




From Campus to Career: A Qualitative Exploration of Graduate Employability and Workforce Readiness in Ilocos Norte

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Abstract

Fresh graduates in Ilocos Norte face substantial impediments while moving from school into the profession, a struggle often rooted in what may be called the epistemological drift of education and industry. An agricultural manager said that a lack of soft-skills training among graduates, especially concerning communication, adaptability, and professionalism, constitutes a major issue in any general setting. Some graduates also have issues with traits or practical experiences peculiar to the industry, as most internship programs are unproductive in developing more contact time and experience in actual working conditions. The gap between the curriculum and industry demands is widening by preparing students inadequately for employment in high-demand sectors such as renewable energy, digital literacy, and environmental planning. Attrition at the graduate level remains a problem in this area because qualified individuals are embarking on outsourcing or mobility toward urban workplaces for higher salaries and more job prospects, thus making the local workforce even more scarce. Addressing such challenges would require better cooperation among educational institutions, industry, and local governments to ensure that programs meet employers' needs. Employers emphasized that micro-credentialing, competency-based training, and structured internships are apparitions to teach students how to teach themselves technical and workplace readiness skills. Career centers should serve as channels for accumulating and providing career advice and relevant professional development workshops to enhance employability. The community would have to revisit compensation schemes and progress in career development to reduce worker flight. The industry-implemented education reforms continued soft-skills training, and the strengthening of academia-industry partnerships will highly impact the likelihood of employability possibilities and the readiness of graduates for the workforce. This summation of strategies can thereafter put Ilocos Norte in a position to develop itself into a locality that hosts the formation of a highly skilled workforce that remains within the local region while supporting sustainable economic growth. Ultimately, the bridging of skill gaps to ensure that fresh graduates transition meaningfully from education to employment remain competitive in the job market, grow their skills in line with industrial demands, and address the ever-evolving requirements of industries.

Keywords *Job Summit, Skills, Fresh Graduates, Employability*

INTRODUCTION

Graduates' lives are influenced by the transition from academic institutions to professional workplaces as they work on their career paths and societal roles (Herbert et al., 2020). Unfortunately, as expected by many employers or the specific realities in the selected industry, it is not an easy path to walk. They are indeed moving from college/university to where they work, which is quite a turning point. In this regard, the problems that fresh job seekers or potential employees face vary from one region to another depending on what is demanded by employers as well as how ready our schools make them before being given job offers (Istikomah et al., 2024). Specifically, this is mostly noticed in Ilocos Norte because local businesses keep changing, and the education system has failed in the past to produce students who can serve these firms.

Recent talks with stakeholders from various sectors, including agriculture and health care, have revealed several significant matters affecting how easily graduates find jobs. Employees often regard soft skills such as communication and adaptability (Okolie et al., 2020), yet others claim that professionalism is lacking, along with no industry-based technical competencies (Ibrahim & Abiddin, 2024). The problem has also been worsened by the novel coronavirus disease outbreak

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since many graduates need more practical know-how regarding their fields, rendering them unprepared for corporate environments (Santandreu et al., 2016).

Stronger collaboration between educational institutions, industries, and government agencies is needed (Tseng et al., 2020). This is because universities make sure that their curricula are in line with what is required in the labor market, internships and on-the-job training programs are improved as well as nurturing a culture of continuous learning (Nsanzumuhire & Groot, 2020). This is important for filling skills shortages and retaining workers, such as skilled graduates, who often leave their regions for greener pastures due to a lack of proper opportunities. This study examines how those who have finished school transition into employment. This section discusses what graduates do to increase their likelihood of getting a job and identifies the difficulties encountered by these individuals.

This outcome adds to current debates about employment capacity building and industrial growth (Borah et al., 2021). Henceforth, it will suggest how to develop closer ties between Industry and Learning Institutions apart from meeting the changing interests of graduates and jobs (Pauceanu et al., 2020). This research focuses on what employers in Ilocos Norte think about the new skills that fresh graduates have acquired. It is based on their skills that this paper would want to find out if they possess the necessary know-how for work-related activities or not, their ability to adapt to workplace situations as well as how much their training is in line with what is required by specific industries in the economy as a whole. This study intends to determine what employers believe are the strengths and weaknesses of graduates who are entering the job market right now across all sectors, especially in areas like agriculture, the health services industry (HIS), the travel and leisure sector (TLS), and sustainable power sources.

This study focused only on the geographical area of Ilocos Norte. Information is gathered from business entities and other bodies that recruit indigenous entrepreneurs. The duration encompasses views from bosses who have contracted freshers in the last five years. Within this period, it is possible to examine how graduate abilities have changed over time and their capacity to obtain employment.

