

# GAP ANALYSIS OF UNEMPLOYED BUSINESS GRADUATES' EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS AND INDUSTRY PREFERENCES

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**ABSTRACT:** Higher education faces significant challenges in addressing the growing number of unemployed fresh graduates from universities and colleges. This paper evaluates the employability skills of business graduates acquired from their university or college education and compares them with the essential skills preferred by industries for entry-level positions. The purpose is to determine whether a gap exists between graduates' skills and the skills sought by employers. The respondents of this study include 80 unemployed business graduates from the university who completed their degrees during the academic years from 2017–2021 and 188 employers. An adapted questionnaire served as the primary data collection tool, utilizing purposive convenience sampling, where participants were selected based on their willingness to answer the questionnaire. The questionnaire was distributed to respondents via Google Forms through social media platforms such as Gmail and Messenger between March and July 2022. The results indicate a significant difference between the employability skills of unemployed graduates and those required by employers for entry-level positions. The skills assessed include communication, decision-making, teamwork, adaptability, professionalism, critical thinking, planning and organizing, customer focus, and reading and writing skills. Based on the findings, the study recommends that universities revise, enhance, or include the required skills in their current course curricula to better align with industry needs.

**Keywords:** Employability, employability skills, skills gap, unemployed graduates, personal attributes workplace requirements, skill mismatch, and graduates

## INTRODUCTION

Securing a suitable entry-level position poses a significant challenge for recent graduates in today's competitive job market. Every year, graduates from universities and colleges encounter numerous obstacles during the job recruitment process. This issue is particularly critical for many countries, especially developing nations. According to a survey by the Philippine Statistics Authority, the unemployment rate in the Philippines was 6.6% of the population as of December 2021. The influx of fresh graduates entering the job market has exacerbated the unemployment situation. Various factors contribute to this issue, one of which is the high number of graduates combined with a lack of employability skills [1].

Every year, the universities and colleges in the country, as well as private or public higher institutions, produce many graduates. However, the proportion of graduates who acquire a job needs to improve after spending their valued time and money to receive educational advantages. Moreover, according to Rehman & Mehmood [2], the graduates' achievements related to discipline are shown as necessary by the employers, but they need more to be employed. Likewise, they quoted that "there has always been a gap between employer's expectations and what college or university produces. One must understand that employers are looking for attributes beyond the qualifications. Companies need graduates who will "fit in," become an important member of the team, and be able to contribute right away to finish the task at hand. While the high chances are that most of the employers will be on the lookout for some job-specific skills, it is also true that at the same time, they also want the candidate to have some general skills." According to Suarta et al. [3], employers nowadays look for capable employees with basic employment knowledge, which can save on training and orientation costs. Additionally, most employers seek candidates with employability skills such as communication abilities, logical reasoning, analytical thinking, problem-solving capabilities, personality traits like confidence and integrity, flexibility, adaptability, innovation, creativity, and teamwork

Consequently, according to Mainga et al. [4], many universities and colleges have answered this call, but progress has been uneven and has encountered challenges. For example, research conducted in Africa showed that academics struggled to integrate employability skills into the curriculum [5]. As also stated by Griffiths et al. [6], some universities and colleges are struggling with aligning traditional learning attainment objectives with the attainment of employability skills rooted in real-world conditions.

Moreover, due to growing graduate unemployment, the employability skills of new university and college graduates have become a concern to university administrators, employers, and the government [7]. Due to this, many researchers in many countries have explored this issue. In contrast, very few studies have been published, particularly in the Philippines. Therefore, this exploratory study is conducted to address the gap. Graduates' employability starts with understanding the skills preferred by the industries. Hence, this study examines employers' perceptions of the employability skills they prioritize for entry-level positions and compares them with the existing abilities possessed by identified unemployed business graduates. Through this study, the universities and colleges in the country can better understand the employability skills needed to equip future graduates based on industry preferences. In a rapidly changing workforce, institutions must adapt and embed the skills in the curriculum at all levels to prepare and align the students with the relevant skills for the labour market to increase their capacities to meet specific workplace demands [8].

## Objective

This study aims to address the growing unemployment rate among business graduates from universities and colleges by identifying and analyzing the specific employability skills these graduates currently possess and determining the gap between their acquired skills and the skills deemed essential by industry employers for entry-level positions.

