

# **Ascertaining the Curriculum Relevance of the Graduate School through Tracer Study in a Philippine Private Higher Education Institution**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Graduate education is part of the most effective means of developing capacities related to doing research that will improve educational theory and practice in the many different aspects of the educational process. Thus, the study traced the employability and productivity of the graduates of a Private Higher Education Institution (PHEI)-graduate school from 2010 – 2015 in the Philippines to further improve its curricular offerings. The descriptive-survey design was used. The majority of the graduates of the Doctor of Education (Ed.D.), Master of Arts (MA), Master of Business Administration (MBA) and Master of Project Management (MPM) programs are employed in a regular or permanent status. They are now occupying supervisory and managerial positions and highly satisfied with their basic salary. The graduate curricula are responding to the needs of various industries. Administration and governance, curriculum and instruction, research, professional and cognate courses, student services, library, internet laboratory, interdisciplinary learning, and teaching/ learning environment are the school-related factors relevant to the current employment of

the graduates. Communication, human relations, entrepreneurial, information technology, problem-solving, critical thinking, and research skills are considered relevant skills learned. Love of God, honesty, punctuality, obedience to superior, perseverance, creativity, professional integrity, unity, fairness, love for others, nationalism and being eco-friendly are the values evidently manifested in their workplaces. Thus, the graduate school is continuously nurturing and embracing the quality of education.

**Keywords** – Graduate education, employability, curriculum relevance, descriptive-survey design, tracer study, Columban College, Philippines

## INTRODUCTION

The perception of employee confronts traditional views about higher education and raises the question of what the point of having a higher degree is; course comprehension and understanding, or learning how to learn. This can lead to instability among academics that are anticipated to teach employability skills, knowledge and values in the classroom in line with modern European and international trends. Graduate education is right on the apex at the educational system in the Philippines. It is an active means of solidifying the research skills and potentials of professionals towards enhancing educational theory and practice (CMO 53, s2007). Moreover, solutions for the various challenges faced by the 21st century are dependent on the quality of professionals with graduate level education (The Commission on the Future of Graduate Education, 2010).

Thus, many countries are investing substantially to improve graduate programs and develop human capital as an engine of economic development. This includes countries such as China and India that have traditionally sent greater numbers of students to U.S. graduate schools. These countries are also offering career incentives for their students who do study abroad to return to their homes. Other countries such as Canada, Australia, New Zealand, U.K, and United States have embraced procedures and policies to recruit and retain international students. Moreover, the employability of higher education graduates is one of the first priorities in Europe. Various studies have been consulted by the researcher to ascertain the relevance of the curriculum through the tracer study. The importance of graduate education through employability of graduates was based on the characteristics that have impact on the quality of program to the world of work (Støren & Aamodt, 2010); any evaluation of employability

needs to indicate areas for internal improvement rather than simply ranking institutions which are based on the employability skills; interpersonal skills, thinking skills, personal qualities/values, resource skills, technology skills, simple skills and informational skills (Rasul, Abd Rauf, Mansor, & Puvanasvaran, 2012); and the quality of management philosophy (Schomburg, 2010). In the case of UK graduates, attributes need to develop to be employable suggested that employability is a complex phenomenon involving the interaction between the graduates, their employer and their job (Minten & Forsyth, 2014). Moreover, Wilton (2011), overriding underlying principles are offered by UK policymakers to service the high-skill labor requirements of a knowledge economy and to enhance educational and employment opportunities for under-represented groups. Thus, employability connects these important principles as a means by which to obtain and maintain high-quality engagement and to eradicate the social reproduction of inequality.

Employability was further analyzed by differentiating the graduates' attitudes towards employment and to detect the effects of graduates' personal and educational characteristics (Kostoglou & Adamidis, 2009); identifying the attributes graduates' need to develop from formal education to the workplace (Minten, 2010). Furthermore, in the context of Scotland, it is one way of comparing other education systems that have undergone a significant curricula change, and exploring the contribution of teacher education to their overall strategy (Menter, Hulme, Elliot, & Lewin, 2010), while in Malaysia, it is appraising the quality of training for the holistic development of individuals equipping them relevant lifelong learning skills such as maturity, reliance, and teamwork (Latif & Bahroom, 2010), and Herrnstein *et al.*, (2012), reiterated that being employable means having the qualities needed to maintain employment and progress in the workplace.