This study concerns the employability and work readiness of fresh, out-of-college young people in Ilocos Norte, specifically focusing on the identification of employers' perceptions of the skill gap and the assessment of the efficacy of internships and on-the-job training programs in preparing graduates for their future jobs.

This study also identifies the potential for partnerships among educational institutions, industries, and local governments to support workforce preparation and address employment issues.

In general, this qualitative research aimed to determine employers' perceptions of how prepared fresh graduates are for the workforce in Ilocos Norte. Specifically, it answers the following questions:

1. What are the critical skill gaps among fresh graduates perceived by employers in Ilocos Norte?
2. What role do internship and on-the-job training play in enhancing graduates' workforce readiness?
3. How can educational institutions, industries, and local governments collaborate to address skill gaps and workforce challenges?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Some of the main problems in education across different countries have persisted for years, such as aligning students' skills with the available jobs because it is hard to determine the right

course to take. This means that if an individual receives a high level of training in their job area but lacks the proper soft skills, there is no guarantee that they will secure employment opportunities or retain existing ones for that matter (Albert et al., 2023). The problem of unemployment among graduates is partly associated with a lack of critical soft skills, including communication. This paper focuses on the labor market orientation and its implications for training practice. Therefore, strategic orientation should be matched with the characteristics of the labor market due to fundamental organizing principles. This means that remedial intervention should be offered in fields like EU development or company finance, where employers do not appreciate any deviation from the preset program and competence-based approaches should predominate in areas such as ITC or language training. In both cases, these should organically grow into flexible and competence-based training models that can be fully controlled by learners. This is aggravated by certain unjustified fears since the number of students enrolled in sub-degree studies in polytechnics and technical training institutes has decreased significantly recently.

The literature underscores the importance of internships and on-the-job training for merging academic theory with real-world practice. The proper execution of these programs has the potential to improve both technical and interpersonal proficiency, thus facilitating a seamless move from school to work (Bhatnagar, 2021). Nevertheless, these initiatives do not always take into account the particular needs of various industries, making them less impactful. This discrepancy is most evident in Ilocos Norte, where employers believe that academic institutions provide graduates with irrelevant skills that do not meet the demands of the labor market (Parilla, 2020).

Other problems arising include student attrition and labor force durability. Graduates from Ilocos Norte, an area with rural and regional character, usually head to other countries or urban settings where they receive higher pay cheques, resulting in a high rate of employee turnover and “Brain drain” syndrome, which destroys local industries (Salahuddin et al., 2023). This contention is supported by employers who believe that there is low pay scale competitiveness, lack of opportunities for career progression, and high levels of unpreparedness by employees at workplaces that lead to the migration of talented human resources. Such setbacks highlight the need for not only providing graduates with a hard-soft skills mix but also establishing working conditions that would enable them to develop their careers without quitting their organizations (Ibrahim & Abiddin, 2024). Although the literature provides valuable information on employability issues at the regional and global levels, it mainly centers on large urban areas and ignores smaller rural markets, such as Ilocos Norte. Some of the considerations that usually surround employability frameworks do not take into consideration the distinct cultural, economic, and social conditions of particular places and hence do not guide employment promotion and creation in areas of increasing or limited populations and sizes (Al-Asefer & Abidin, 2021).

A strong foundation is laid by the reviewed literature through the identification of the critical role of skills alignment, development of soft skills, and work-based learning in enhancing employability. However, it does not address the specific challenges that the labor force in Ilocos Norte faces; which differ considerably from national or neotropical dynamics. This gap is bridged by our study, which focuses on the experiences of employers and their perceptions of local graduates’ preparedness. Because of qualitative exploration, the research identifies areas such as curriculum alignment, internship enhancement, and staff retention strategies that require attention. Thus, this research not only helps fill the skills gaps in its host region but also provides an example that can be followed by other similar regions that are grappling with staff problems.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

The employability and workforce readiness of recent graduates in Ilocos Norte are explored

in this study, which uses a qualitative research approach and a phenomenological design. To reveal what lies beneath their common experiences, this research intends to discover the main and essential themes within the participants' shared experiences. A thematic analysis method is used to analyze patterns systematically identified and interpreted from other sources besides the data at hand.

