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SKILLS, KNOWLEDGE, AND VALUES NEEDED BY RECENT PHILIPPINE GRADUATES FOR EMPLOYABILITY

Maria Virginia G. AGUILAR¹ and Genine S. TORRES¹¹ De La Salle University-Dasmariñas, Philippines; mgaguilar@dlsud.edu.ph (M. A.)**Handling Editor:**

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Abstract

There is a dramatic shift in the skills, knowledge, and attitudes needed by new university graduates in order to meet the demands of the local, national, and the global job market. This reality underscores the significance of identifying, analyzing, and understanding the attributes that constitute today's definition of a "job-ready candidate." This study aimed to solicit the perceptions of the parents, alumni, and graduating students for the school year 2021-2022 in one of the leading private higher education institutions in the Philippines towards the three most important skills, knowledge, and attributes that university graduates must possess. The study followed a cross-sectional research design involving qualitative variables from an online survey with open-ended questions. A reflexive thematic analysis was used to analyze and determine the patterns of meaning based on the perceived competencies of the respondents. Results reveal that the three most important skills, knowledge, and attitudes are intertwined and overlapping: social and communication skills, course-based competencies, and ardent zeal, passion, commitment, and joy in one's work. The study recommends a re-evaluation of the expected graduate attributes this Philippine university is aiming at, to build an enhanced graduate profile with valued skills, knowledge and attributes for the global contemporary workplace.

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Introduction

Major forces of change at the global, regional, and local levels are extensively disrupting the lives of millions of Filipinos. In effect, the government, the business sector and institutions of higher education, among others, race to rethink strategies that will enable them to mitigate the spread of the virus, continue operations despite harsh conditions, and respond to the adverse effects of the pandemic on the economy (Aguilar & Torres, 2021; Aguilar et al., 2021b; Epetia, 2021). One important area that has been particularly vulnerable is the labour market (Coibion et al., 2020). The latest Philippine labour force survey reveals the unemployment rate to be at 6.4%, which is equivalent to 2.93 million unemployed Filipinos (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2022). During the pandemic, various industries in the local and international market had no choice but to reallocate jobs, automate tasks, and lay off workers (Cech & Hiltner, 2022). Such phenomenon proves to be a challenge for young Filipinos to be qualified for an entry-level job without having to compete with seasoned candidates with years of work experience and refined employable skills (Benaraba et al., 2022).

The need to address the attendant concerns is crucial through competent human resources via relevant educational systems. Given the dynamic changes in the job market, higher education institutions (HEIs) are urged by students and employers to produce ready-for-the-job graduates with skills, knowledge, and values significant to the industry's needs (Verhaest & Baert, 2018; Baird & Parayitam, 2019). Moreover, it is important to emphasize that with the advent of the Industry 4.0 environment, the graduate must have the ability to use digital technology to solve complex problems and perform multiple tasks simultaneously to be sought after or be employable.

The Confederation of British Industry (1999 cited in Bridgstock, 2009), defined employability as "the possession by the individual of the qualities and competencies required to meet the changing needs of employers and customers". Lowden et al. (2011) more specifically explains that graduate employability is often associated with graduates' possession of a certain level of competencies (types of knowledge, skills and attitudes) and ability to utilize them to obtain and retain a job. To further explore employability and its influential factors, Finch et al. (2013) reviewed literature on this concept and found that one's employability is determined by specific employability factors (e.g., listening skills, writing skills, academic performance) and higher-order categories (soft-skills; problem-solving skills; job-specific functional skills; pre-graduate experience; and academic reputation). Following the above, current studies confirm that essential changes in the technical and practical skills, professional qualities, and competencies need to be considered by schools for their graduates to stand out in today's job market and that of the future (Pandya et al., 2022; Gouda, 2022; Hayes et al., 2022). Failure to align the curriculum and the pedagogical framework with the up-to-date, pertinent skills and the shifting employer expectations will ultimately result in a severe skills gap that will leave graduates at a disadvantage. Hence, this university's pragmatic role is to guarantee that students acquire the skills, knowledge, abilities, and values that address current employer needs in particular, and societal demands in general, while still maintaining self-efficacy, and this is of paramount importance to higher education institutions (Baird & Parayitam, 2019). Ultimately, the knowledge, skills and attributes they manifest in their jobs enable their communities and the world to be a better place.