## Related Literature

As defined by Fajaryati et al. [9], cited by Briones et al. [10], employability skills are the personal attributes that enable a person to secure a job and sustain an individual's career life. Employability skills are commonly referred to by various terms, such as generic skills, soft skills, core skills, fundamental skills, key competencies, transferable skills, transverse skills, 21st-century skills, life skills, and work-ready skills [11]. These skills enable one to perform a specific task, including technical, personal, higher-order thinking, and social, generic, and self-perceived employability skills. Also, employability skills pertain to employees' attributes, making them a practical human resource of an employer [12]. Employers nowadays look for applicants with specific skills and qualities besides academic qualifications. This may not be job-specific, but it plays a crucial role in enhancing performance and adding value in the workplace.

According to Konig, L., Juric, P., & Koprivnjak, T. [13], the connection between higher education and employability is frequently discussed in the academic community. There is pressure on higher education from employers to produce employable graduates because they have the knowledge, attributes, and capabilities to work successfully. Students start their studies with the expectation that they will acquire the knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary to perform jobs and advance their careers. Numerous people apply for jobs and come to the interview feeling they deserve a job simply because they graduated. Moreover, a graduate's achievements related to the subject discipline are considered necessary by employers, but they must be sufficient for them to be hired. Employers today expect higher education to provide graduates with the employability skills required to perform their jobs [14].

However, the results from the study of Adams, A.V. [15] confirm that university graduates are poorly equipped for work because there is a disconnection between the education and training provided by the universities and the opportunities available in the labour market. Accordingly, [16] noted a mismatch between the skills acquired by university graduates and those required by employers of labour. As revealed by Nadarajah, J. [17], in Malaysia, employability skills necessary in the job market were communication and analytical skills. Further, Rasul et al. [18] disclosed from their study that employers placed great importance on communication skills (reading, speaking, writing, and listening). These skills were also the most commonly mentioned by employers as vital across all employees and positions. Also identified that communication skills obtained the highest score on its importance according to employers, followed by problem-solving skills, adaptability skills, interpersonal skills, and ability to work as a team, planning and organizing, time management in the manufacturing industry.

Gurcharan Singh G.K & Garib, Singh S.K. [19] also mentioned that most young graduates leave the university with good certificates and degrees. Still, it was noted that these graduates need more skills, attitudes, and understanding to enter the world of work successfully. Another study, as cited [20], claimed that graduates are not prepared for work

despite having tertiary qualifications. As a result, the unemployment rates among university and college graduates are increasing. In competitive economies, graduates who are unprepared and lack employability skills are unlikely to secure employment successfully [21].

Employers seek workers who can function well in the dynamic economy of today. Graduates' attributes are more critical than graduates' degree subjects. McArthur et al. [22] disclosed in their study that the most demanded attributes in Australia in marketing include motivation, time management, communication skills, and digital marketing experience. However, the literature review shows that employability skills have become a significant issue in the 21st-century labour market. A Survey of past research conducted across different countries suggests gaps between employer expectations and the skills business students have at graduation [23; 11; 24; 25; 26 & 4]. Employers still claim that graduates must gain the necessary skills to be ready for work. [7]

In addition, [27] concluded in their present study that they sought to understand employers' perceptions of employability skills and career development in Morocco. The study indicates that though many Moroccan employers are satisfied with the essential technical skills graduates possess, they feel that some graduates lack the necessary employability skills to create a highly competitive human resource team.

On the contrary, in a study by Crossman & Clarke [28], as cited by Guardia et al. [29], employers were dissatisfied with the skills and competencies of graduates in Sub-Saharan East Africa. The ILO [30] also reveals that despite formal qualifications, graduates lack the essential skills employers demand. Abbasi et al. [23] & Farhad, Amjad & Naila [31] also found and proved that the employability skills of business graduates were less than the expectations of managers in the banking industry in Pakistan. These findings point to the need for continuous re-alignment of higher education curricula with the ever-changing skills needs of industry and business.

To summarize, researchers have recognized several employability skills that employers value nowadays. These include communications, decision-making, problem-solving, teamwork, adaptability, professionalism, critical thinking, planning and organizing, and customer-focus skills [32; 33; 34; &35]. Employability skills are considered necessary before being hired. These skills are essential because possessing the ability to think, analyze, and make sound decisions is critical for any employee, especially when dealing with a global and competitive business environment that is constantly changing. As Kalei [36] mentioned, connecting the universities and business/industry by determining the skills needed can be very helpful in facilitating graduates' employability.

## RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a descriptive-normative research design to investigate the gap between the employability skills of unemployed business graduates and the skills preferred by employers. A purposive convenience sampling method was utilized to recruit participants, selecting individuals based on their willingness to complete the questionnaire and their availability during the study period (March-July 2022). This

approach, while expedient given resource constraints, introduced inherent limitations.

The questionnaire, adapted and modified from Suarta et al. [3] to ensure clarity and ease of understanding, incorporated concise questions with structured response options. Data were collected using Google Forms and distributed via respondents' social media accounts (Gmail and Messenger). Each questionnaire was accompanied by an introductory letter outlining the study's purpose, procedures, and ethical considerations, emphasizing participant confidentiality and anonymity. Participants were explicitly informed of their voluntary participation and right to withdraw at any time.

The study sample comprised 80 unemployed business graduates from two campuses of one of the universities in the Caraga Region, Philippines, who graduated between 2017 and 2021. The focus on one university and a specific geographical region limits the generalizability of the findings to other universities and regions. Furthermore, including only unemployed graduates might not fully capture the skills profile of all business graduates. The employer sample included 188 participants representing various industries but was also subject to convenience sampling, potentially introducing bias. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (percentages and weighted means) to summarize the findings and inferential statistics (t-tests) to examine the significant differences between the employability skills of unemployed business graduates and employer preferences.

**Limitation of the Study**

A key limitation of this study is the potential lack of generalizability stemming from the reliance on convenience sampling for both graduate and employer participants. The sample may not fully represent the characteristics of all unemployed business graduates or employers across the Philippines. Future research should employ more robust sampling techniques, such as stratified random sampling or cluster sampling, to enhance the generalizability and external validity of the findings. A larger, more geographically diverse, and representative sample would allow for more reliable conclusions about the extent and nature of the skills gap. The focus on the pre- and during COVID-19 pandemic period might have also influenced the results, which should be considered in future research. Despite these limitations, the findings provide valuable insights into the perceived discrepancies between employer expectations and graduate skills within the specific context of this study.

**RESULTS**

**Table. 1 Reliability testing**

| Variable             | Cronbach's Alpha | No. of Items |
|----------------------|------------------|--------------|
| Unemployed Graduates | 0.975            | 56           |
| Employers'           | 0.945            | 56           |

The survey instrument used for data collection was pilot-tested for reliability. As shown in Table 1, the Cronbach's Alpha values for the 56-item scale exceeded 0.90 for both

unemployed graduates and employers, indicating excellent reliability. As cited by Jaharuddin and Zainol [37], reliability values above 0.90 are considered outstanding.

The study involved two groups of respondents (table 2). The first group included 188 employers from various industries where the university's business graduates might find employment. These respondents comprised owner/top management (8%), managers (39%), supervisors (33%), and rank-and-file/HR personnel (20%). The second group included 80 unemployed business graduates, 55% majoring in Financial Management and 25% in Human Resource Management, graduating between 2016 and 2021. Of this group, 74% were female, and 26% were male. Also, as shown in Table 2, the majority of the employers who serve as respondents of the study came from the banking & lending industries (24%), followed by sales and marketing (23%), manufacturing (16%), and other government agencies (12.5%). Most came from the CARAGA region, where the university is located, and from the National Capital Region. In general, employability skills are essential for any business graduate. These skills will lead them toward successful work in their respective fields of expertise. The company considers employability skills the most essential, and it is also assumed that they can contribute to the company's development [9].

Table 3 presents a comparison of employability skills ranked by mean scores, revealing significant discrepancies between employer preferences and the skills possessed by unemployed business graduates. Employers prioritized *Customer Focus* (M = 4.81, SD = 0.36, Rank 1) as the most crucial skill, followed by *Teamwork* (M = 4.76, SD = 0.34, Rank 2), and *Professionalism* (M = 4.72, SD = 0.42, Rank 3). This emphasis on customer-centric skills aligns with previous research [38, 39], highlighting the importance of customer satisfaction in today's competitive market [40, 41]. The strong correlation between customer focus and organizational success underscores the need for graduates to possess robust customer engagement skills. However, unemployed graduates demonstrated a significantly lower mean score for *Customer Focus* (M = 4.01, SD = 0.69), indicating a substantial gap (t = 94.44, p < 0.001) between employer expectations and graduate capabilities. This finding corroborates Fadhil et al.'s [42] assertion that many educational programs inadequately prepare students for customer relationship management (CRM), leaving graduates ill-equipped for roles demanding strong customer service skills. This skills deficit likely contributes significantly to graduate unemployment within the sales, marketing, and service sectors. This implies that the university should consider integrating more practical, hands-on training in customer service and customer relationship management into its curriculum, potentially through internships, simulations, or case studies. Also, industry partnerships could provide valuable insights into current customer service trends and best practices