Table 1. Participant

Cluster	Industries Covered	Participants	Additional Representative
Cluster I	Agriculture, Fisheries, Tourism	HR Managers, Company Executives	Provincial Government Representatives
Cluster II	IT-BPO, Mining, Construction, Renewable Energy	Department Heads, Executives	Provincial Government Representatives
Cluster III	Accommodation, Food & Beverage, Travel	Stakeholders, Business Representatives	Provincial Government Representatives
Cluster IV	Hospitals, Medical-related Businesses	HR Managers, Institution Representatives	Provincial Government Representatives

The research participants were deliberately selected to cover an assortment of industries in Ilocos Norte. The research involved a total of 30 participants. Each cluster also had representatives from the Provincial Government of Ilocos Norte. The participants comprised HR managers, company executives, department heads, and representatives from various institutions. By so doing, the sample ensured that all major employers were represented, providing a balanced view of the employment sectors and assessing the extent to which higher education institutions adequately prepared graduates to meet job requirements.

Data Gathering

To obtain detailed information about graduate employability in Ilocos Norte and their readiness to enter the workforce, focus group discussions (FGDs). FGDs were used for data collection in this study. FGDs were chosen as the predominant qualitative method for this research because they have the unique capability of capturing multiple, interactive, and context-dependent insights that can help the research objectives. Engaging in FGDs enables participants to experience dynamic interaction, thereby allowing employers from different sectors to describe their experiences, voice common problems and support each other's point of view. It is for this reason that such an approach is key for Ilocos Norte. Understanding mutual aspects such as communication gaps among employees' skills during training or needs born out of the particular industry is important. In contrast to individual interviews, FGDs allow for the emergence of common perspectives among group members, thereby leading to a comprehensive perspective on the workforce challenges facing graduates. FGDs were chosen as the primary data collection method for this study because of their effectiveness in capturing collective insights, diverse perspectives, and interactive discussions that contribute to a deeper understanding of graduate employability and workforce readiness.

Although effective, FGDs have their limitations and are biased, especially regarding the

people selected to participate in them as well as how the information acquired is analyzed. With an aim at obtaining specialized knowledge about different sectors within the Ilocos Norte region, this research purposely targeted employers exclusively from these particular industries, thereby giving less prominence to educators, policymakers, and fresh graduates, among others. This means that issues presented herein could only mirror what larger well-established businesses want without regard for budding industries in our environmental context. Additionally, participants sometimes feel pressure to conform to their answers given within groups or say things they think other members will like, whereas, in a real sense, they do not believe in such ideas. As a result, the recording may appear to favor the produced voices at the expense of other quieter ones, thereby introducing bias in data collection. These biases were reduced by ensuring inclusive representation across industries and balanced participation encouraged by experienced moderation. To validate the results, secondary data sources were checked, and detailed documentation was provided on the data analysis processes to minimize subjective interpretation. Even though these strategies serve to enhance the reliability of the study; henceforth it is necessary that more perspectives be brought in by other stakeholders like graduates and educators so that a full understanding of the skills gap as well as workforce readiness challenges could be realized in the region.

During the Pre-Job Summit that took place on November 7, 2024, FGDs were led by faculty members of the College of Business Education at Northwestern University (NWU), the School of Business and Accountancy at Divine Word College of Laoag (DWCL), and the College of Business Economics, as well as Accountancy at Mariano Marcos State University (MMSU). There were four clusters at the summit, and each cluster held two FGDs to ensure sufficient interactions among participants from various sectors and to effectively represent their opinions.

Participants were asked a series of open-ended questions to explore various topics in their capacity to adjust their responses to the questions provided across all sessions while ensuring basic order. The content covered encompassed talents and skills possessed by fresh graduates concerning quality internships, on-the-job training programs, workforce readiness strategies, workforce retention approaches, and whether educational areas match the industry requirements. Those at the event were drawn from different fields, such as agriculture, the tourism industry, and healthcare service providers.

For accuracy and depth, all FGDs were video-recorded with participants' consent and detailed field notes, which facilitators took. The notes were transcribed word-for-word, thus keeping participants' own words intact. This made available a rich tapestry of information for examination, thereby enabling a comprehensive look at the lived experiences and shared insights of employers in Ilocos Norte.

Data Triangulation Scenario

To enhance the validity and reliability of the findings, a triangulation approach was employed by integrating multiple data sources, methods, and perspectives. Methodological triangulation was applied by collecting data through FGDs with industry employers, reviewing secondary sources such as employment reports and academic literature, and conducting observational analysis during discussions to capture nonverbal cues and group dynamics. This combination ensured that employer perspectives on graduate employability were cross-validated with existing research and policy documents. Data source triangulation was also used by involving multiple industry sectors, including agriculture, healthcare, IT-BPO, tourism, and construction, to provide a comparative analysis of graduate preparedness across different fields. Additionally, representatives from local government agencies were invited to offer policy-level insights, while faculty members from higher education institutions provided perspectives on academic curriculum and internship structures. This multi-sectoral approach ensured that the findings were not limited

