

The Employability Skills of the Overseas Filipino Workers

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ABSTRACT

A university tracks its graduates to determine if its curriculum has prepared students for the job market. The purpose of this study was to ascertain the self-perceived employability skills of sociology and economics graduates of Bukidnon State University, who are working overseas. The OFWs were traced by using the snowball sampling technique. Of the three measures of employability, they scored the highest on personal qualities followed by core skills and process skills. Rated the highest were 'self-awareness' and 'initiative' skills. By and large, the OFWs may be considered global citizens and lifelong learners if viewed through the lenses of an Australian model of employability. This implies that even if the academic credentials do not directly match with the job description, the graduates were hired on the basis of employability qualities and skills that were perhaps already embedded in the curriculum. The study concludes that the notion that discipline-based knowledge will guarantee a job is no longer applicable. Since knowledge will be outdated but nevertheless, the main component for obtaining a college degree, one of the recommendations is for the curriculum to connect transferable personality and skills development with the process of obtaining and generating knowledge. Further research must be pursued in terms of determining the specific values and attitudes that the employers of these OFWs prefer so that it would be possible for the university to identify the exact qualities and skills preferred by employers as a basis for curriculum development.

Keywords – Social Science, employability skills, OFWs, descriptive design, Malaybalay City, Philippines

INTRODUCTION

To be employed means having a job. In this paper, it means having a job and being paid for it by an employer whose agency is located outside the Philippines. The ‘employed’ are Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs thereafter), which in this paper means the graduates of Bukidnon State University who are currently working abroad and are expected to return as they are not permanent residents in the country they are working. Furthermore, being employable in this paper means having the qualities and skills needed in the workplace. The term ‘employability’ in this study refers to ‘skills, understandings and personal attributes’ considered to be a ‘set of achievements’ that graduates must possess to gain, sustain, realign or relocate employment skills over a period of time (Yorke, 2006; Knight & Yorke, 2003).

There are no published tracer studies about the employability skills of graduates that completed their degrees under the Social Sciences Department of the College of Arts and Sciences in BSU, Philippines. Conducting this tracer study is important to make the university’s programs relevant to the shifting needs of the job market and the desire of BSU to play a significant role in the global community.

The Social Sciences Department (SSD henceforth) is one of the five departments under the College of Arts and Sciences of BSU. There are four programs under the SSD, namely: Sociology, Economics, Social Science, and Philosophy. The first two programs are Level 3 Re-accredited by the AACUP or Accrediting Agency for Colleges and Universities in the Philippines.

The employability of graduates has been examined through the lenses of some educators who seem to have a general belief that the success of graduates may be equated to their ability to get employed, and whose employment is aligned to the program the students completed. For example, there is a prevailing notion in our setting that a sociology graduate must be able to work as sociologist; or an economics graduate must be able to work as economist, upon graduation.

The literature, however, does not support this concept. For instance, the extant models of employability suggest that knowledge and skills in the workplace do not necessarily align with the knowledge and skills the graduates specialized in their undergraduate degrees. Instead, there are many factors that employers

consider. The model of Hillage and Pollard (1998) shows that the essential components of graduate employability include four elements: 1) employability assets (knowledge, skills and attitudes); 2) deployment (career management skills, including job search skills); 3) presentation (job getting skills, e.g. CV writing and interview techniques); and 4) personal circumstances (family responsibilities and external factors, e.g. opportunities in the current labor market). The model of Bennet, Dunne and Carre (1999), on the other hand, indicated the following as assets of employability: disciplinary content, knowledge, disciplinary skills, workplace awareness, workplace experience, and generic skills.

FRAMEWORK

Specifically useful for this paper is the employability model of Barrie (2004). The graduate attributes from which this theory was derived, were those from the faculty and students of an Australian university. According to this model, these graduate employment skills are like strands of a single fabric that provide students with a paradigm within the context of the discipline: 1) scholarship, 2) global citizenship, and 3) lifelong learning. A graduate's academic preparation is further validated by theories of employment which explain that a graduate gets employed for other specific reasons. Relevant to this argument is the positional conflict theory which posits that job competition is subjective (Smetherham, 2003). Employers hire graduates not solely on the basis of education but also of other forms of capital such as personal capital, social capital, cultural capital, or reputational capital. Brown, Hesketh and Williams (2003) explain the positional conflict theory as it applies to employability. They stated that job hunting may be viewed not as a rivalry among graduates themselves but as a competition of interest groups that these graduates either represent or are allied with. Consequently, success in terms of employability and the skills that go with it is not a result of fair competition, but rather a product of inequitable, if not, unmerited, feat.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to ascertain the self-perceived personal qualities, core skills and process skills of the graduates from Bukidnon State University working overseas. Inherent to this aim is the determination of the profile of these graduates.