Thus, it is critical to any program of study to constantly evaluate its curriculum to ensure that its content remains relevant, of high-quality and is in tune with the demand of the job market (Peng & Zhang, 1997). One of the ways institutions does this is through tracer studies, and this is recommended to be carried at least a year after students graduated (Kumar, 1991). Ideally, the target students should be not too long on the job so as to achieve an effective tracer feedback since it is often difficult to remember courses taken up to 10 years previously (Loughridge, 1990). Tracer study provides quantitative data on the productivity and employability of the graduates as well as the relevance of the school curriculum based on their actual experiences in the field (Chung & Yet, 2009).

While almost all the previous studies conducted are focused on the undergraduate programs, the present study ascertains on the relevance of the different graduate school curricula by tracing the employability of the graduates. As one of the Catholic PHEIs in the Philippines, the CCI-GS envisions to become a leading institution of higher learning in the region responsible for the holistic formation of students and professionals who want to be Christ-centered and service-oriented individuals. The responsibilities of Catholic school leaders are multifaceted, and their roles demand essential skills and preparation to guarantee the success (Daniels, 2014). Therefore, use of a graduate tracer study is an appropriate tool in determining institutional capability in preparing graduates to meet the demands of the workplace. It involves a determination of graduates in the job search mode; lead time and employment condition, where the knowledge acquired in schools is used to work, in promotions, and job satisfaction. This is a very significant advantage in countries on the edge of industrialization and in developing countries.

## FRAMEWORK

One of the key conceptual issues in a tracer study is tantamount to learn about the relative impact of graduate programs on acquired competencies and professional success. Since then, indicators of graduates' transition and early career success have been attracting ever more attention on the policy agenda, accompanied by international surveys (Gajderowicz, Grotkowska, & Wincenciak, 2012). The purpose of this paper is to measure the potential role of the graduate education through the employability of the highly educated professionals (Garrouste, 2014) by assessing how important for graduates to possess the required skills for the industry. These skills are assessed based on their basic knowledge, soft, and entrepreneurial skills. Such study is important to identify if the level of skills possessed by graduates during their studies are appropriate in helping them to perform in a job market (Ahmad, Zainal, & Rahmat, 2012), and to establish the relationships between employability and graduates' perception of their skills (Ahmed, 2009). Questions are raised relative to the content and performance of the HEIs if able to meet the changing needs of society (Árcelo & Sanya, 1987), and new insights are offered by identifying the value of skills and personal attributes required at the workplace (Bhanugopan & Fish, 2009). The results will confirm beneficial effects for future curriculum enhancement from the valuable insights of the graduates (Blassoples, 2011).

In the contexts of Australia, Pakistan, Singapore, and Malaysia, employers, universities and professional bodies need to develop professionals who possess practical skills (Consultancy, 2007); and employment skills and knowledge (Haque, 2013). These knowledge and professional characteristics are at varying degrees across the sector and HEIs (Lowden, Hall, Elliot, & Lewin, 2011). Moreover, Eurico, Da Silva, and Do Valle, (2015) confirmed that the HEIs image is strongly influenced by employability, which was associated with satisfaction and loyalty towards higher education institutions (HEI). Results showed a wide gap was found in communication skills. This means that improvement efforts and corrective actions must be taken to improve employers overall satisfaction (Islam, Rafikul, Abdul Hamid, Mohd Shukri & Abd Manaf, 2013). Chinese universities are experiencing a decline in their graduate employment since the past decade. With this, Su, Zhang, and Nisar (2015) adopted a multiple approaches to establishing the skills to students' employability; and de Guzman and de Castro (2008) saw it on the epistemological dimension of the qualities acquired by the graduates in various contexts. Additionally, a confirmatory analysis substantiated that knowledge, skills, thinking skills, interpersonal skills, communication skills, and management skills are demanded by employers (Naveed, 2015). Adding to the lists of soft skills, Holt, Tink, Mandigo, and Fox (2008) emphasized the need to have an overall framework the skills and knowledge of students. This was reiterated by the UK Research Councils' Training requirements by providing an excellent framework that outline the expectations for students' research skills (Polziehn, 2011). Information technology and communication skills, and values were identified to be very much useful to the present work of the graduates (Macatangay, 2013). However, hard skills were considered less prominent compared to soft skills and personal attributes. Nilsson (2010), indicated that the educational program should be more on generalist competence and soft employability skills (Norshima, 2011). Moreover, in Malaysia, employability skills were analyzed based on academic qualification, experience, and specific soft skills, and rate of employability was far above the ground on soft skills requested by employers (Omar, Manaf, Mohd, Kassim, & Aziz, 2012). Further, communication skills and IT skills were found indispensable skills that the LIS graduates should possess (Pradhan, 2015). The researchers also revealed that cataloging and classification and experiential learning remain very critical to their related jobs (Shongwe & Ocholla, 2011). In contrast, the employment of highly educated Dutch doctoral graduates in the Netherlands, academic, non-academic, and demographic variables, such as research publications, age, gender

and number of children in the family, were highly correlated with contract type than factors such as supervision and labor market preparation (Van De Schoot, Yerkes, & Sonneveld, 2012).

