TOWARDS A FRAMEWORK FOR INTEGRATING EMPLOYABILITY OUTCOMES IN THE QUALITY ASSURANCE ROADMAP

RENO R. RAYEL, DBA[1], OMAR B. JORDAN, LPT, MAEd[2]
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7935-7007[1], https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0877-3916[2]
reno.rayel@perpetualdalta.edu.ph[1], omar.jordan@perpetualdalta.edu.ph[2]
University of Perpetual Help System DALTA Molino
Salawag-Zapote Road, Molino 3, Bacoor City, Cavite, Philippines

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ABSTRACT

This research underscores the significant role Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) play in fostering the employability of their graduates. Acknowledging this responsibility, HEIs must ensure that their graduates possess the essential skills, competencies, and attributes requisite for successful employment. While the implementation of Quality Assurance mechanisms and the alignment of HEIs' Quality Assurance with employment indicators represent positive steps, there remains a need for further improvement in graduates' employability. It also addresses this challenge by endeavoring to devise a framework enabling HEIs to seamlessly integrate employability outcomes into their Quality Assurance roadmap. Through a comprehensive exploration of pertinent factors and mechanisms linking quality assurance and employability, the paper identifies key considerations. These encompass integrating employability into the institution's mission, strategic, and operational plans; adhering to established guidelines through relevant policies and programs; infusing employment enablers into HEIs' tri-focal functions; engaging key stakeholders in the development, planning, and implementation of policies, programs, and activities; establishing a dedicated unit for overseeing employability targets; providing tailored support services for students and alumni; and conducting employment promotion activities that reflect the dynamics of local and global job markets. In essence, this research posits that graduates must possess knowledge, skills, and values closely aligned with requirements, whether for local or international employment, and advocates for a holistic framework to enhance HEIs' effectiveness in fostering graduate employability.

Keywords: quality assurance, employment indicators, integrating quality assurance and employment indicators, quality assurance-employability link, quality assurance-employability framework

INTRODUCTION

In an era where change is an everyday reality, the ability to be employed, maintain employment, and shift employment when necessary is paramount. To thrive and survive, one needs to be highly employable, which would mean possessing the skills, competency, and other relevant attributes required in the workplace. Industry requirements change quickly, and people must keep pace with change to stay in demand and employable.

One relevant question is, "What makes an individual employable?" While technical skillset can be the immediate answer, another question is,

"What other skills do employers require?" The answers may vary from industry to industry and from one employer to another, considering that their requirements can also change quickly. Undoubtedly, companies will hire applicants based on technical skills and competency qualifications. They will choose applicants ready to work and perform rather than someone needing further training. However, this may only be the passport to the initial stage of the hiring process, as employers may also look for other requirements that may boil down to an applicant's attributes. For instance, Holmes (2001), as quoted by Christodoulou (2013), explains that companies look for behavior and performance as they want workers to perform in desirable ways. She described the necessary attributes as "self-starter," "confident," and "enthusiastic." Doyle (2020), on the other hand, suggests the integration of soft skills in the picture as she describes it as one of the most sought-after employability skills to go with hard skills. These skills include communicating and working well with others as a team player. Agbu (2022) further explains that companies continuously innovate thinking and rethinking what they do and how they work and would prefer flexible employees who can cope with changes. Agbu quoted the World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs report suggesting that "employees in almost every part of the world need to upgrade their skills and capabilities by 2025."

Skills and attributes are two concepts that will significantly impact employability when one complements the other. Diviney (2022) suggests that one difference between the terms is that skills are taught or learned, and attributes are developed. For instance, a good researcher can learn the necessary writing and statistical data analysis skills from a teacher. However, the patience, dedication, passion, and commitment that go with the skills to produce a scholarly output can be taught differently than the writing and analytical skills. Diviney further explains that to develop the attributes, a person has to have self-motivation, self-direction, and willingness to develop the attribute. He further states that when a person, or a student, has the right attitude, it is always possible to teach the skill.

