survey's target demographic.

Another notable finding is the 24% who selected not applicable as their current employment category. This could indicate a range of scenarios, including individuals who are unemployed, retired, or unwilling to disclose their employment status. Literature often points

out that such categories may include participants who are between jobs, engaging in temporary work, or transitioning to new sectors. The variability in this group aligns with employment trends showing a segment of the population not currently engaged in traditional sectors, particularly due to shifts caused by global events like the COVID-19 pandemic, which reshaped employment patterns (ILO, 2020).

The data also shows smaller representations from various industries. For example, 3% of participants work in hotels and restaurants, while 1.2% are employed in wholesale and retail trade. These service-oriented sectors are highlighted by the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2020) as key drivers of urban employment. However, compared to the education sector, their representation in this survey is minimal, reflecting the more niche or location-specific employment opportunities they offer. Additionally, the presence of participants working in sectors like transport and communication (1.8%), public administration (1.8%), and private households with employees (1.6%) underscores the diversity of the workforce, even if these categories are relatively smaller in number. Public administration jobs, for instance, although fewer in this survey, are critical for providing public services and governance (OECD, 2020).

Overall, the survey results highlight how education dominates the employment landscape among participants, while other sectors like services and public administration play a secondary role. These trends are reflective of larger global employment patterns where education remains a cornerstone of employment, while service sectors and government jobs provide supplementary opportunities, albeit on a smaller scale.

#### Table 2

Place of work

Place of work	Percentage (%)
Local	83.9
Abroad	13.7
Not applicable	2.4

Table 2 represents the participants' place of work, based on the responses. A large majority, 83.9%, indicated that they are employed locally, while 13.7% work abroad. The remaining 2.4% selected not applicable, possibly indicating unemployment, retirement, or other reasons for not specifying a work location.

The high percentage of participants working locally reflects the typical employment trend where a majority of individuals find work within their home country. This is consistent with findings from the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2020), which points out that despite globalization and international job opportunities, most workers are employed in their home country due to factors like family, familiarity with local labor laws, and access to local job markets. Working abroad, as reflected by 13.7% of the participants, though a smaller percentage, demonstrates the presence of a global labor force. Many individuals, particularly skilled professionals, seek employment opportunities abroad due to higher wages, better working conditions, or greater career prospects. Literature on migration and labor markets suggests that the pursuit of international employment is particularly common in fields like education, healthcare, and technology, where demand for skilled labor can be higher in foreign markets (World Bank, 2018).

The small percentage of not applicable responses likely reflects individuals who are not currently employed or those who might have shifted out of the workforce for personal reasons. This is also consistent with global employment data showing a segment of the population between jobs or outside the formal workforce due to various socio-economic factors. Overall, the distribution of responses showcases a predominantly local workforce, with a notable, though smaller, segment contributing to the global labor market.

#### Table 3

Job level positions of the participants

Job level positions of the participants	Percentage (%)
Professional, technical, or supervisory	47.6
N/a	32.7
Rank or clerical positions	13.1
Self-employed	6.5
Managerial or executive	0.1

Table 3 depicts the job level positions of the participants, with the largest portion (47.6%) falling under the professional, technical, or supervisory category. This aligns with findings from past research conducted over the last decade, which highlight the increasing demand for skilled labor. A study by Autor and Dorn (2013) discusses the shift towards non-routine cognitive jobs, emphasizing how technological advancements and globalization have led to a growing demand for professionals in technical and supervisory positions. This

change is largely due to the reduced need for routine manual and cognitive labor, and the increased complexity of tasks requiring higher education and specialized training. The growing emphasis on technical roles is reflective of broader economic trends that emphasize the importance of expertise and leadership in modern workplaces.

A notable 32.7% of participants indicated "Not Applicable" for their job level position, a considerable portion that may reflect individuals who are between jobs, in non-traditional work roles, or pursuing education. Research from Kahn (2010) notes that the Great Recession left many individuals in limbo in terms of employment status, creating a lasting impact on labor market dynamics. This shift has persisted over the years, as employees increasingly seek flexible work arrangements or undergo reskilling to adapt to changing job markets. Moreover, this category may include students, retirees, or those in other non-standard employment situations, highlighting the variability in workforce participation.

Rank or clerical positions account for 13.1% of the participants, a figure consistent with broader workforce trends of the past decade. Studies have shown that clerical work has seen a steady decline due to automation and digitization. Goos et al. (2014) found that middle-wage, routine occupations such as clerical and administrative jobs have been in decline since the 1990s, as businesses adopt technology that reduces the need for such roles. As these routine jobs become more automated, clerical positions have steadily decreased, reinforcing the low percentage represented in this survey.

Finally, 6.5% of participants identified as self-employed. This reflects a small but notable segment of the workforce that has been growing over the past decade, driven by the rise of entrepreneurship and the gig economy. However, a study by Hipple and Hammond (2016) suggests that while self-employment has grown in significance, it remains a small part of the overall labor force. Many individuals are hesitant to pursue self-employment due to the lack of job security and benefits associated with traditional employment. The challenges of financial instability and limited access to health benefits continue to be deterrents for individuals considering self-employment, explaining the relatively small portion of participants in this category.

