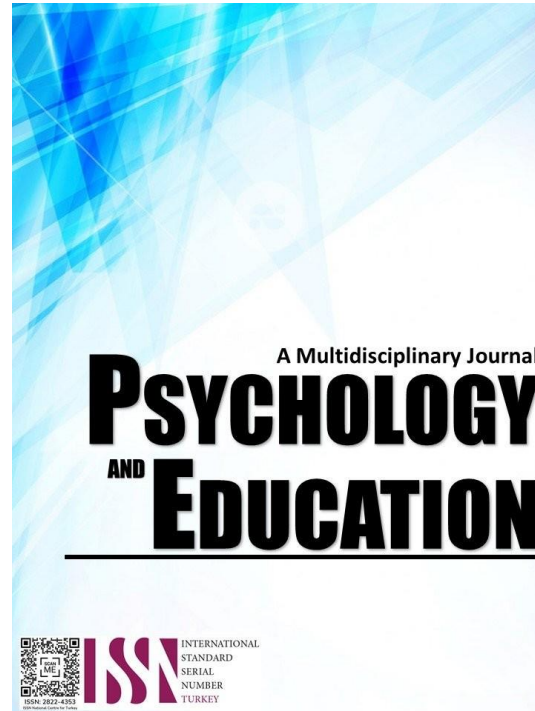


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Workplace Competence of Graduates of a State University: Inputs for Curricular Enhancement

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Abstract

The study explored the assessment of identified employers and immediate heads/supervisors on the workplace competence of the graduates of the University of Eastern Philippines (UEP), where findings of the study would be inputs in identifying areas for improvement in the curricular programs of the University. The study was conducted within the provincial offices and offices in the municipality of Catarman, where there are identified graduates of UEP as employees. Employing the descriptive design, the study utilized a four-part survey instrument and an interview schedule to gather data. Statistical tools utilized in the study are means. Responses in the interviews were analyzed and themes were generated to support the survey results. The graduates were assessed by the heads as competent in terms of Knowledge and Understanding, General Qualities, and General Skills. Proposals for enhancing the curricular programs of the University in line with the competence in the workplace of graduates of the University focused on three themes: fostering work attitudes and ethics, improving communication skills, and updating knowledge to cater to industry standards.

Keywords: *workplace competence, employability, graduates, curricular enhancement*

Introduction

One of the objectives of every degree program is to see every graduate to be able to land into a job related to the course they graduated from. Moreover, it is imperative that the graduates who landed into jobs are able to adjust and work smoothly in their job stations. Heads of offices or employers are expected to be able to see the competence of the employees. Acquiring competent people is of paramount importance to organizations (Pang, et al., 2019).

Building the Philippines' human capital and innovation capacity towards the development of a Filipino nation is the vision of the Philippine higher education system (CHED, 2011). To realize this vision, educational programs offered by higher education institutions are evaluated in terms of the competence of their graduates in the workplace. The workplace is the test of whether the knowledge and skills imparted by the schools are evident and are applied by the graduates in new settings. Hesketh (2000) expects that training in the school is the preparation of students for the world of work. Thus, graduates are expected to develop personal skills, qualities, and experiences that will enable them to compete in the labor market (Molebash, 2012).

The website Jobstreet.com (2022) reports that employers look for prospective employees who exhibit prior work experience, passion for growth, digital skills, adaptability, being solution-driven, resilience, self-motivation, leadership, critical thinking skills, and good reputation. Moreover, more Filipino employers are willing to reward workers that possess interpersonal and communication skills, or work ethics, as well as key personality traits (conscientiousness, extroversion, openness to experience, and agreeableness), and more "grit" and decision-making power (Acosta & Igarashi, 2017).

Schools are faced with a big task of preparing students to imbibe the skills expected by employers. Hence, the curriculum needs to embody learning activities that would develop these skills in the learners. employees. Weligamage (2014) opined that universities should recognize collection of skills that will suitably provide the future labor market as well as enable them to make program alignment to meet those needs. The study will form basis for curriculum enhancement in as much as heads'/employers' feedbacks will be essential in designing curriculum activities anchored to what heads/employers expect in the workplace.

Research Questions

This study aimed to:

1. Ascertain the competence along essential competencies of the UEP graduates as identified by employers/heads of offices; and
2. Craft curricular enhancement proposal along the findings of the study.