to a single industry's viewpoint but were reflective of broader employment trends in Ilocos Norte. In addition, investigator triangulation was incorporated by engaging multiple researchers in data collection and analysis. FGDs were moderated by faculty members from Northwestern University (NWU), Divine Word College of Laoag (DWCL), and Mariano Marcos State University (MMSU), thereby reducing potential biases from individual researchers. Thematic coding and analysis were conducted independently by several researchers who later compared and cross-validated their findings to ensure consistency and accuracy in interpretation. By employing this triangulation approach, the study strengthened the credibility and trustworthiness of its conclusions, ensuring that graduate employability challenges were examined from diverse perspectives and supported by multiple data sources.

Data Analysis

The study used thematic analysis and phenomenological reduction to interpret data captured through focus group discussions, which revealed valuable insights related to the employability and workforce readiness of Ilocos Norte graduates. First, thematic analysis was conducted in which the researchers immersed themselves in the data multiple times, reviewing transcripts and field notes during the initial familiarization phase. At this early stage, key phrases or repeating ideas were singled out and coded based on descriptive terms; an example of coding applied here includes "soft skills gap," "OJT quality," and "workplace adaptability." These codes were then grouped into broader themes, for instance, skills gaps, training in practice, and industry-specific cooperation vis-à-vis workforce retention concerns, among others, based on the questions each cluster answered. These themes were redefined to synthesize the participants' key responses, and a thematic map was developed to illustrate how they were interconnected visually.

At the same time, the participants' shared experiences were distilled using phenomenological reduction. This process began by horizontalizing all useful statements to obtain a complete perspective. Statements that resembled each other indicated that they referred to the same concept and were grouped. First, some textual descriptions were necessary to explain what had happened to the employees, for example, why employees with rare skills were leaving organizations or why those who were leaving universities lacked some interpersonal abilities. Lastly, such phenomenological reduction led to synthesis, revealing that all employers had common dreams and faced similar problems when creating more competent specialists.

By combining thematic analysis and phenomenological reduction, this dual approach provided a deep yet detailed comprehension of the data, enabling the researchers to locate both patterns, relations, and the undying essence of the employer's perspective. The latter can be considered fundamental to any suggestion that should be directed at linking education with job opportunities within this region.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The table presents the profiles of research participants, including their industry affiliations and roles within their respective sectors. The study involved a total of 30 participants from various industries in Ilocos Norte, ensuring a diverse representation of employment sectors. Each cluster also included representatives from the Provincial Government of Ilocos Norte. The participants consisted of HR managers, company executives, department heads, and institutional representatives. To maintain confidentiality, individual names are not disclosed, aligning with ethical research practices. Instead, industry categories and roles are provided for reference.

Thematic Analysis

Theme 1. Communication and Language Proficiency

Effective communication skills were a major issue in most clusters because there was no articulation amongst many graduates. Employers belonging to different clusters mention errors involving grammar, poor understanding, and a bit of articulation that goes against the proper execution of duties in the office. These problems show the necessity for organized spoken language training that touches on such areas as grammar, sentence construction and verbal expression for future professionals. For instance, some of them find it hard to express themselves well during interviews and daily instructions without indicating that they understand by simply responding with 'yes'. Participants stated the following:

"Graduates tend to struggle with verbal communication, which affects their overall workplace effectiveness." (Cluster I-A)

"They should improve their effective communication skills, particularly in comprehension." (Cluster I-B)

"Graduates lack basic sentence construction like subject and verb agreement, grammar, pronunciation, and usage of conjunctions." (Cluster II-B)

1. Deficiencies in Verbal and Written Communication

Grads have a hard time constructing sentences, putting words together, or even grammar. These same defects often make their interviews and workplace interactions extremely ineffective because they do not comprehend things well.

2. Limited Professional Communication Skills

The employers state that these people do not know how to write a professional report or letter. This affects how college graduates can effectively participate in any form of correspondence.

Theme 2. Job Readiness and Practical Experience

Several graduates do not possess practical exposure and hands-on experience that will benefit them in the job market. As far as the connection between academic knowledge and application is concerned, it is very crucial to have internships and on-the-job training (OJT) though their relevancy concerning various sectors remains wanting. Some students during the internship said that the programs they were engaged in were irrelevant and not enough to give them a comprehensive experience of what they had learned at school. To employers, the importance of having specialized internships and programs that are full-time was underlined, which could assist students in getting first-hand information regarding the working environment, especially for sought-after professions like engineering, renewable energy, and business management. The supporting quotations are as follows:

"Internships give students a chance to observe and participate in actual business operations." (Cluster I-A)

"Schools should provide more opportunities for students to gain practical experience outside their studies to better prepare them for the job market." (Cluster I-B)

"Industry immersion is meaningful and aligned with the student's course to provide relevant experience." (Cluster II-A)

1. Misaligned Internship Programs

It is very common for interns to get internships that are not in line with what they have been taught in school or what they want to study in their careers, hence missing out on building much-needed practical experience.