Teaching and developing are the main thrusts of an educational institution. Schools must teach and equip their learners with technical skills for applicable quality standards and statutory requirements. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are guided by the student outcomes and performance indicators defined in CMOs and national and international standards in the Philippines. Accrediting bodies require the development of an assessment system to determine the achievement of the student learning outcomes (Ayadat et al., 2020). Moreover, HEIs also take the responsibility of molding the learner into a person of defined character anchored on the school's core values, mission, and vision. Similar to student outcomes, accrediting and certifying bodies also give weight to evaluating the achievement of the core values as an integral component of the school's mission and vision. These accreditation and certification activities are necessary mechanisms to ensure that academic institutions seriously give high regard to quality.

Agbu (2022) underscores the importance of linking quality assurance with the employability of graduates. He explains that quality assurance mechanisms have to be in place to ensure that graduates acquire the skills they need to continue to grow and adapt throughout their careers. However, despite the implementation of quality assurance, HEIs still need to address employability issues. In India, for instance, HEIs graduate around 22,000 yearly but still need a skilled workforce because most of these graduates need the required skill sets (Reddy, 2019). The trend is true in India and the rest of the world. Agbu quoted UNESCO that employability is heavily dependent on quality education and that the various issues on employability are blamed on education systems for their inability to teach students the required skills to get by. There are also issues with the support HEIs provide its graduates after graduation. Samantha (2022) quoted Panagiota Marselou, a Human Resources Manager, arguing that "there are many students who graduate without having any idea where to look for a job and what the application process looks like."

Many more issues on employability are traceable to HEIs' failure to sustain quality. These

issues necessitate reflecting on integrating employability indicators into quality assurance and promoting employment activities. While quality assurance is in place, one critical question is its link to employability. With this, the researchers need to develop a framework to guide academic institutions in integrating employability with quality assurance. The framework provides a straightforward process to achieve the target employability outcome, which shall be anchored on the school's mission vision and strategic directions; articulated in the quality assurance thrusts; integrated into the academia's three-fold functions; demonstrated with the support of all the stakeholders; and promoted in consideration of the immediate community, country, and the global market.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study aims to develop a framework that HEIs can use for integrating employability outcomes in the quality assurance roadmap anchored on global standards. In accordance, it addresses address the following specific objectives:

1. Assess the level of importance and current state of HEIs' integration of employability outcomes in their quality assurance:
    a. Compare assessments of the groups of respondents on the importance and current state of employment indicators integration in Quality Assurance.
    b. Determine significant differences among the assessments of the groups of respondents on the importance of integrating employment indicators in Quality Assurance.
2. Assess the importance and current state of HEIs' employment promotion activities.
    a. Compare assessments of the groups of respondents on the importance and current state of employment promotion activities of HEIs.
    b. Determine significant differences among the assessments of the groups of respondents on the importance of employment promotion activities.
3. Compare perceptions of the groups of respondents on the link between employability and quality assurance.
4. Compare the following:
    a. Assessments on the importance and current state of:
        i. Integration of employability indicators in QA; and
        ii. Employment promotion activities
    b. Employment promotion activities of HEI respondents when grouped according to demographics;
    c. Employability indicators vis-à-vis respondents' demographics; and
    d. Employability of graduates against demographics.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design. This quantitative study utilized a descriptive-comparative design to describe and compare assessments on the importance and current state of the employability outcomes integration to quality assurance and the employment promotion activities of higher education institutions in the region. Cantrell (2011), as quoted by Ompoco (2022), posits that a descriptive comparative research design aims to describe the differences between groups in a population without manipulation.

Respondents. The study included 202 respondents in four categories: HEI, Industry, Alumni, and students. Respondents from the higher education institutions involved Deans, Principals, Department Heads, and their equivalents who are knowledgeable about the quality assurance thrusts of their respective universities and colleges. Participants from the industry include company managers and those assuming supervisory positions at the minimum. On the one hand, students include those in their

final year in college. Members of the alumni traced during the data-gathering period completed the list.

Table 1 below details the distribution of study participants according to respondent type.