To validate the aforesaid institutional aspiration, Baird & Parayitam (2019) propose that the competencies of what constitutes the Expected Graduate Attributes (EGA) of any university need to be revisited to ensure that the knowledge areas, technical and generic skills, and values needed by graduates are developed through holistic curricular offerings. The ensuing question then focuses on the extent to which this Philippine university's programs include knowledge, skills, abilities, and behaviors that span personal, general, and functional competencies. To respond to this matter, a survey that articulates what knowledge, skills and values ought to be

imbibed by this Philippine university's graduates was conducted among 236 respondents composed of alumni, parents, and graduating students. The resulting insights of the survey formed part of the topics tackled in the subsequent focus group discussions (FGD) with the same categories of respondents. The FGDs intended to contextualize the themes identified in the surveys. García-Aracil et al. (2023) explains that analysis of the level of competencies possessed by graduates on entry to the workplace highlights the magnitude of the mismatch between the level of competencies provided by HE studies programs and the level of competencies required in the workplace. Hence, the relevance of employability studies. In particular, recognizing that not only are current, well-focused knowledge and skills necessary but also crucial in achieving a much higher level of competence in areas such as oral and written communication, management, leadership, and other general and personal competencies, is of utmost importance. More specifically, in the context of this Philippine university, it is imperative to determine the attributes that graduates need to cope with the challenges of the current times especially since the university is seen as a prominent resource of highly skilled and competent graduates in the province where it is located.

The study aims to solicit the point of view of selected stakeholders of this Philippine university regarding the three most important values, skills, and knowledge that its graduates should possess to be successful in their careers and ultimately to be and valuable members of society. In particular, this paper seeks to first, identify the values, skills and knowledge of this Philippine university's graduates deemed significant by the alumni, parents, and graduating students; second, discuss why these stakeholders consider these attributes important and third, articulate recommendations on how the curriculum offerings can be best improved to include the preferred attributes.

Research Method

Research Design

This paper followed a cross-sectional research design involving qualitative variables to analyze the perceptions of the respondents regarding the expected graduates' attributes of this Philippine university. The nature of this approach demonstrates a commitment to understanding and measuring the prevalence of specific variables in relation to the skills, knowledge, and values that graduates should exhibit. A total of 236 respondents, representing graduating students (81.4%), alumni (16.1%), and parents (2.5%), voluntarily provided their opinions and recommendations in a survey facilitated through google form. Among the graduating students, about 20 percent each came from College of Business Administration (CBA), College of Science (COS) and College of Engineering, Architecture and Technology (CEAT). Focus group discussions were conducted among seven graduating students, seven parents and five alumni after the survey results were initially tabulated. These were facilitated to solicit their feedback and insights on the results, their agreement or disagreement, their approval or disapproval and generally, how these results can be explained, among others. The diverse composition of the participants indicates the bid to represent the different characteristics of graduating students, parents and alumni.

Data Gathering Procedure

The data for the study was gathered through an online survey via Google forms amongst this Philippine university's stakeholders including the graduating students, alumni, and parents of students. Towards culmination of data collection period, the free-form responses were extracted, and the demographic information were stratified. Watson & Lupton (2022) affirm that gathering data through digital means can be an acceptable method as it allows also for rich data to be gathered, and during distancing protocols, it is part of adaptive strategies (Aguilar et al., 2021a). To understand and analyze the voluminous data related to the opinions and

recommendations of the participants, a reflexive thematic analysis following Braun & Clarke's (2021) approach was applied.

Research Results

Most Important Skills

The changing demands of today's industry compel academic institutions to integrate in their curricula particular skills needed to produce competent and job-ready graduates. As shown in Table 1, there are eight themes culled from the perceptions of the alumni, graduating students, and parents regarding the most important cross-disciplinary skill that the university's graduate must possess.

Table 1 Most Important Skill

Skills	Frequency	Percentage
Social and communication skills	71	30.1
Work ethics skills	55	23.3
Leadership and organizational skills	41	17.4
Critical/analytical and creative problem-solving skills	33	14.0
Information and communications technology skills	19	8.1
Other soft skills	12	5.1
Specific course-based competencies	3	1.3
No response	2	.8
Total	236	100

In reference to Table 1, social and communication skills was ranked as the most vital skill to succeed in today's competitive labour market. Such result is congruent to the findings of Mainga et al. (2022) that strong communication skills is adjudged by employers to be the most valuable skills for entry-level graduate employment. Similarly, Briones et al. (2021) found that the skills more preferred by the employers are leadership, communication and interpersonal skills. Tudy (2017) explains that while technical and industry-specific skills demonstrate knowledge and abilities to perform specific tasks, good communication skills, though considered "soft skills", these remain to be a vital requirement for any job in the past, current, and in the future. Schroth (2019: 13) explains that "Employees' social effectiveness depends on their ability to read, understand, and control social interactions, and it is related to job performance." Similarly, Baird & Parayitam (2019) found that oral/speech communication skills is deemed one of the 6th most important skills for employers in the northeastern part of USA, along with interpersonal skills; critical thinking/problem-solving skills; listening skills; professionalism; and personal motivation. Social and communication skills also aid in navigating complex relationships with other workers from various backgrounds and culture. Mainga et al. (2022) and Briones et al. (2021) revealed that Philippine employers prefer these skills over job-specific competencies for entry level employees for the most basic justification: they have to deal with people of all sorts of character. As Deming (2017) contends, this skill has become even more relevant especially with today's information-rich and global environment wherein the ability to culturally sense, read and react accordingly is necessary. Despite the automation of several tasks to make things easier and more standardized, social interaction has proven difficult to automate, rendering these skills important to sustain among future workers.

