Introduction

In a world where knowledge is a critical element for nations to prosper and compete, primacy is placed on the quality and relevance of education and how it can ensure that graduates have the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values that industries need. The changing nature of work environments, the emergence of technology-driven processes, and the diversified needs of clientele are challenging the ability of higher education institutions (HEIs) to meet the demand for employable graduates (De Guzman and De Castro, 2008).

It has thus become critical for universities and colleges to develop globally competitive graduates. HEIs are coming under great pressure to equip their graduates with more than just academic skills (Singh, 2008). Graduates are expected to develop personal skills, qualities, and experiences that will enable them to compete in the labor market (Moreau and Leathwood, 2006 and McQuid and Lindsay, 2005). Employers are urging universities and colleges to exert more explicit efforts to develop graduates’ core skills—transferable soft and employable and/or generic skills.
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What Makes a Graduate Employable?

McCoy (1991) defined employability skills as those required not only to gain employment but also to progress within an enterprise in order to achieve one’s utmost potential and to successfully contribute to enterprises’ strategic directions. From an HEI perspective, employability refers to producing capable graduates, which affects all aspects of student university or college life, including the ability to deliver effective academic programs and co-curricular activities (McQuid and Lindsay, 2005).

Coopers and Lybrand (1998) identified four areas of employability—traditional intellectual skills such as critical evaluation, logic, communication, numeracy, and IT; learning how to learn; personal attributes; and knowledge of organizations. Employability is perceived as more than the ability to get one’s first job (McNair, 2003). It refers to the concept of retaining and obtaining fulfilling employment (Harvey and Nixon, 2002). Yorke and Knight (2003) defined employability as the concept relating to the ability of graduates to overcome job-related challenges and to gain employment.

These concepts draw the line between being employed and being employable. Being employed means having a job while being employable means having the necessary qualities to remain employed and to progress in one’s workplace.

From an employer’s perspective, employability refers to “work readiness,” which means possessing the skills, knowledge, and attitudes and commercial understanding that will enable graduates to make productive contributions to organizational objectives soon after commencing employment (Mason, Williams, and Cranmer, 1990).
Graduate attributes should be aligned with employability skills.

To make graduates employable, graduate attributes should be aligned with employability skills. Graduate attributes are the qualities, skills, and understanding that a university/college community agrees its students should develop during their time with the university/college (Bowden, 2001). Cummings (1998) has identified three major factors that affect graduate attributes—the popular perspective that education is a lifelong process, greater focus on the relationship between education and employment outcomes of graduates, and the development of outcome measures as part of the quality movement. Graduate attributes thus definitely redound to obtaining employment.

The Department of Education Employment Training and Youth Affairs (DEETYA, 1998) in Australia has identified the following generic framework for graduate attributes:

1. A graduate must have the technical capacity for critical, conceptual, and reflective thinking in all aspects of intellectual and practical activities.

2. A graduate must have technical competence and an understanding of the broad and conceptual and theoretical elements of his/her field of specialization.

3. A graduate must possess intellectual openness and curiosity and an appreciation for the interconnectedness of and areas of uncertainty with regard to current human knowledge.

4. A graduate must have effective communication skills in all domains—reading, writing, speaking, and listening.
5. A graduate must possess research, discovery, and information-retrieval skills and the general capacity to use information.

6. A graduate must have multifaceted problem-solving skills and the capacity for teamwork.

7. A graduate must possess high ethical standards in his/her personal and professional life, underpinned by the capacity to engage in self-directed activities.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 1991), meanwhile, described Europe’s employable graduates in the following manner:

1. An employable graduate is multifunctional. He/She can meet different and important demands of daily life that will help him/her achieve various goals and solve multiple problems in different contexts.

2. An employable graduate is relevant across many fields. He/She has skills that are relevant in participating in the labor market, in social networks, and in interpersonal relationships, including family life, as well as in developing a sense of social well-being.

3. An employable graduate is mentally complex. He/She has the mental autonomy that will allow him/her to become actively involved in daily activities and to have a reflective approach toward life.

4. An employable graduate is multidimensional. He/She has the necessary proficiency—analytical, cultural, and communication skills—and a common sense to gain employment as well as to succeed at work.

Furthermore, a graduate must also have a sense of social justice (Murdoch University), adhere to a global perspective (University of New England), respect ethical practices (Monash University), and strive for academic excellence (University of Melbourne).