Table 1
Distribution of Research Participants According to Respondent Type

Respondent Type	f	%
Graduating Students (4th year & 5th year)	70	34.7
Alumni	91	45.0
HEI (Deans/Department Heads/Supervisors)	36	17.8
Industry (Managers/Supervisors)	5	2.5
Total	**202**	

As depicted in the above table, the majority of respondents, comprising nearly 80%, consist of graduating students (34.7%) and alumni members (45.0%). Their perspectives are integral to the study, given their direct experience with employability. Another subset of respondents includes administrators from higher education institutions (17.8%), playing a crucial role in student employment preparations before graduation. Despite their smaller representation (2.5%), the insights of professionals from the industry were also incorporated, recognizing their role as direct recipients of HEI graduates.

Instrument. The researcher-designed questionnaire consists of five sections. The first segment gathered demographic information from respondents, forming the basis for categorizing participants in the inferential phase of the study. The second section, comprising nine items, assessed the importance and current status of integrating employment indicators into quality assurance. Part 3 involved a 14-item assessment gauging the importance and current state of employment promotion within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The initial three questions in the information to be shared, which will only be used solely for the study. A brief study description was also provided to ensure the respondents knew and understood the study's objectives

fourth section focused on gathering information about the employability of graduates through various question formats, while subsequent queries were open-ended. These open-ended questions sought insights into the challenges faced by graduates in both local and international employment, the factors contributing to their job acquisition, and potential solutions to identified issues and challenges. The final section comprised a four-item perception survey on factors connecting quality assurance and employability. All sections using quantitative data employed a four-point scale.

The reliability of the questionnaire sections was assessed through Cronbach's Alpha, yielding results ranging from 0.824 to 0.947, indicating a high level of acceptability for the survey items.
HEI respondents were required to complete all sections of the questionnaire. Conversely, other respondent groups only addressed the assessment on the importance of integrating employability indicators into quality assurance, the importance of the state of employment promotion activities, and the evaluation of factors linking employability to quality assurance.

Data Gathering Procedure. The survey tool was administered to school administrators, industry partners, members of the alumni, and graduating students via Google form. The participants came from the local and international academic and industry partners and linkages of the University of Perpetual Help System Dalta – Molino Campus, identified through the Linkages Office. To trace UPHSD alumni, the researchers sought the help of the Alumni Association through the Office of Student Affairs and Services. The Academic Deans helped facilitate the survey of the graduating students.

In adherence to the Data Privacy Act of 2012 (RA10173), informed consent was provided in the first section of the form. The respondents were assured of the confidentiality of the

Data Analysis. The IBM-SPSS version 24 software was used to analyze the gathered data statistically. Specifically, mean and frequency were used for the descriptive inferences. Mann-Whitney

U Test, Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test, and the Kruskal-Wallis Test were utilized to establish significant differences between and among the compared variables.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Assessment of the level of importance and current state of HEI's integration of employability outcomes in their quality assurance

Table 2
Assessment of the Importance of Employment Indicators Integration in Quality Assurance

Indicators	Importance				Current State				Difference Between the Means of 'Importance' and 'Current State'
	Mean	SD	Int	Rank	Mean	SD	Int	Rank	
Q1: Institutional Mission	**3.78**	**0.44**	**VI**	**1**	**3.51**	**0.66**	**VE**	**3**	0.27
Q2: Institutional Strategic and Operational Plan	**3.73**	**0.47**	**VI**	**3**	3.46	0.61	E	4	0.27
Q3: Quality Assurance Thrust	**3.73**	**0.47**	**VI**	**3**	3.37	0.69	E	5.5	0.36
Q4: Research Agenda	3.64	0.56	VI	6	3.37	0.69	E	5.5	0.27
Q5: Community Extension Service	3.63	0.55	VI	8.5	3.06	0.94	E	8	0.57
Q6: Dedicated Unit	3.63	0.56	VI	8.5	2.94	0.97	E	9	0.69
Q7: Policies, Programs, Activities	3.64	0.52	VI	6	3.34	0.54	E	7	0.30
Q8: Curriculum and Course Design and Delivery	3.64	0.56	VI	6	**3.54**	**0.56**	**VE**	**1.5**	0.10
Q9: Knowledge-Skills-Values Syllabi Integration	**3.73**	**0.48**	**VI**	**3**	**3.54**	**0.56**	**VE**	**1.5**	0.19
Composite Mean	**3.68**	**0.42**	**VI**		**3.32**	**0.56**	**E**		**0.36**