Literature Review

Dillon expounds that a workplace competency is a description of a required skill, attribute or behavior for a specific job used to define and measure an individual's effectiveness. Competencies are arranged into a framework that brings together a number of job roles and the required capabilities that the job holder must possess or acquire in order to perform his job effectively (www.smallbusiness.com). Delamare Le Deist and Winterton (2005) define competencies as the abilities and skills to integrate the education and training, aligning both with the needs of the labor market and promoting mobility for individuals. Workplace competence is known as core skills in United Kingdom, key competencies in Australia, employability skills in Canada, workplace know-how in the United States, and transferable skills in France (Weligamage, 2009). Employers, to include immediate heads or supervisors of graduates are one of the best people to evaluate the competence in the workplace of graduates of a learning institution.

Employers' feedback can generate evidence on the quality of graduates, their capabilities and performance in school (Butler, 2003)

Humburg, et al. (2013) reported that employers identified six skills areas which graduates should cover very well to perform in the 21st century: professional expertise, interpersonal skills, commercial/entrepreneurial skills, innovative/creative skills, strategic/organizational skills, and general academic skills. Adebakin, et al. (2015) found that Nigerian employers expect graduates to have analytic and problem solving skills, decision-making skills, risk management, leadership, information and communication skills, teamwork, and English proficiency and literacy skills. However, the study showed disparity in the required skills with that of the skills possessed by the university graduates. In the local setting,

Tayco, et al. (2022) reported that employers observed professional values, general skills, and work habits as the highest means in the various skills of graduates of Negros Oriental State University. Plantilla (2017) found that employers were very much satisfied on the performance of Business graduates of the University of Rizal System Pililla in terms of knowledge and understanding of the job, general skills, specialized skills, and personal qualities. In the same study, employers placed a strong preference to the graduates of the school. The study of Yap and Reston (2014) found that the employers preferred high level of skills in critical thinking, independent learning, teamwork, and computer. In the study of Montano and Salvador (2012), employers found graduates to have the capacity for cooperation and teamwork; ability to apply knowledge to the workplace; and adaptability/capacity to cope with change, thus, were satisfied with the quality and preparedness of the BS Fisheries graduates. Employers are satisfied with teachers prepared at Batangas State University ARASOF (Aquino, et al., 2015).

In the study of Mendoza (2021), among the competencies demonstrated by graduates of the Lyceum of the Philippines Batangas, graduates are strongest in skills, followed by knowledge which is slightly lower versus skills, while attitude comes the least. Employers were very satisfied with the attributes of BS Information Technology graduates and suggested to put emphasis on the written and oral communication skills and improvement of self-discipline of students (Lumauag, 2016).

Human resource officers revealed that University of Immaculate Conception graduates are competent and trainable, sociable and silent workers (Sagarino, et al., 2013). Similarly, the graduates of Laguna State Polytechnic University show excellent manifestation of integrity, professionalism and innovation in fulfilling their roles and responsibilities at work (Gregana, 2022). The study of Briones, et al. (2021) showed that the skills more preferred by the employers are leadership, communication and interpersonal.

Employer perceptions of the performance of graduates form an essential part of the university's program (Oliver, et al., 2015). It is therefore important for higher education institutions to tailor curricular programs to the needs of the workplace. Lumauag (2016) reported that employers suggested that the school should have a periodic review and updating of the curriculum. According to Department of Labor and Employment, soft skills are in high demand, are weak among graduates, and are considered as a college responsibility to include in the curriculum.

Methodology

Respondents

The respondents of the study were 19 immediate supervisors of UEP graduates who were purposely sampled. The supervisors are heads or officers-in-charge of the various national and local offices in the municipality of Catarman where there are graduates of the University of Eastern Philippines Main Campus.

Instrument

Employing the descriptive design, the study utilized a survey instrument to gather data. The instrument asked the respondent to rate the graduates of the University who are employed in their respective offices in terms of knowledge and understanding, general qualities, and general skills.

Aside from the survey instrument, interviews with the immediate supervisors were conducted. The interview centered on their feedbacks on the graduates of the University and their suggestions to improve the curricular programs of the University in line with their expected workplace skills for employees.

Procedure

Before the actual gathering of the data, permission was sought from the Heads of the Offices considered for the study. The respondents were asked to fill in the survey questionnaire. After the survey, an interview was done. Statistical tools utilized in the study are frequency counts and ranking. Responses in the interviews were analyzed and themes were generated to support the survey results.

Ethical Considerations

Before the questionnaires were given to the respondents, the objectives of the study were explained. It was emphasized that the results of the study will be used solely for the purposes of the study, which will ultimately be directed to the improvement of student services in the University.