2. Lack of Workplace Familiarity

It is quite common that a good number of university graduates are not able to handle real-life situations at work due to poor exposure in terms of work-related roles meant for those in specific industries; hence, they know too much theoretically and little in practice.

Theme 3. Professionalism and Work Ethics

A major area that needs improvement for recent graduates has been identified as professionalism and work ethics. Some of the employers observed that some graduates are not respectful, accountable, or disciplined themselves. Unrealistic expectations regarding corporate culture, salary scales, and promotion are common characteristics among university graduates. Consequently, fear and low esteem reduce graduates' ability to express competence during interviews. The need for these individuals to grow into a career involves building upon strong work values of; endurance, accountability, and adaptability so that they can sail through any task at the workplace successfully. The participants said during the FGD:

"There's a need for improvement in graduates' professionalism and work ethic." (Cluster I-A)

"Graduates with Latin honors... struggle to answer questions in interviews because they get too nervous." (Cluster I-B)

"Graduates are afraid to ask questions and to cross the status quo." (Cluster II-B)

1. Unrealistic Expectations

Several learners enter employment settings anticipating massive pay packages or an idealistic view of the company's traditions, thus causing unhappiness and ill-conduct.

2. Weak Work Ethics and Accountability

Graduates have been cited by their employers for lacking self-discipline, respect for workplace norms, and their inability to take any initiative; this makes it difficult for them to participate in organizational duties.

Theme 4. Alignment of the Curriculum with Industry-Specific Skills

During the FGDs, it was observed that there existed a major discrepancy between what is taught at schools and what is required in different sectors. To this end, employers underscored that education should be aligned with current job market needs to bridge existing gaps in occupation-specific abilities. On such grounds, there was mention of such things as environmental planning micro-credentialing/certification, renewable energy qualification, and digital literacy as being critical for boosting employability, among others. Additionally, institutions should periodically overhaul their course content based on feedback from employers so that graduates acquire pertinent technical and analytical capabilities, among others, as demanded by the market. One way to achieve this is through increased collaboration between academic institutions and industries, which can help keep curricula flexible enough to respond quickly to changes occurring in workplaces. Most participants stated the following:

"We recommend that institutions conduct research on labor market demands and adjust their curricula accordingly." (Cluster I-A)

"Micro-credentialing would be highly beneficial." (Cluster II-A)

"The OJT programs should balance local and external exposure... to give them a well-rounded experience." (Cluster III)

1. Mismatch Between Academic Training and Industry Needs

Curricula do not meet particular industry requirements and thus lack the technical competencies required in high-demand sectors such as renewable energy or environmental planning.

2. There is not enough emphasis on new skills.

Most graduates do not learn crucial new competencies that hinder them from being competitive in industries that keep changing like digital literacy or micro-credentialing in specialized areas.

Theme 5. Adaptability and Problem-Solving

Frequently mentioned as lacking among graduates are adaptability, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills. Although some have excelled at organized tasks, many have been unable to cope with unexpected and creative/strategically thinking-demanding situations. Employers observed that graduates were not ready for real-world problem-solving because they applied too much theory in their solutions. Graduates' capability of effectively maneuvering through job-work challenges can be highly improved when experiential learning opportunities are incorporated into college curricula alongside creating a climate conducive to innovative staff behavior as well as deep thought, including sober reasoning. The participants responded as follows:

"Graduates tend to perform well in structured tasks but struggle when faced with unpredictable scenarios." (Cluster I-A)

"Critical thinking, strategic thinking, creativity, and adaptability are vital." (Cluster II-A)

"Graduates are afraid to ask questions and to cross the status quo." (Cluster II-B)

1. Excessive dependency on theory

Often, graduates fail to solve dynamic challenges in work that require critical reasoning and innovation because of their overreliance on academic paradigms.

2. Difficulty in handling unpredictable situations

Employers note that many fresh graduates experience problems adapting to unstructured assignments or complex practical tasks.