**Table 2. Data profile of the respondents**

| Respondent                     |  | Percentage |  | Percentage                         |  |
|--------------------------------|--|------------|--|------------------------------------|--|
| Employers                      |  | 188        |  |                                    |  |
| Owner/Top Management           |  | 8          |  | Supervisory Position               |  |
| Managerial Position            |  | 39         |  | Rank and File (HR Personnel)       |  |
| Type of Industry               |  |            |  |                                    |  |
| Banking & Lending Institutions |  | 24         |  | Recruitment & Manpower             |  |
| Mining Industry                |  | 5          |  | Realty and Developer               |  |
| Insurance                      |  | 0.5        |  | Hospitality & Food Industry        |  |
| BPO                            |  | 4          |  | Logistics & Delivery Services      |  |
| Sales & Marketing              |  | 23         |  | Manufacturing                      |  |
|                                |  |            |  | Others (Government Agencies, etc.) |  |
| Province/ Region               |  |            |  |                                    |  |
| 1                              |  | 3          |  | 8                                  |  |
| 2                              |  | 2          |  | 9                                  |  |
| 3                              |  | 0.5        |  | 10                                 |  |
| 4                              |  | 8          |  | 11                                 |  |
| 5                              |  | -          |  | 12                                 |  |
| 6                              |  | 2          |  | CARAGA                             |  |
| 7                              |  | 9          |  | NCR                                |  |
| Unemployed Business Graduates  |  | 80         |  |                                    |  |
| Gender                         |  |            |  |                                    |  |
| Male                           |  | 6          |  |                                    |  |
| Female                         |  | 74         |  |                                    |  |
| Major                          |  |            |  |                                    |  |
| Financial Management           |  | 55         |  |                                    |  |
| Human Resource Management      |  | 25         |  |                                    |  |
| Academic Year Graduated        |  |            |  |                                    |  |
| 2020-2021                      |  | 23         |  | 2017-2018                          |  |
| 2019- 2020                     |  | 27         |  | 2016-2017                          |  |
| 2018-2019                      |  | 17         |  |                                    |  |

**Table 3. Employability skills and its significance**

| Skills                           | Employers   |        |      | Unemployed Graduates |        |      | Significance          |             |           |                |
|----------------------------------|-------------|--------|------|----------------------|--------|------|-----------------------|-------------|-----------|----------------|
|                                  | Mean**<br>* | SD     | rank | Mean**<br>*          | SD     | rank | Welch's test<br>value | P-<br>value | Decision  | Interpretation |
| <b>Communication</b>             | 4.6906      | .33379 | 6    | 3.6734               | .50998 | 8    | 269.166               | .000        | Reject Ho | Significant    |
| <b>Decision Making</b>           | 4.7201      | .38394 | 5    | 3.7188               | .55207 | 7    | 218.258               | .000        | Reject Ho | Significant    |
| <b>Teamwork</b>                  | 4.7580      | .34315 | 2    | 3.9250               | .58482 | 4    | 141.561               | .000        | Reject Ho | Significant    |
| <b>Adaptability</b>              | 4.6423      | .47466 | 8    | 3.9969               | .65421 | 3    | 63.612                | .000        | Reject Ho | Significant    |
| <b>Professionalism</b>           | 4.7213      | .42056 | 3    | 4.0950               | .61868 | 1    | 68.507                | .000        | Reject Ho | Significant    |
| <b>Critical Thinking</b>         | 4.6383      | .48178 | 9    | 3.5750               | .58335 | 9    | 206.002               | .000        | Reject Ho | Significant    |
| <b>Planning &amp; organizing</b> | 4.7207      | .42774 | 4    | 3.7219               | .49841 | 6    | 244.646               | .000        | Reject Ho | Significant    |
| <b>Customer Focus</b>            | 4.8138      | .36460 | 1    | 4.0125               | .69001 | 2    | 94.438                | .000        | Reject Ho | Significant    |
| <b>Reading &amp; Writing</b>     | 4.6673      | .45668 | 7    | 3.8097               | .50228 | 5    | 172.503               | .000        | Reject Ho | Significant    |