Results and Discussion

Knowledge and Understanding

Table 1.1 shows the respondents' assessment of the competence of the graduates of the University in terms of Knowledge and Understanding. Generally, with a mean of 4.06, the graduates of the University are rated 'Competent'. Specifically, the graduates were rated as Highly Competent on the 'understanding of job-related functions' and 'understanding of systems and organization'. The graduates have the smallest means in terms of 'understanding the standards of the industry' and 'knowledge of specific computer applications for the job'.

Table 1.1. *Workplace competence of UEP graduates in terms of Knowledge and Understanding*

<i>Competency</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
Understanding of job-related functions	4.24	Highly Competent
Understanding of systems and organization	4.22	Highly Competent
Knowledge of the field of study	4.11	Competent
Understanding of job-related information	4.00	Competent
Specific technical knowledge required for the job	4.06	Competent
Knowledge of people and other cultures	4.06	Competent
Understanding of the standards of the workplace environment	4.06	Competent
Knowledge of specific computer applications for the job	3.94	Competent
Understanding of standards of the industry	3.89	Competent
Mean	4.06	Competent

General Qualities

Table 1.2 shows the respondents' assessment of the competence of the graduates of the University in terms of General Qualities. Generally, with a mean of 4.06, the graduates of the University are rated 'Competent'. Specifically, the graduates were rated as Highly Competent on the 'commitment to the job' and 'flexibility and adaptability'. The graduates have the smallest means in terms of 'ethical principles to decision-making', 'creativity in the job' and 'control of personal behavior'.

Table 1.2. *Workplace competence of UEP graduates in terms of General Qualities*

<i>Competency</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
Commitment to the job	4.44	Highly Competent
Flexibility and adaptability	4.24	Highly Competent
Willingness to learn and to keep abreast of new information	4.17	Competent
Attitude to work	4.11	Competent
Seeking advice on work assignments from experienced co-workers	4.11	Competent
Dependability on completing assignments within approved deadlines (reliability)	4.06	Competent
Good judgment to problem solving (critical thinking)	4.06	Competent
Initiative on the job	4.06	Competent
Responsibility for consequences of actions (leadership)	3.94	Competent
Ethical principles to decision-making (integrity)	3.89	Competent
Creativity in the job	3.88	Competent
Control of personal behavior (self-discipline)	3.78	Competent
Mean	4.06	Competent

General Skills

Table 1.3 shows the respondents' assessment of the competence of the graduates of the University in terms of General Skills. Generally, with a mean of 3.94, the graduates of the University are rated 'Competent'. Specifically, the graduates have the highest means on 'teamwork and organization' and interpersonal human relation skills'. The graduates have the smallest means in terms of both 'written' and 'oral communication skills'.

Table 1.3. *Workplace competence of UEP graduates in terms of General Skills*

<i>Competency</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
Teamwork and organization	4.17	Competent
Interpersonal/human relation skills	4.17	Competent
Working independently	4.11	Competent
Following organizational rules and regulations	4.06	Competent



Conflict management	3.83	Competent
Time management	3.83	Competent
Risk management skills	3.83	Competent
Written communication skills	3.72	Competent
Oral communication skills	3.72	Competent
Mean	3.94	Competent

Curricular Enhancement

Based on the interviews with the respondents, proposals for enhancing the curricular programs of the University in line with the competence in the workplace of graduates of the University focused on three themes: fostering work attitudes and ethics, improving communication skills, and updating knowledge to cater to industry standards.

Fostering work attitudes and ethics. Majority of the respondents expressed concern on the need to emphasize positive work attitude. The employee is expected to be dedicated to duty and to be flexible and adaptable to the work. Some employees, especially the younger ones, are impatient. Human relations and dealing with future clientele could also be integrated to subjects. A respondent expressed that despite the trainings for their employees prior to assumption to work, it is better that these aspects be learned in the four year course of the graduates.

Improving communication skills. Some respondents lamented on the employees’ lack of communication skills, particularly in written English. In the case of the Provincial and Municipal Offices, these skills are highly used in reporting purposes.

Updating knowledge to cater to industry standards. Another concern of the respondents centered on the curricular programs to be adept to standards of the various industries. Facilities

used in delivering instruction is a big help to improve the competence of the graduates. There is a need for subjects to be attuned to changes in policies, in the case of the Department of Education, Bureau of Fire, and the Provincial Social Welfare and Development Office.

Provided in Table 2 are the three curricular enhancement areas drawn from the findings. Description of the areas and some suggested activities are provided.