Theme 6. Retention and Career Progression

Employers often have difficulty maintaining educated employees because of salary rivalry combined with limited career advancement possibilities. Many graduates leave for higher-paying jobs abroad, which makes local industries have some of the highest staff turnover rates. Company

managers propose that organizations need to increase their efforts toward promoting their employees' careers, providing rewards that are competitive with other firms, and initiating various programs aimed at recognizing the efforts of employees to lead to greater job satisfaction as well as loyalty from workers who are engaged in these programs. By establishing paths for progress and repaying excellent performance, firms can retain high-quality staff while decreasing the degrees to which they lose team members. The employers said:

"Higher salaries and better career prospects often entice employees to leave." (Cluster I-A)

"Some skilled workers are poached by larger companies offering more competitive salaries." (Cluster III)

1. Salary Competition and Brain Drainage

Skilled laborers in domestic enterprises may be compelled to shift to multinational companies if they prefer standards of living commensurate with global rates of payment.

2. Limited Career Growth Opportunities

The lack of well-defined ways of advancement or training courses that are in harmony with personal dreams is a common reason graduates abandon their work.

Theme 7. Training and Development

Training is the foundation of human resource development. To prepare graduates for work, they must receive education and undergo lifelong training. This could be achieved through apprenticeship programs that are designed to equip individuals with the skills required by employers. Typical, these take 1–3 months but can go up to 6 months depending on the context. On-the-job training also helps new employees understand specific procedures, such as how billing is performed and dealing with clients' complaints. For a learning organization, nontrivial changes can make greater contributions than incremental changes because of their dynamic nature. The employers emphasized the following points:

"Micro-credentialing gained outside the formal curriculum could enhance students' employability." (Cluster II-A)

"We conduct a series of 20-30 days of training for new hires to adapt and learn." (Cluster II-B)

1. Importance of Basic Training

Employers pointed out the need for strong training programs to cover all necessary knowledge and to equip graduates for workplace requirements.

2. Lifelong Learning and Certifications

Certifications and professional development should be sought by graduates to keep abreast of developments in modern industries through continuous skill improvements.

Theme 8. Local Collaboration and Career Centers

One must foster perfect cooperation and collaboration between schools, administration at the local level, and companies to simplify worker preparation. The business people said they wanted one place in town where students and other people interested could meet each other easily through the use of career centers that would also enable people to identify job openings. This way, at least,

students would be heading back home after graduating to fill vacancies that go unfilled over long periods. Joint liaisons would guarantee courses of study that corresponded with those needed by manufacturers, hence offering the knowledge required for successful local employment opportunities for alumni. The employers said the following:

"Schools should invite industry professionals... to career guidance sessions to discuss job opportunities." (Cluster III)

"There is a tangible base career center on how to improve the workforce... a common workplace for the industry, academe, students, and government." (Cluster II-B)

1. Development of strong academia-industry linkages

OJT and internship programs help ensure graduates inculcate the right abilities when institutions of learning team up with local businesses.

2. Establishing Career Advice Centers

The creation of local career centers will help in providing personalized direction to students while avoiding brain drain, hence bridging the gap between what the curriculum offers in terms of preparation and what is demanded by industrial work.

Phenomenological Reduction

The focus group discussions highlight the employers' experiences in Ilocos Norte regarding the employment skills and preparedness of new graduates. These rich data are thus reduced into core themes, and all repetitions are eliminated to concentrate on the main information.

The focus group discussions revealed important themes related to the employability and readiness of recent graduates in Ilocos Norte. Employers mentioned significant gaps in soft skills and outstanding technical skills. Immediate action was needed to improve soft skills such as communication, teamwork, critical thinking, and emotional intelligence. At the same time, sector knowledge, digital literacy, and industry tools formal proficiency stood out, especially in health care and renewable energy.

Internships and OJT have become crucial issues regarding whether individuals are ready to work. If they have ever interacted with the workplace directly, graduates are more likely to cope with the demands of being in the office. However, the categories of these programs differed in such a way that some needed to match the exact requirements of some industries, making them ineffective. Employers feel that graduates should have more valuable practical experiences, which should align with what they will likely encounter after leaving university.

Often, there needs to be improvement in the employment field due to a disconnect between academic qualifications and actual requirements, thus leading to a mismatch in positions held by employees. Many fresh employees were said to need help understanding what was required of them to be useful to their employers due to their ignorance of specific industry specifications. To counteract this, the parties interested in this matter urged revising course programs and including vocational skills designs targeted at specific sectors to link school learning with job experience.

One major problem was keeping employees with complete skills, who would eventually prefer better wages or opportunities in different countries. In order to make them remain in the same field locally, companies have suggested suggesting permanent jobs with attractive pay as well as health plans, among other things. Retention in the region was critical because it ensured that both consistent workers were involved.