METHODOLOGY

The study used the descriptive design. To attain the purpose of this study, a questionnaire was designed. The first part was developed in such a way that data about the respondents' demographic profile may be collected. The second part contained 39 aspects of employability that was developed, as part of the Skills *plus* project reflected in the questionnaire devised by a Dr. Ray Wolfenden of the University of Manchester. Accordingly, some aspects of these items are connected to theoretical constructs and responses to pragmatic concerns. The items in this part of the questionnaire are divided into 3 sets: *personal qualities*, *core skills and process skills*. Each item in the questionnaire was translated into Visayan language which is the first language of the respondents. The respondents were asked to rate the occurrence of qualities and skills being possessed, with a three-point scale measured from 1 being 'almost never; 2 'sometimes' and 3 'almost always'. It is assumed in this study that the respondents chose the extent of occurrences based on their current work experience, although respondents in self-assessments tend to either overrate or underrate themselves. Data analysis utilized frequencies to compute percentages and mean.

A total of 23 respondents who completed either the sociology or economics program at Bukidnon State University (BSU), Philippines, were traced through snowball sampling, done through some social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Yahoo Messenger or email for a period of 5 months within the school year 2011–2012. This period includes distribution and retrieval of questionnaires sent electronically. The difficulty in tracing more OFWs was due to dissimilar time zones, work culture of the respondents and limited time, and facilities of the enumerators. More respondents could have been traced but the period of data collection for this study was only five months.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

At the time the study was conducted, the graduates were working at countries like Dubai, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Norway, Thailand, Hongkong, North Korea. Their ages range within 23-35 years old with 27 years old which has the highest percentage (23%) and 35 years old the lowest percentage (4%); although 17% of the respondents did not indicate their age. Further, there was an almost equal number of male (48%) and female (52%) respondents traced. Within the total number of respondents, 52% were single, 39% were married; while 9% declared that they were single parents.

When the data were sorted according to the graduates' specialization, 57% of the respondents specialized in sociology; and only 13% completed economics. Of these graduates, 83% completed their degrees in the main campus; while only 4% finished their degrees in either the external or extension centers of BSU. However, 13% of the respondents left this pertinent data in the questionnaire blank. Of the total respondents, only one (1) has taken a master's degree. Furthermore, only 3 (13%) declared that they passed some professional exam, e.g. civil service eligibility; while only 30% said they have obtained trainings after graduation.

With regard to the nature of employment, 34.8% stated that they are working overseas as teacher; 26% as domestic helper; and 9% as AU Pair. The rest are employed as junior officer (4.3) field coordinator (4.3%); PSI Coordinator. However, 13% of the graduates did not indicate the nature of their job at all.

Looking at the nature of their jobs, the data which showed that only 22% are working with the government makes sense because the bulk of them work in private companies (39%). A few of those traced, however, merely stated 'others' (9%) when asked about their work affiliation. When further asked if their current job is the first job since they completed their 4-year degree, 43% said yes and 48% said no; 9% did not indicate any answer. Probing deeper, it was found that their present job is not at all related to the program they completed (61%), although 26% said it is connected to their curricular program.

They were also asked how they found their current job, to which majority (35%) said it was 'recommended by someone' (35%). Some said that they were a 'walk-in applicant' (17%), or 'got the information from friends' (17%), or as a result of a 'job fair' (13%). Only 9% said they obtained their job after they responded to an advertisement. When asked about their job level or position, majority said it is a 'job order' (34.8%) level; almost half said it is a supervisory/technical/professional level (17%). Only a few said the nature of their job is managerial (4.3%) level.

Most of the respondents have been working abroad for two years (30%) at the time the survey took place; this was followed by one year (26%). The longest number of years respondents worked was 3-5 years (9%); and the shortest was 7 months (4.3%) when the survey was undertaken. The respondents regarded the BSU curriculum as helpful when asked to give a categorical answer, e.g. yes (65%) and no (9%). For some reason, 26% had no answer.

In general, the results showed that the qualities and skills of the OFWs as they perceived it are all above the mean (see Table 1). Although the samples of this

study are not representative of the bigger population of OFWs, the value of this result lies in its capacity to, some certain extent, fill a gap in the local literature.