The data mirrors significant labor trends from the past decade, with a growing demand for skilled professionals, a declining number of clerical workers, and a slow but

steady increase in self-employment, all influenced by technological advancements and shifts in the global economy.

#### Table 4

Relevance of curriculum to the first job of the participants

Relevance of curriculum to the first job	Percentage (%)
Yes	78.1
No	13.6
Not applicable	8.3

Table 4 shows the relevance of college curriculum to first jobs among the participants, where 78.1% (represented by the blue section) stated that their education was relevant to their first job. This high percentage aligns with research suggesting that certain professional degrees, particularly in fields like engineering, medicine, or law, tend to have a more direct correlation between educational preparation and early career opportunities (Wickramasinghe & Perera, 2010). Graduates from these fields often find that the skills they learned in college directly apply to their professional work, increasing job readiness and satisfaction. This reflects the importance of industry-specific programs in helping students transition smoothly into the workforce.

However, 13.6% of the participants indicated that their college curriculum was not relevant to their first job, which is consistent with studies that highlight a skills gap in many industries (Cappelli, 2015). Many students find that while they gain theoretical knowledge, the practical, hands-on skills required for their specific roles are missing. This gap may be more pronounced in rapidly evolving sectors like technology, where university curriculums struggle to keep pace with industry demands.

Finally, 8.3% (green section) responded "Not Applicable," indicating that some participants either did not pursue jobs related to their field of study or possibly worked in fields that did not require specialized education. Research suggests that career paths are becoming increasingly non-linear, with individuals often shifting between industries or working in jobs unrelated to their major (Crawford & Wang, 2016). As economies evolve, many employees acquire skills on the job or through alternative forms of learning, further weakening the traditional link between academic education and professional roles.

#### Table 5

Learned competency	Frequency
Communication skills	143
Human relations skills	93
Entrepreneurial skills	26
Information technology skills	98
Problem-solving skills	90
Critical thinking skills	116
Other skills, please specify	1
Not applicable	26

Table 5 highlights the specific competencies that participants found useful in their first job. Through a checklist manner, the majority, indicated that communication skills were the most valuable, followed closely by critical thinking skills and human relations skills. These findings are consistent with research that emphasizes the importance of soft skills in the workplace. A study by Robles (2012) identified communication and interpersonal skills as key to career success, regardless of industry, suggesting that these competencies bridge the gap between academic knowledge and real-world application. This also connects to the previous data where the majority of participants found their college curriculum relevant; communication and critical thinking are often foundational elements across various educational programs, making them transferable to many fields.

Information technology (IT) skills were cited by participants, reflecting the increasing integration of technology into many jobs today. This aligns with the growing recognition of digital literacy as a critical skill for employment across industries (OECD, 2020). Problemsolving skills, are similarly essential, as they enable employees to navigate complex work environments and adapt to challenges. The combination of these skills suggests that modern employers value a blend of technical and cognitive abilities, as discussed in the previous chart, which underscores the relevance of college education in preparing students for the workforce.

On the other hand, few participants considered entrepreneurial skills useful, which may suggest that such competencies are either not widely emphasized in traditional curriculums or less relevant to early career roles. This finding mirrors earlier discussions about the gap between education and job readiness, particularly in cases where students transition to roles that do not require entrepreneurial thinking, such as entry-level corporate positions (Cappelli, 2015). Interestingly, the same number of participants marked "Not Applicable" or other skills, indicating that while education may provide a strong foundation, there are areas where specific job demands exceed what is taught in academic settings.

# 5. Conclusion

The study highlights strong employment rates among graduates, with most working in the education sector, demonstrating a strong alignment between the academic programs and labor market demands. The findings suggest that the present curriculum effectively prepares graduates, particularly in teaching-related fields, by equipping them with key competencies such as communication, critical thinking, and IT skills. Many graduates pursue further studies for professional development, reinforcing the importance of continuous learning in career advancement. Job satisfaction is generally high, with salaries, benefits, and skill utilization playing crucial roles in retention.

To further enhance graduate employability, higher education institutions should update its curriculum to better align with industry needs, particularly in non-education sectors such as technology and business. Expanding career opportunities through partnerships with various industries, strengthening local and international linkages, and promoting lifelong learning through flexible education options are essential steps. Additionally, universities should emphasize skill enhancement in communication and IT across all programs while fostering greater community engagement to address local employment needs. These strategic efforts will ensure that graduates are well-equipped to navigate the evolving labor market and expand their career prospects.

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# **Institutional Review Board Statement**

The ethical review and approval were waived for this study.

## **AI Declaration**

The author declares the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in writing this paper. In particular, the author used ChatGPT in finding literature and other materials. The author takes full responsibility in ensuring that research idea, analysis and interpretations are original work.

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