Thus, employability studies are typically viewed to have practical implications for HEIs and curriculum re-engineering related to the enhancement of graduates. The findings of the present study have implications towards regular review and revision of the program of studies in a way that would enable graduates to meet the expectations of changing information job market. Lastly, it suggests that the HEI may work more closely with industries, professional and learned societies through the establishment of university-industry link cooperation that will grow up to be a catalyst for skills enhancement of the graduate students and professionals.

## **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

The study traced the employability and productivity of graduates to ascertain the curricular relevance of a graduate school. Specifically, it sought to analyze the productivity of the graduates regarding employment status, position in the present job, and gross monthly income in the present job, school-related factors relevant to employability, competencies/ skills/ and values learned and useful in the current job, and the suggestions to further improve the curricula.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

This study utilized the descriptive-survey design of research. Descriptive research aims to describe the nature of a situation, as it prevails at the time of the study and to explore the causes of particular phenomena. The descriptive research seeks familiarity with the subject and portrays selected employability and productivity data of the graduates of 2010– 2015. Thus, it is the most common means of obtaining information from the graduates with the use of survey-questionnaire, random interviews with the aid of the study guide and observation.

### **Participants**

The actual number of graduates was traced and identified through the help of the College's Admissions and Registration Office. There were fifty-two

(52) Doctor of Education (Ed.D), sixty-six (66) Master of Arts in Education (MAED), twenty-four (24) Master of Arts in Language Teaching (MALT), thirty (30) Master of Arts in Science Education (MASE), six (6) Master of Arts in Religious Education (MARE), sixty-one (61) Master in Business Administration (MBA), and twenty-one (21) Master in Public Management (MPM) graduates.

### **Instrument**

The instrument used was the modified GTS survey-questionnaire provided by the Commission on Higher Education (CHED). Several parts of the questionnaire were considered for the purpose of the present study about employment status, job level/ occupation, position in the present job, and gross monthly income in the present job. A separate portion of the survey form to pertinent data as to the relevance of school-related factors in the graduate's employability, the usefulness of the learned competencies/ skills and values to the current job of the graduates was added. There was no further validation of the instrument done because it was issued by the CHED to facilitate the tracer study of the graduates in the region. However, minor reconstruction on the direction/ instruction needed to be done to simplify the instrument for its face validity.

### **Data Gathering Procedure**

The researcher personally asked the assistance of the staff from Admissions and Registration Office for the actual listing of the desired participants. With the help of friends, currently enrolled students, and e-mail communication, the researcher, was able to distribute and retrieve the desired number of participants in the study with a retrieval rate of 100% of the total number of graduates. In compliance with research ethics protocol, the researcher asked permission through informed consent from all the respondents who were surveyed.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The graduates are employed on a regular or permanent status, locally, and internationally. This implies that the school is continuously nurturing and embracing the quality of education as revealed by the employability rate of graduates. Employment status in the current labor market ascertained the specific areas of skill, the credential of higher education, awareness of interdisciplinarity and the role of HEIs in supporting graduates' careers through continuous strategic development, and bridging higher level of education with the labor market (Pavlin & Svetlik, 2014).

The job levels/ occupations of graduates reveal that 53.85% of the Ed. D. graduates are occupying a key position in the educational institution as the supervisor or head teacher, 42.31% are school principals, and 3.85% are Master Teachers. Out of the 126 MAED graduates, 65.87% are classroom or Master Teachers, 28.57% are head teachers/ supervisors; and 5.56% are principals. Moreover, out of the 61 MBA graduates, 11.47% are college professors, 67.21% are occupying a clerical position; 13.11% are supervisors in numerous companies; and 8.19% are managers in different business organizations. Lastly, there are 28.57% MPM graduates who landed as college professors, 52.83% are enjoying a clerical position, and 19.05% are supervisors in various LGU/ NGO. The results imply that the programs are responding to the needs of diverse industries. The findings affirmed Ramirez, Cruz, and Alcantara (2014); and Ramli, Nawawi, and Chun (2010) when the graduates claimed that their knowledge, academic-acquired skills and competencies contributed greatly to their job performance. Likewise, academic-acquired skills and competencies of the graduates are relevant to their chosen occupations. The results further showed that school produces marketable and appropriately trained graduates with the majority landing in course-related jobs within a short period after graduation. The study also indicated that the graduates possess the skills and competencies necessary to succeed in this competitive world; and when employers perceived the needed enhancement programs to focus on the development and enhancement of critical thinking ability, generating hypotheses and linking ideas, applying theory into practice, sharp analytical skills, prioritizing problems, keeping up-to-date on latest information regarding the professionalism, giving clear explanation about problems and treatments and recognizing the effects of decisions to be made.