Table 1. Employability Skills of the OFWs

Qualities and Skills	X
1. Personal Qualities	2.73
2. Core Skills	2.65
3. Process Skills	2.59
Grand Mean	2.66

N= 23

Hence, with a grand mean of 2.66, it may be construed that these graduates ‘almost always’ possess employability qualities and skills needed by their employers. Of the three measures of employability, however, the students scored the highest on personal qualities ($x=2.73$), followed by core skills ($x=2.65$); and the lowest are on process skills ($x=2.59$).

A. Personal Qualities

The items in the questionnaire categorized under personal qualities refer to 10 characteristics: ‘malleable self- theory, self-awareness, self-confidence, independence, emotional intelligence, adaptability, stress tolerance, initiative, willingness to learn, and reflectiveness” (Knight & Yorke, 2003).

Table 2 shows that the top personal qualities reported were self-awareness, initiative, self-confidence, and independence. These results are similar to two studies regarding graduates: one in a national science program at Liverpool John Moores University (Saunders & Zuzel, 2010), and another in a Malaysian community college (Omar, Baker & Rachid, 2012), in which personal qualities in juxtaposition with other skills, were rated highest by both the graduates and their employers. In particular, the study of Jones (2013) shows that self-awareness is the top personal quality identified by employers worldwide.

Table 2. Personal Qualities of the OFWs

Personal Qualities	Highest rated skills	X
Self-Awareness I am aware of my own strengths and weaknesses, aims, and values.		2.9
Initiative I have the ability to take action unprompted.		2.9
Self- Confidence I am confident in dealing with the challenges that employment and life throw up.		2.78
Independence I have the ability to work without supervision.		2.78
Lowest rated skills		
Emotional Intelligence I am sensitive to others' emotions and the effects that they can have.		2.6
Stress Tolerance I have the ability to retain effectiveness under pressure.		2.6
Reflectiveness I have the disposition to reflect evaluatively on the performance of oneself and others		2.6
Grand Mean		2.73

N = 23

In contrast, the lowest personal qualities (each has $x = 2.60$) rated were: emotional intelligence, stress tolerance, and reflectiveness. Except for the latter, these results are parallel to a study that reported emotional intelligence and stress tolerance to be ‘moderately developed’ among senior students in a private Malaysian university (Wye & Lim, 2009).

B. Core Skills

Included in the group of twelve core skills in the questionnaire are ‘reading effectiveness, numeracy, information retrieval, language skill, self-management, critical analysis, creativity, listening, written communication, oral presentation, explaining and global awareness’ (Knight & Yorke, 2003). Table 3 indicates that the graduates scored highest in skills such as listening ($x = 2.80$) and self-management ($x = 2.80$). The latter is one of the top preferred skills by employers worldwide (Jones, 2013).

Table 3. Core Skills of the OFWs

Core Skills	X
Highest rated skills	
Numeracy I have the ability to use numbers at an appropriate level of accuracy.	2.5
Creativity I have the ability to be original or inventive and to apply lateral thinking.	2.4
Lowest rated skills	
Self-Management I have the ability to work in an efficient and structured manner	2.8
Listening I can have a focused attention in which key points are recognized.	2.8
Grand Mean	2.65

In contrast, the respondents scored lowest on creativity ($x= 2.4$) and numeracy ($x= 2.5$). That numeracy is a skill lacking by many graduates, is corroborated by a report presented by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (Rosenberg, Heimler, & Morote, 2012).

C. Process Skills

There are 17 skills under the set of process skills: ‘computer literacy, commercial awareness, political sensitivity, ability to work cross-culturally, ethical sensitivity, prioritizing, planning, applying subject understanding, acting morally, coping with ambiguity and complexity, problem solving, influencing, arguing for and justifying a point of view or course of action, resolving conflict, decision-making, negotiating and teamwork’ (Knight & Yorke, 2003; Yorke, 2006).