The need for collaboration between educational institutions, industries, and local

governments was strongly emphasized. Career centers, skill enhancement programs, and regular industry-academic dialogs must be provided to match schools' outputs to labor market requirements. They also looked at how small-scale accreditation of achievements could help address some of the gaps existing among enterprises in areas such as renewable energy that had yet to be fully explored by assigning them specialized courses specifically designed for them.

Employers noted that new entrants (fresh graduates) lacked essential traits of adaptability and professionalism. They could not easily fit into the workplace norms because these were new and strange to them, and they needed support, especially in the first months of their work. If students took responsibility, became disciplined, and were trained in resilience, they could cope with challenges in their future professional lives.

Finally, frequent problems were related to mismatching salaries and career paths. Employers recommended conducting career guidance sessions and courses to help the graduates realize the need to increase their wages or learn the realities of the labor market. All these observations indicate the necessity for a thorough joint strategy to address skill shortages, improve employee job readiness, and promote the long-term employability of young people in Ilocos Norte.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of the focus group discussions provided an engaging story on the intricate problems and opportunities presented by graduate employability and workforce readiness in Ilocos Norte. There is a recurring emphasis among employers who continually assert that graduates need some basic technical background but still need to improve regarding adaptation qualities like flexibility during changes or decision-making processes based on logic rather than emotions. Another thing that worsens this situation is that students need more chances to get hands-on experience because only a few OJT or internship programs match what they need when they finally matriculate from college. However, sometimes, both may agree on something. Pure luck would benefit anyone.

A continuous challenge is that academic readiness rarely meets employers' expectations but there are recurring cases of underdraining in the workplace, which both parties are annoyed with. To address these issues, it has become evident that we need to enhance our education system and develop new frameworks aimed at professional development based on competencies acquired through coursework or on-the-job training. Employers consider collaboration among universities/colleges, corporate organizations, and the government crucial. Transforming traditional career advice services into a comprehensive one-stop shop that includes guidelines on developing employable skills alongside job placements represents an effective way to ease the transition from school to work.

Increased overseas salaries and fewer opportunities for local growth make retention more difficult. Employers interested in keeping people fit have been devising different ways to make employees feel valued by providing competitive pay, full-time jobs, employee recognition programs, and promoting wellness programs. This constant job-hopping could be reduced through loyalty initiatives for graduates while addressing the brain drain in this region. Furthermore, orientation programs are necessary to examine careers in their entirety, with readiness for work and not workplace politics or corporate motivation alone, because graduates sometimes have unrealistic expectations when it comes to careers, mainly in the monetary aspect, like salaries.

Graduates must acquire professionalism and adaptability traits, indicating the crucial importance of early job training. Employers emphasize that the technical preparedness of graduates is only sufficient for their mental preparedness and emotional intelligence.

Ultimately, these results underscore the need for comprehensive, cooperative dealing regarding Ilocos Norte's workforce development. When it comes to bridging knowledge

deficiencies, adjusting school programs to be more in line with sector requirements, or creating long-term jobs, this region will develop staff that will not only match various professions but will be resistant to any changing market-specific needs at any stage of evolution. Therefore, this discussion enhances the significance of collaborating among stakeholders coupled with groundbreaking approaches to reshaping both educational and professional spheres to ensure competent graduates who can contribute positively to these communities' economic development in the future.

Implications

These findings go far beyond this highly targeted part of the world, specifically Ilocos Norte, into several other rural areas with marked regional variations in how they run their labor markets. The noted hindrances, for example, inadequacies in proficiency as regards interpersonal relations together with other soft skills like adaptability as well as technical expertise together with a gap between what is taught at school and what the job market requires alongside the challenges of keeping good employees are all problems experienced not only in Ilocos Norte specifically but in various other parts of third world countries where people aspire largely for poverty alleviation, including most developing nations worldwide. The importance of localized approaches to workforce development is emphasized in this research, implying the need for education systems to better suit regional industry demands. Other economies that are supported by certain sectors such as agriculture, tourism, and renewable energy, could benefit from this approach, which largely involves tailor-making skills and practical training programs. The research shows how micro-credentialing and internship alignment is valuable in demonstrating this idea, as well as how strong academia-industry-government collaborations can be achieved using such examples. It is within this context that the framework can be useful in other regions with similar characteristics. In addition, the importance of tackling staff retention issues like brain drain and competitive wages highlights the necessity of an all-encompassing workforce strategy that considers both regional and international prospects. Its recommendations on improving employability.