\*\*\* Perceptions of the importance of the skills by the employers and the skills acquired by unemployed graduates with five as the highest mean score representing the extremely important and the highest level of skills acquired by the unemployed business graduates

Moreover, employers ranked *Teamwork* as the second most important skill (M = 4.76, SD = 0.34, Rank 2), reflecting its crucial role in organizational success [43-47]. This finding aligns with research emphasizing teamwork's high value across various industries [48, 49] and its status as a cornerstone of 21st-century workplaces [3, 50]. However, unemployed graduates demonstrated a significantly lower mean score for teamwork (M = 3.93, SD = 0.58) (t = 141.56, p < 0.001), suggesting a substantial skills gap. This discrepancy is concerning, given the documented negative impact of deficient teamwork on productivity and performance [51]. The considerable difference between employer expectations and graduate capabilities also

highlights the need for universities to prioritize the development of effective teamwork skills, encompassing aspects such as collaboration, communication, accountability, and diversity awareness [3]. The findings propose that business programs should incorporate more collaborative projects, simulations, and group assignments that require students to work together to solve problems and achieve common goals.

Employers ranked *Professionalism* third (M = 4.72, SD = 0.42, Rank 3), encompassing reliability, ethical conduct, and positive work attitude. While graduates scored moderately higher (M = 4.09, SD = 0.62) than in other skill areas, this still fell short of employer expectations (t = 68.51, p < 0.001).

This gap, also noted by Chowdhury & Miah [52] in marketing and sales, suggests that while some graduates demonstrate professional behaviors, many lack the professionalism required by employers [53]. The deficiency may stem from limited real-world experience and mentorship within academic training, hindering students' understanding of workplace expectations. This lack of soft skills can hinder employment prospects, even for technically qualified graduates. This suggests that the university should also emphasize professional development through workshops, seminars, and mentorship programs. These initiatives could focus on workplace ethics, communication etiquette, time management, and personal branding.

Conversely, *Critical Thinking* received the lowest employer ranking ( $M = 4.64$ ,  $SD = 0.48$ , Rank 9), a finding seemingly at odds with its recognized importance in the 21st-century workplace [56-59, 60]. While Abbasi et al. [23] observed a similar result in the banking sector, the critical role of critical thinking in problem-solving and strategic decision-making remains undeniable [54, 55]. The significant gap between employer perception ( $M = 4.64$ ) and graduate attainment ( $M = 3.58$ ,  $SD = 0.58$ ) ( $t = 206.00$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) is particularly concerning, given its high desirability among employers [60, 61]. This finding underscores a critical area for curriculum reform.

Furthermore, the consistent rejection of the null hypothesis across all skills using Welch's t-test reveals statistically significant discrepancies between employer expectations and graduate capabilities. This reinforces findings from studies across various disciplines and geographical locations [24, 29, 62-65], indicating a widespread skills mismatch contributing to graduate unemployment [66, 67]. The urgent need for universities to adapt curricula to incorporate industry-relevant skills is evident [34, 68]. This includes not only enhancing existing skill development initiatives but also strategically integrating practical experiences and mentorship opportunities to bridge the gap between academic learning and workplace realities.

## CONCLUSION

Employability skills, as assessed in the study, demonstrated an apparent disconnect between employer needs and graduate competencies. Employers identified Customer Focus, Teamwork, and Professionalism as the top three most critical skills, yet unemployed graduates exhibited significantly lower mean scores in these areas. The considerable gaps in these essential competencies suggest a pressing need for curriculum enhancements in practical, real-world applications, including customer relationship management, collaborative problem-solving, and professional workplace conduct.

Critical Thinking, though recognized as a vital skill in modern workplaces, received the lowest employer ranking, indicating an area that requires further academic reinforcement. Given that all skill areas analyzed showed statistically significant differences between employer expectations and graduate competencies, the study reinforces previous research on the widespread issue of skills mismatch, which contributes to graduate unemployment.

To address these disparities, universities should prioritize curriculum reforms integrating hands-on training, industry partnerships, mentorship programs, and real-world experiences, such as internships and case studies. Emphasizing customer service strategies, teamwork dynamics, and professional development initiatives will enhance graduates' readiness for the labor market. By aligning academic programs with industry needs, universities can significantly improve graduate employability and workforce preparedness, ultimately contributing to economic growth and business success.

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