A considerable number also pointed to work ethics skills. Work ethic is a term used to describe a worker's dedication in relation to his or her job. In Grow & Yang's (2018) study among the Gen Z's entering the advertising workplace in the US, work ethics emerged as one of the most

important strength needed by Gen Z's to thrive in the workplace. As explained, work ethics allows them to highly value their profession and success and commit to doing whatever it takes to get the job done. Employees with strong work ethic skills exemplify determination and a commitment to their role within their organization and are highly valuable to employers. The FGD among parents extolled the virtue of maintaining strong work ethics, as this not only marks the specific character "brand" of this Philippine university, but at the same time, strong work ethics is perceived to be what overseas Filipino workers are known for as seen in how these manifest resilience, patience, diligence and kindness in the workplace (Sales, 2021).

The second most important skill is on leadership. Indeed, there is a growing emphasis on the need to cultivate and acquire leadership and organizational skills in order to succeed in the workplace. Developing this people skill (Spendlove, 2007) may provide fresh graduates an edge in the job market especially since it encompasses one's ability to show initiative, creatively solve problems, think critically, and collaborate with other team members. As described by Kirkpatrick (2022), leadership is one of the most sought-after soft skills, but it remains to be one of the most challenging ones to nurture among students. Generally, this skill is not just about meeting organizational goals, but it also means demonstrating one's ability to communicate effectively to motivate and influence others to work together, at the same time be innovative and creative in leading people. Leadership skills are strongly associated with creating a team and forging teamwork where the focus is improving performance of the group, rather than the individual, emphasizing that employees are members of interdependent teams rather than mere individual workers (Khan & Wajidi, 2019). Furthermore, Chuang (2013) emphasizes that leadership and organizational skills work to bring out the best in a team to ensure positive communication, effective conflict resolution and the ability to work closely together as one. While work environments often target individuals and personal goals, with reward and recognition singling out the achievements of individual employees, with good team-building skills, employees can be united around a common goal to generate and carry genuine participation of each team member. Moreover, strong leadership and organization skills enable a worker to perform productively with others or with a sense of partnership, no matter their culture, perspective or even rank (Hughes et al., 1993).

The third most important for the respondents is social and communication skills, which have been adjudged as the first most important skill, as previously discussed. In the FGD among graduating students, the prevailing rationale for this is the timing of the survey: the COVID 19 pandemic has reframed our notion of how communication, virtual or face to face can effectively be facilitated (Hidayat et al., 2020). It would appear then that the ability to openly and honestly communicate and listen in a way perceived to be afforded by face-to-face encounter creates mutual understanding with others from diverse positions, perspectives, backgrounds, cultures, among others, which may not be facilitated in the online setting (Hidayat et al., 2020). However, more than the demands created by physical distancing, in the FGD with alumni, social skills are deemed crucial because these skills give a glimpse of the character traits and intelligence of the speaker. Good intentions can be lost in words that are not culturally-sensitive (Jenifer & Raman, 2015). Tanius et al. (2019) however cautions that employers value fresh graduates' effort to integrate social and digital skills, leading to greater employability opportunities.

What Knowledge Should Graduates Possess?

Graduates need to master core concepts associated with their discipline if they have to triumph in their particular field (Pandya et al., 2022; Gouda, 2022; Hayes et al., 2022). With a very challenging employment landscape in Industry 4.0 utilizing digital platforms should augment individuals' potential to explore their values Rahmat (2022).

Table 2 Most Important Knowledge

Knowledge	Frequency	Percentage
Course-based competencies	55	23.3
Self-development and empowerment knowledge	49	20.8
Religious/faith-based values	29	12.3
Specific values of university	28	11.9
Knowledge of Information and communications technology	27	11.4
Knowledge to enhance social and communication skills	13	5.5
Concern for the poor	10	4.2
Network/groups/organizations for linkage	6	2.5
Others	18	7.6
No response	1	.4
Total	236	100

As seen in Table 2, the respondents view course-based competencies as very essential for the university's graduates to succeed and contribute to today's economy. While specific set of competencies for a particular niche generally has low transferability, having a set of related knowledge, skills, and abilities, mostly associated with major subjects taken up during college are viewed as indispensable to successfully perform "critical work functions" or tasks in a defined work setting (Hui et al., 2021). Competencies often serve as the basis for skill standards that specify the level of knowledge, skills, and abilities required for success in the workplace as well as criteria for assessing competency attainment. For Aquino et al. (2015), competencies are reflected on the students' proficiency on subject matter specifically their knowledge of the area of specialization and its interaction with other subject areas.