Creating opportunities for employing this study's findings means participating in worldwide dialogs about workforce growth because they apply to areas that are characterized by unique economic features and cultural diversity. Hence, by accommodating the immediate requirements in Ilocos Norte and still maintaining room for enlargement, our paper offers guidance toward linking education to labor markets alongside bridging workforce needs to spur regional development while enabling alumni to fare well within ever-changing employment conditions globally.

LIMITATION & FURTHER RESEARCH

Various limitations may affect the generalizability and scope of this study. Initially, it is geographically restricted to Ilocos Norte, thus concentrating on the views of employers confined within this area. Although it enables individuals to learn at a local level, it might not reveal all the employment challenges facing different regions within the Philippines or even at the international level. Furthermore, only employers in certain sectors were involved in this survey, so other possible sources of information, including teachers, policymakers, and alumni, were excluded. Such restriction narrows how employable graduates are assessed or rather their preparedness for the work environment.

The study also depended on the use of qualitative methods that were to be set on the focus group discussions that were rich in detail but could have been influenced by the participant's bias or the effects that were resulting from social desirability. Some participants felt that there was a need for them to either go along with what others say within their respective groups or fail to express themselves fully. At last, the occurrence and observations were carried on within a

particular period, and hence, it may fail to put on board future variations concerning labor market demands as well as shifting trends in the industry (note this is an incomplete conversion).

In the future, research on graduate employability and workforce preparation should apply diverse techniques and methodologies to provide a more comprehensive analysis while also addressing current gaps. A mixed methodological design that incorporates questionnaires quantitatively and open-ended interviews or focus group discussions qualitatively can be employed to capture a wider range of issues in an in-depth manner. Alternatively, as an illustration, cross-sectional surveys might find out the extent of particular skills' insufficiency regionally, while interviews reveal the root causes behind such deficits. Longitudinal approaches would trace alumni over time spanning from their senior year through matriculation into the work environment, thereby highlighting efficacy levels for remedies like attachment schemes and establishment-induced advancements in professions as well as reasons for discontentment. Comparative regional studies potentially can give researchers much to know by examining how other, similar regions solve employment issues. Such research presents an opportunity to identify common behaviors by comparing Ilocos Norte and other rural area within the Philippines or across the globe. An ethnographic approach, which involves participant observation in universities and companies, can provide extensive insight into the daily hurdles confronting recent graduates, exposing processes that may remain concealed beneath quantitative analyses executed via questionnaires/interviews.

Recommendations

For Ilocos Norte to address the highlighted skill deficiencies as well as workforce challenges, there must be cooperation between educational institutions, industry players, local authorities, and recent graduates. Therefore, a consensus is that educational institutions should keep their curricula up-to-date to conform with the current needs of various firms both locally and internationally. Furthermore, such schemes have to have relevant internships that provide practical knowledge in line with what students are taught in class as well as meet the specific needs of any particular sector; this way, they will be more prepared for what happens out there after graduation. To facilitate this process, employability-type workshops need to be conducted without fail on manners and ethics at workplaces and how one can be an innovative thinker or problem solver since such essentials help ease the movement between schools and jobs.

Both industries and employers must enhance existing ties with academia by regularly organizing guest lectures, mentorships, and site visits. Additionally, providing regular feedback on areas or specific skills that are needed helps shape course content. To retain skilled individuals, organizations must provide pay packages that are competitive enough, while also having pathways for career advancement or wellness programs. Another approach could involve funding joint development projects for enhancing teamwork between employers and colleges under co-funded micro-credentialing programs focusing on new skills such as renewables and computer literacy, thus preparing students for changing labor markets.

For these efforts to be successful, local authorities and legislators need to create rules that give lecturers an incentive to work together with business people. Additionally, the establishment of job centers targeting people from that area would help address the issue of joblessness in that specific area by offering more personalized services for individuals looking for work opportunities. To ensure regional competitiveness increases, investments should also be made in training programs as well as public-private partnerships. In conclusion; competitive packages, as well as recognition-based incentives, such as awards, serve as important elements for any strategy aimed at discouraging professionals from leaving their home countries, which is referred to as brain drain. To remain employable, individuals who have already graduated are advised to invest in ongoing

education, certifications, micro-credential programs, etc., among other things while staying competitive. Employees must develop adaptability, emotional intelligence, and problem-solving skills that are more in line with today's employers' expectations.

To close the gap between education and employment, all concerned people should come together and work together. Schools and companies should form strong partnerships that enable the implementation of creative programs along with specific interventions within the regulations. This joint duty would not only help Ilocos Norte but may also offer a blueprint that other areas could use when assessing matters relating to work readiness. Therefore, such attempts have the potential to lead to long-term economic development and personal fulfillment by reshaping job market hurdles.

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