Ed.D. graduates are enjoying a salary of more than 900USD a month. Moreover, there are 16.67% MA graduates who are receiving a monthly salary of more than 500USD, 50.00% with more than 600USD monthly salary, 22.22 % with more than 700USD, 3.97% with more than 800USD, while 1.59 % is very happy with more than 900USD a month. Out of the sixty-one (61) MBA graduates, 9.84% are receiving a monthly salary of 440USD, 62.29% with more than 600USD, 11.47 % with more or less 740USD, while 6.55% are receiving a monthly salary of more than 900USD. Lastly, 33.33% of the MPM graduates are enjoying a basic salary of 340USD, 52.38% with 450USD, 9.52% with 650USD, and 4.76% with 750USD. The findings imply that the graduates are contented with their monthly income.



The school-related factors relevant to graduates' employment are collectively grouped to administration and governance, curriculum and instruction, research subjects, professional and cognate courses, student services, library, internet laboratory, inter-disciplinary learning, and teaching/ learning environment are the related factors which contributed a lot to their current employment status. The results reveal that the presence of these relevant factors hones their knowledge, skills, and values which are considered by them as a very important instrument for landing in various prestigious jobs. Thus, the school is continuously finding countless ways to improve the management of the graduate school. Efforts of the entire administration are very noticeable towards the attainment of quality graduate studies. A study conducted by Business, Industry and Higher Education Collaboration Council on Graduate employability skills (August 2007) is characterized by diversified programs from various universities develop graduate employability skills. Thus, universities work to develop employability skills in their students by providing academic staff with relevant support and resources, integrating these skills into the curriculum and course design, providing students with work placements and exposure to professional settings and providing advice and guidance through career services.

In the Philippines, the Presidential Commission on Educational Reform (PCER) carried out a study regarding the status of Philippines education and came out with a report in April 2000. One of the significant findings of the said report is that "the quality of HEIs depends on the superiority of its teaching force. Thus, the government recommended that faculty at the college level must have a Master's degree in the area of specialization. Hence, there is a need to encourage and provide assistance to HEIs to enable them to meet this CMO requirement. The faculty of the school maintains the expertise to accomplish the mission and to ensure that the school administration should conduct continuous assessment among faculty members (AACSB, 2009). Lucey (2002) mentioned that the higher authorities including the teaching staff play a significant role in motivating students. The present study considers the effectiveness of faculty as coping measures for dealing with such circumstances. Findings would provide professors stronger abilities to focus on student developmental needs. Research into effective methods, for developing administrator prioritization and personal skills would also support environments promoting student development. These findings affirm von Hellens, Clayton, Beekhuyzen, and Nielson (2009) who found out about the perceptions of ICT as a field of study and work in German schools.