Table 2 exhibits that all the HE respondents assessed all the indicators as "Very Important" to integrate employment indicators in Quality Assurance, with the means ranging from 3.63 to 3.78. This signifies that the factors listed in Table must be considered in the HEIs' efforts to integrate employment indicators in Quality Assurance. Furthermore, looking at the differencesin the means between the level of "Importance" and the "Current State," with the difference ranging from 0.10 to 0.69 for each of the factors and a difference of 0.36 in the composite means, the HEIs view the "Importance" higher in all the factors as compared to what they deem as their "Current State." This signifies that they have so much to work on to achieve the desired integration of employability outcomes indicators in their Quality Assurance roadmap.

Table 3
Comparison of the Assessments of the Groups of Respondents on the Employment Indicators Integration in Quality Assurance

Group of Respondents	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Alumni	3.60	0.48	Very Important
HEI	3.75	0.32	Very Important
Industry	4.00	0.00	Very Important
Students	3.72	0.39	Very Important
Total	**3.68**	**0.42**	**Very Important**

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Table 3 indicates that all respondent groups rate the integration of employment indicators in Quality Assurance as "Very Important," with the rating ranging from 3.60 to 4.00. We note that industry respondents rated 4.00, indicating the utmost importance the industry attaches to the employability of the graduates that concerns drive curriculum design and delivery innovations. While the primary focus of internal quality assurance (IQA) is to improve teaching and learning, Martin explains that it can also enhance employability. This claim is supported by the results of her study on analyzing the effectiveness of existing HEIs IQA in 8 countries through the UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning (IIE). In this study, she also identified tools for universities to enhance the employability of their graduates. These tools include tracer studies, employer satisfaction surveys, and job market analysis. To enhance employability, she also recommended the following strategies: (1) involvement of stakeholders in the conduct of curriculum reviews and in providing feedback on the competencies of graduates and interns under their supervision; (2) promoting discussion of employability with HEIs, and (3) balancing multiple perspectives from all the stakeholders.

On the one hand, Agbu (2022) asserts that the relationship between employability and quality assurance should be anchored on preparing graduates for employment. In her article, "Connecting Quality Assurance and Employability for a future-ready Workforce," she mentioned schools produce. There were no significant differences among the assessments of the groups of respondents.

Martin (2018) underscores the interconnection between higher education and graduate employability, noting that employability

creating employability and quality assurance models to help HEIs address graduate employability issues. Specifically, she mentioned the Commonwealth of Learning's (COL) model on employability, which included four cyclical processes of assessment and sensitization, planning, implementation and evaluation, and reflection. The model was piloted in seven African universities, proven effective, and is now being considered for implementation in other HEIs'. The model also resulted in the creation of frameworks to facilitate effective implementation.

Looking from the opposite perspective, Rajab (2021) argues that the lack of quality assurance directly affects employment opportunities. He directly associated poor and outdated quality assurance mechanisms with low graduate competitiveness in an article he published in the University World News Africa Edition. He further explained that even if an educational institution is implementing quality control, if such has yet to be reviewed for recency and relevance, it would not offer support enhancing the employability of graduates.

2. Assessment of the level of importance and current state of HEI's employment promotion activities

Table 4
Assessment of the Level of Importance and Current State of Employment Promotion Activities