The second and third most important knowledge that got the highest count is on self-development and empowerment. This is resonated in Baird & Parayitam's (2019) study where employees' interpersonal skills were considered of prime importance by employers. García-Aracil et al. (2023) likewise revealed that cognitive and leadership competencies are essential for work performance and the improvement of professional and personal development. Accordingly, knowledge on this domain enable one not only to set meaningful goals to identify what one wants from life, but also to take action to achieve those goals. However, these patterns of behavior can be changed and broken by increasing self-awareness and then self-confidence, which can both be achieved when one works for self-development (Herman & Hilton, 2017). Overall, respondents of the survey believe that graduates need more than just in-depth knowledge, understanding, research and other skills associated with their disciplines but also capabilities to understand diverse cultures and perspectives which can be facilitated best if a sense of empowerment to handle challenges are developed early on.

Very Important Values that Graduates Need to Exhibit

A job ready candidate should not just possess the combination of right skills and industry-specific competencies. Employers and hiring managers also examine the applicant's value as it reveals emotional intelligence that will be required in the workplace (Herman & Hilton, 2017; Stewart et al., 2016). Based on Table 3, the most important value is ardent zeal, passion commitment and joy in one's work. This implies that overall, work-related value is of utmost importance for the respondents. These results are echoed by Callaghan & McManus (2010) who reiterated that employers look for strong work ethics among new hires for employers.

Table 3 Most Important Value

Value	Frequency	Percentage
Ardent zeal, passion, commitment and joy in one's work	68	28.8
Humility and gratitude	47	19.7
Faith	35	14.8
Care and compassion	33	14.0
Sense of community, inclusiveness, and fraternity	22	9.3
Integrity and honesty	15	6.4
Others	10	4.2
No response	6	2.5
Total	236	100

The FGD results with alumni pointed out that ardent zeal, passion, commitment and joy in one's work is one of the specific values inculcated by the University. When already absorbed by the company, ardent zeal, passion, commitment and joy in one's work is manifested when the employee is able to prioritize and, manage tasks to maintain a sense of focus and deliver projects on time is. In addition, showing resiliency when confronted with challenges and able to adapt positively to and accept change through a continued willingness to learn show zeal for one's career, which is surmised to create a winning disposition amongst employees (Davis & Batcheller, 2020). One reason for this is the notion is that employees who remain consistently happy and engaged in their careers, are usually the ones who stay at the top of their professional game. Rosso et al. (2010: 95) refer to this as 'meaningful work': work experienced as particularly significant and holding more positive meaning for individuals.

Also figuring prominently in this area is the value of humility and gratitude. Humility is characterized by low self-focus, secure sense of self, and increased valuation of others (Naseer et al., 2020). Gratitude is marked by a sense that one has benefited from the actions of another. The results suggest that humility and gratitude are mutually reinforcing. As Exline & Hill (2012) suggest, humble people are also particularly generous with their time and money. Another set of values that also scored high is care and compassion. Caring for another person is an act of displaying kindness and concern for others. Compassion involves the sharing of feelings of another as a means of coming to an understanding and appreciation for how they feel. Paakkanen et al. (2021) propose that compassion has important implications for leadership, well-being, and productivity.

Conclusion

In this Philippine university, results from the survey and FGDs among the graduating students, alumni and parents as to what skills, values and knowledge are most needed at the workplace point to an interesting narrative: overlaps are evident in these areas, articulating the notion that skills, values and knowledge are interdependent, and hence, one cannot speak of each in mutually exclusive terms.

Deemed as the most important skills, social and communication skills are seen as an "enabling device": while technical and industry-specific skills demonstrate knowledge and abilities to perform specific tasks, without good communication skills, expertise cannot be articulated. In addition, the importance placed on course-based competencies as the most important knowledge graduates must possess emphasize the role of the university in preparing students for their future careers. A synergy between skill and knowledge is clear in this respect: having excellent social skills and mastery of course-based competencies make the graduate job-ready. However, as this Philippine university believe that value too is crucial if it is to produce a well-rounded graduate ready to embark on a career, formation of character should be part of the curriculum. The findings point to ardent zeal, passion commitment and joy in one's work as

the most important value this Philippine university's graduate must inculcate. The results of the study has implications on determining the knowledge areas, skill sets, abilities, and behaviors that are deemed most relevant and thus, needs to be emphasized in a 21st-century curriculum.

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