The competencies, skills, and values learned by the graduates such as communication skills, human relations skills, entrepreneurial skills, information technology skills, problem solving skills, critical thinking skills, and research skills are of interest to their jobs. MA graduates reveal that courses offered are parallel with the practical application of the work which makes the curriculum responsive to their needs. This is a manifestation that the atmosphere in the graduate school in an output and competency-based instruction has been cascaded to the students' level. Graduates also claimed that though they found research very thought-provoking subject, it needs time, devotion and skills to understand it seriously. Human relations skills gained by the graduates are deeply rooted from the caring and individualized attention given to the students during their stay in the institution. This kind of relationship is resounding behavior worthy to be emulated, and most of the graduates admit that they are very convenient as they effectively and efficiently perform their task. Communication skills, critical thinking skills, information technology skills, human relations skills and problem solving skills are also pertinent skills according to them. Graduates found these skills applicable due to the up-to-date level of job performance in the market. The Commission on Higher Education (CHED) has directed the conduct of GTS to selected HEIs offering programs responsive to the needs of industry and society (CHED CMO #s 38, s. 2006, 11, s. 1999). About the adequacy of training on human relation skills, it likewise resulted to a high degree of satisfaction which is interpreted as "strongly agree." Hence, the graduate school has provided the alumni with "very adequate" skills on human relations. The adequacy of training on problem-solving skills, the ability to evaluate action for making future decision earned a descriptive rating of "strongly agree". These abilities, together with the critical thinking skills, earned an overall descriptive rating of "strongly agree." Therefore, the graduates involved in this study are sufficiently provided and trained in solving problems and critical thinking. As to the adequacy of training on research skills, the ability to use technology to acquire needed information gained a descriptive rating of "strongly agree. This is brought by the fact that the use of technology in all aspects is very popular in the Philippines. Nonetheless, all research abilities yielded a descriptive rating of "strongly agree." Hence, the data confirmed that CC-GS was able to develop the research skills of its graduates. The findings of the present study support the claim of Sitepu and Kehm (2011) when mapping the graduates' competencies, knowledge, personal attributes are very useful in workplaces.

Moreover, the graduates strongly agree that Love of God, honesty, punctuality, obedience to superior, perseverance, creativity, professional integrity, unity, fairness, love for other, nationalism and eco-friendly are evidently manifested in their workplaces as part of the hidden curriculum of the institution. Although a considerable amount of literature addresses employability skills and values, much of the information is theoretical in nature and offers policy recommendations and prescriptive advice. Further, a majority of research studies have primarily examined the experiences of a particular higher education institute where remedial actions were taken to impart employability skills (Wickramasinghe & Perera, 2010).

The graduates are very satisfied with their current employment situation and that College may sustain its best to improve on the knowledge, values, and skills they are developing among students for better alignment between college education and the world of works. The findings of this study are essential for curriculum development, higher education policy development, and higher education quality assurance.

For the improvement in learning condition, the results imply that graduate school needs to think about strategies that are helpful in developing programs that could improve the alignment between higher education and the labor market. One program could be a strong curriculum program for internship and practicum that could provide graduates with advanced and more relevant skills for their chosen careers. Undoubtedly, the consequences are powerful documented factors to determine the graduates' level of satisfaction of the school services, academic environment and physical plant and facilities. Thus, the existing program of studies are still effective, adequate and relevant in taking action to the modern and complex changes brought about by emerging developments such as the international standards in academic programs, the ASEAN integration, the Qualifications Frameworks in the 21st Century, among others, and HEIs should stand out as one of the major players to cope with these reforms (Gines, 2014). Also, professors are imparting the required performance standards and competencies as emphasized in the Human Capital Theory, popularized by Schultz to ensure a high employability skills possessed of Business Education graduates. The researchers encouraged the teachers to become more active in imparting the identified skills (Imeokparia & Kennedy, 2012). Thus, this paper introduces a straightforward, practical factor of employability that will allow the concept to be explained easily at the graduate level and that can be used as a framework for working with students to develop their employability (Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007).

## CONCLUSION

HEIs should continue to work together with industry professionals to equip future graduates with the appropriate skills needed for success in the workplace. Unlike the results from previous studies in other countries that there was a large unemployment rate among graduates, this study found out that all participants in this study are employed. The finding of the study also revealed that graduates are contented with their current employment situation and that colleges should sustain the skills they are developing in students for better alignment between graduate education and the world of works. The findings of this study are significant for curriculum development, higher education policy development, and higher education quality assurance. For improvement in learning condition, the study recommends that graduate schools in the Philippines are required to begin to think about strategies that are useful for developing programs that could improve the alignment between higher education and the labor market. One such program could be a curriculum revisit vis-a-vis relevant skills for their chosen fields. Given that teacher, graduates may not teach their subject specialization, at least two possible options for the teacher education curriculum exist: a strong generalist curriculum excluding special options; or a strong generalist curriculum with a relatively small special component fully (Ramrathan, 1997).

## TRANSLATIONAL RESEARCH

The result of the study could be translated through a journal article for international publications, newsletters, radio, social media, and other media for information dissemination and to revisit the institutional admission requirements and support from the administration for continuous improvement of the graduate curricula. Additionally, both the external and internal stakeholders might be able to translate it into a more comprehensive institutional policy and specific strategic intervention program that could increase the interest of prospective graduate school students and professionals towards further studies. Finally, it can be translated by sharing this with future students and faculty to clarify the skills needed in the workplace.

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