Table 4. Process Skills of the OFWs

Process Skills	X
Highest rated skills	
Computer Literacy I have the ability to use a range of software.	2.7
Commercial Awareness I can understand business issues and priorities.	2.7
Ability to work cross-culturally I have the ability to work cross-culturally both within and beyond	2.7
Ethical Sensitivity I can appreciate ethical aspects of employment and acts accordingly.	2.7
Prioritizing I have the ability to rank tasks according to importance.	2.7
Problem Solving I select and use appropriate methods to find solutions.	2.7
Lowest rated skills	
Planning I set achievable goals and structuring action.	2.4
Influencing I am capable in convincing others of the validity of one's point of view	2.4
Arguing for and/or justifying a point of view I am objective in arguing for and/or justifying a point of view or a course of action.	2.4
Grand Mean	2.59

The OFWs rated themselves above the mean on computer literacy; commercial awareness; ability to work cross-culturally; ethical sensitivity; prioritizing; and problem solving ($x = 2.70$ for each). Among these skills, commercial awareness is least expected since the respondents were not business management students. Although computer literacy was likely to come out due to the popularity of computer-related gadgets that OFWs utilize when they were still schooling, the graduates' claim their ability to decipher cultural nuances was quite unexpected because their exposure to international settings was very limited, if not, merely vicarious.

The skills that were rated the lowest are 'influencing' ($x = 2.40$) and 'arguing for and/or justifying a point of view or a course of action' ($x = 2.40$). These skills are similar to the skills that Robinson and Garton (2008) found to be likewise, deficient even among American university agricultural students, e.g. 'communicating ideas verbally to groups, and accepting constructive criticism'.

Based on the employability model of Barrie (2004), the OFWs in this study may be considered 'global citizens' and 'lifelong learners', because it is evident that they seek to make a significant contribution to the country they live in, and to continually learn about its people and culture just to comprehend and appreciate their roles in the workplace.

These descriptions complement and/or manifest the specific personal qualities (Knight & Yorke, 2003) that stood out: 'self-awareness' which means being aware of one's 'own strengths and weaknesses, aims and values'; self-confidence (confidence in dealing with the challenges that employment and life throw up) and independence (ability to work without supervision).

Similarly, the top core skills that came out, e.g. 'listening' and 'self-management' parallel with Barrie's 'lifelong learning' and 'global citizenship' graduate attributes. 'Listening' according to Knight and York (2003) refers to "focused attention in which key points are recognized; and 'self-management' refers to the "ability to work in an efficient and structured manner."

Likewise, the top process skills that surfaced reinforce Barrie's conception of global citizenship and lifelong learning: computer literacy (ability to use a range of software); commercial awareness (understanding of business issues and priorities); ability to work cross-culturally (both within and beyond UK, or in this paper, Philippines); ethical sensitivity (appreciates ethical aspects of employment and acts accordingly); prioritizing (ability to rank tasks according to importance); and problem solving (ability to rank tasks according to importance.) In other words, no graduate could work in a cross-cultural setting amidst rapid changes taking place, without those qualities and skills that graduates rated far above the mean.

Given the demographic profile within the framework of the positional conflict theory, it may be said that these OFWs were employed not so much on the basis of the academic content of their program but probably because of social capital (Gyamati & Kyte, 2003), cultural or human capital (Potts, 2005), and other forms of capital e.g. cultural, personal and reputational capitals (Brown et al., 2002). It is possible that these capitals are already embedded in the top personal qualities, core skills and process skills that they claim to have. The OFWs in this study do not occupy elite job positions but nevertheless working as teachers, domestic engineers, or managerial jobs, for reasons not related to academic capital.

What probably explains this phenomenon is that job recruiters want a variety of other skills rather than specialist subject knowledge, except probably in certain

sectors such as those fields related to medicine, law or engineering, but even here employability skills may be necessary. These various skills, however, must be transferable for employability, alongside a work-ready attitude which is part of a human capital.

CONCLUSIONS

The overall employability skills of the graduates are not that high, and definitely not associated with their degree programs, yet they were employed. Hence, the perception that discipline-based knowledge will guarantee a job is no longer applicable. However, there is a need to connect personality and skills development with the process of generating discipline-based knowledge to sharpen up employability skills.

For skills that were rated low, there is a need to revisit the curriculum to ascertain how it can address the issue. Further research must also be pursued in terms of determining the specific values and attitudes that the employers of these OFWs prefer so that it would be possible for their Alma Mater to identify the role of the different forms of capital in acquiring employment.

TRANSLATIONAL RESEARCH

The results of this study are useful for the university administrators and curriculum designers, specifically in terms of identifying and infusing into their curriculum, the specific content and corresponding skills that have the potential to enhance the employability and life-long learning skills of their graduates. Likewise, the study is relevant as it pushes higher education institutions to balance the development of their students' personal, process and core skills that employers in the international arena need, irrespective of the graduates' field of study.

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