Table 2. Curriculum Enhancement Activities

<i>Curriculum Enhancement Themes</i>	<i>Suggested Activities</i>
Fostering work attitude and ethics	Values and ethics are not taught directly. Proper nurturing of values and ethics can be fostered through a myriad range of teaching techniques such as role play, drama, simulation, educational games, debates, discussions, projects, collaborative activities, study trips, brainstorming, and other creative outputs such as poems, stories, songs, posters and slogans. These techniques can be integrated in almost all subjects. Almost all, if not all, courses have subjects which are in line with ethical issues in the respective professions. These are subjects which can be utilized to emphasize and inculcate the values and ethics required for the future jobs of the students. On the job trainings and practicums are appropriate training grounds for students to imbibe these values and ethics. More than the knowledge and skills component, the training program of the colleges should also emphasize these affective components of the learning process.
Improving communication skills	Communication is a skill enhanced over the passing of time. This skill should be incorporated in curriculum materials even from the first year level subjects of students. Good communication and interpersonal skills are requisites for collaborating with others, communicating to supervisors or heads of offices, and speaking with clients or customers. Communication subjects, both in English or Filipino, can utilize techniques such as watching films that model or teach proper conversational skills, using technology tools, reinforcing active listening, asking open-ended questions, using tasks and activities that foster critical thinking, and offering reflective learning opportunities. The task of improving communication skills is not only within the ambit of Language teachers. Every teacher who involves any communication experience in the classroom can help in teaching the proper communication skill to students, if the need arises.
Updating knowledge to cater to industry standards	The 21st century workplace is a picture of a revolution of rising skills. The call of time requires matching the skills level of graduates of higher education institutions and the employability requirements of the future workplace environment. The various curricular programs of the university have subjects which introduce the intricacies of the different professions. These are subjects where updating of knowledge on industry standards can be fully integrated. Hence, the teachers should not only rely on what is written in printed materials, but may employ inviting resource persons or visiting actual agencies, industries or companies which can give updated information related to the respective future professions of the students.

As graduates were rated competent in terms of Knowledge and Understanding, the graduates of the University employed in the workplace have full grasp of the nature of their jobs and how they would relate to the whole organization. In the interview, a respondent stated that the graduates are not difficult to teach about their respective work. However, there is a need for graduates to deepen understanding on the standards of the industry and knowledge of job-specific computer applications.

As graduates were also rated competent in terms of General Qualities, the graduates of the University employed in the workplace have a high level of commitment to their work and are flexible and adaptable to different work situations. This finding is emphasized by one respondent that the graduates are committed when they are given tasks to accomplish. In the interview, majority of the respondents emphasized attitude to work, work ethics, and initiative as problematic areas among the graduates of the University who are in the different workplace.

Graduates are also rated competent in terms of General Skills. The graduates have the highest means on teamwork and organization and interpersonal human relation skills which are two related competencies. Teamwork can heavily depend on a good level of interpersonal/human relation skills. This means that the graduates of the University are team players and have a high level of working interdependently with co-workers. In the interview, most of the respondents agreed that graduates of the University are good in their interpersonal skills. There is a need to improve written and oral communication skills. One respondent stated that some graduates lack the facility of communication skill, especially in written English.

While in general, graduates' performance was rated Competent, there are still areas which should be taken into consideration to improve the skills of the prospective graduates while they are still in the university. These areas for improvement can be integrated in learning tasks or may be provided through capability building activities.

Conclusions

This descriptive study ascertained the competence along essential competencies of the UEP graduates as identified by employers/heads of offices; and crafted curricular enhancement activities along the findings of the study.

As the UEP graduate is generally found to be competent in the essential competencies identified by the study, the University is producing graduates who are relevant to the workplace. The mission statement of the university specifying graduates who will be employable is fulfilled in the case of UEP graduates. Specifically, areas of improvement identified by the employers and heads of offices focus on fostering values and work ethics, improving communications skills, and updating knowledge to cater to industry standards. The findings point out that a mix of the sufficient knowledge, particularly on the workplace and its evolving standards, appropriate values and work ethics, and the enhanced skills, particularly on communication, among others, is a right formula for the success of the UEP graduates in the workplace. As the success of the graduates in the workplace is a function of the preparation that the graduates underwent in college, curricular activities through the teaching-learning process, should really be geared to supporting not only the present needs of the students while learning their respective professions, but also to the future needs of the students when they are already in their work.

Hence, the following recommendations are forwarded:

The different colleges of the university should sustain the tracer studies of graduates to determine not only where the graduates are employed, but also to assess what intervention activities could be afforded to graduates to assist them in their transition in the workplace.

The College Deans, through the department chairs, should adopt the suggested curriculum enhancement activities in crafting their OBE syllabi, since the needs identified are manifested attributes or outcomes. A lecture series on improving the teaching-learning process vis-à-vis workplace competencies can be designed by the Office of the Vice President for Academic Affairs through the Office of the Director for Instruction.

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