Employable graduates should thus have three major qualifications. They should have the necessary knowledge (e.g., academic preparation and training); skills (e.g., communication- and job-related as well as other skills); and personal characteristics (e.g., industrious, responsible, and punctual), including ethics and values (e.g., morals and good role models) to gain employment and to remain gainfully employed.
The Philippines aspires to become a knowledge center in Asia/Pacific, a regional leader in the information technology (IT) industry, including the business process outsourcing (BPO) segment, by providing a well-educated workforce.

The country aims to produce knowledge workers for information and communication technology (ICT)-enabled and so-called “customer interaction service” centers. To make this a reality, the quality of higher education needs to improve. While the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) has made a lot of progress in providing career information services, the majority of university/college students still pursue oversubscribed courses. CHED should thus provide research-based guidance to the youth in order to enhance their job placement opportunities.

Even though the country imposes the use of English as the medium of instruction (MOI) and provides job-enrichment programs, its graduates still lack communication and other job-related skills. The quality of instruction and on-the-job training that schools provide has to be reassessed and reevaluated.

Philippine graduates frequently become underemployed. CHED and higher education institutions should have a career resource unit or center that will bridge the gap between graduates and employers. A closer collaboration between employment and higher education should be undertaken, as these are closely intertwined.

A program to hone IT graduates’ job-related skills should also be implemented. CHED should build up graduates’ job-related skills by providing quality internship programs in cooperation with members of the information technology and outsourcing (ITO) industry.

CHED cannot do this alone, however. It needs the help of other government agencies, universities/colleges, and students as well.

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Universities/Colleges

1. Universities/Colleges must develop students’ skills and create opportunities so they can participate in job shadowing, internship, and on-the-job training (OJT) programs in order to enhance their job-related skills. They should actively sponsor capacity-building programs such as seminars, workshops, and communication-proficiency courses. They should also encourage students to pursue advanced degrees to become more competitive.

2. Universities/Colleges should embark on providing value-added services (VASs) in the IT industry. They should conduct research to see to it that improvements and developments are continuously promoted in the industry.

3. Universities/Colleges should design curricula that match industry’s needs. This will reduce instances of job mismatch and will help reduce unemployment. They should make business leaders part of their pools of industry experts, lecturers, and, if possible, Boards of Trustees.

4. Universities/Colleges should design programs that will develop in their students leadership and behavioral skills, work values, and ethics in order to become more competitive. They should also strongly focus on developing their students’ communication, critical-thinking, and initiative-taking skills by integrating these into their first- and second-year curricula.

5. Universities/Colleges should upgrade their teacher quality and standards in order to develop highly competitive graduates. Immediate intervention in teacher training and higher order thinking skills (HOTS) facilitation is needed.

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Employers

1. Employers are encouraged to maintain links with the academe. They shall involve universities/colleges in their training and research programs and secure partnership agreements with universities/colleges.

2. Employers should accelerate connectivity and information sharing and improve their communication with government agencies and the academe.

3. Employers should provide wider selection and better access to graduates from all higher education institutions not limiting hiring to graduates of top-ranking schools. Hiring must be based on personal qualification and demonstrated IT competence and not solely on the reputation of the school the graduates came from.

4. The business and industry sector must maintain close linkages and should collaborate with schools. A shared database that allows information sharing regarding job requirements and qualifications should be created for the use of the educational institutions that supply graduates and employers in search of new employees.
Students

1. Students should seek advice from their guidance counselors for appropriate career counseling. Guidance and counseling officers can assist them in determining what courses suit their abilities. They can also help students select courses that are in demand even if these are not so popular.

2. Students should take a look at the School to Office Response to Employment (STORE) database, a database that identifies manpower forecasts per industry and per company as well as tracks job openings and skills requirements prior to choosing their courses.

Conclusion

To realize the Philippine dream—to become a knowledge center in Asia/Pacific by producing knowledge workers for ICT-enabled and so-called “customer interaction service” centers—the government, universities/colleges, employers, and students each need to play their part. They should work hand in hand to make their education count so that all IT graduates can gain not just the know-how that will make them employable but also the necessary competence and skills so they can remain not just gainfully employed but prosper in their chosen careers in the future.

The full “Employability of Philippine IT Graduates” report can be accessed electronically through www.seameo-innotech.org.

Website Information

This research was undertaken under the leadership of UNESCO Bangkok Office. Further information on the research outputs of other countries can be found through the following:

- The website of UNESCO (http://www.unesco.org)
- The website of SEAMEO INNOTECH (http://www.seameo-innotech.org)