Indicators	Importance				Current State				Difference Between the Means of 'Importance' and 'Current State'
	Mean	SD	Int	Rank	Mean	SD	Int	Rank	
Q1: Considering an immediate community	3.62	0.54	VI	11.5	3.14	0.91	E	6.5	0.48
Q2: Considering the country's job market	3.66	0.51	VI	4	3.14	0.73	E	6.5	0.52
Q3: Considering the global job market	3.66	0.52	VI	4	**3.17**	**0.75**	**E**	**3.5**	**0.49**
Q4: Different Colleges' responsibility	**3.67**	**0.52**	**VI**	**2**	**3.34**	**0.64**	**E**	**1**	**0.33**
Q5: Support Departments' participation	3.62	0.54	VI	11.5	3.09	0.78	E	9.5	0.53
Q6: Students engagement	3.66	0.53	VI	4	3.14	0.81	E	6.5	0.52
Q7: Faculty engagement	**3.67**	**0.49**	**VI**	**2**	**3.29**	**0.71**	**E**	**2**	**0.38**
Q8: Alumni Engagement	3.63	0.55	VI	9.5	3.06	0.84	E	11.5	0.57
Q9: LGU collaboration	3.61	0.56	VI	13.5	**3.17**	**0.82**	**E**	**3.5**	**0.44**
Q10: National government agencies collaboration	3.63	0.56	VI	9.5	3.03	0.86	E	13.5	0.60
Q11: Job placement company collaboration	**3.67**	**0.51**	**VI**	**2**	3.09	0.89	E	9.5	0.58
Q12: Promotion to potential employers	3.66	0.52	VI	4	3.14	0.77	E	6.5	0.52
Q13: Promotion to industry association	3.66	0.52	VI	4	3.06	0.76	E	11.5	0.60
Q14: Tapping of international linkages	3.61	0.57	VI	13.5	3.03	0.86	E	13.5	0.58
Composite Mean	**3.64**	**0.46**	**VI**		**3.13**	**0.68**	**E**		**0.51**

Table 4 above shows that all respondent groups assessed as "Very Important" for HEIs to embark on the listed employment promotion activities to achieve employment outcomes, with the mean ranging from 3.61 to 3.67.

However, the same respondents rated only as "Evident" what they deem as the current efforts of HEIs in conducting employment promotion activities. Looking at the differences in the means between the level of "Importance" and the "Current State," with the difference ranging from 0.33 to 0.60 for each of the factors and a difference of 0.51 in the composite means, the respondents view the "Importance" higher in all the factors as compared to what they deem as their "Current State." This signifies that the respondents deem that HEIs need to intensify their conduct of employment promotion activities in order to achieve the desired employment outcomes.

Table 5
Comparison of the Assessments of the Groups of Respondents on the Importance of Employment Promotion Activities

Group of Respondents	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Alumni	3.60	0.45	Very Important
HEI	3.66	0.49	Very Important
Industry	3.83	0.17	Very Important
Students	3.67	0.47	Very Important
Total	**3.64**	**0.46**	**Very Important**

Table 5 presents that all respondent groups rate employment promotion activities as "Very Important," with ratings ranging from 3.60 to 3.83. We note that, in industry respondents again gave the highest rating at 3.83. This supports the earlier finding that the industry attaches the utmost importance to employment promotion activities to connect graduates to employers.

3. Perceptions on the link between employability and quality assurance

Table 6
Perceived Link Between Employability and Quality Assurance

Indicators	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Q1: Contribution of Policies, Programs, and Activities	3.52	0.61	Strongly Agree
Q2: QA, employability promotion in the country	3.50	0.64	Agree
Q3: QA, employability promotion in the international market	3.46	0.65	Agree
Composite Mean	**3.49**	**0.60**	**Agree**

Table 6 reflects the respondents' view of the importance of the schools' policies, programs, and activities in achieving employment outcomes, including employment promotion for both local and international markets.

Table 7
Comparison of the Perceptions of the Groups of Respondents on the link between Employability and Quality Assurance

Group of Respondents	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Alumni	3.39	0.67	Agree
HEI	3.40	0.55	Agree
Industry	3.93	0.15	Strongly Agree
Students	3.63	0.52	Strongly Agree
Total	**3.49**	**0.60**	**Agree**

Table 7 highlights the respondents' view of the importance of linking employability outcomes and Quality Assurance with the industry and students registering the most substantial agreement. The industry's strong view could reflect its dire need for a workforce that fits and responds to its requirements. In contrast, the students' view could reflect their awareness of the heightened and competitive demands of the industry, which they hope their schools, through their Quality Assurance, could help address.

The test of significant difference shows significant associations among the assessments of the groups of respondents where Industry and Students have stronger views about the link between employability and Quality Assurance relative to the other respondents. We note that the students have a stronger view of the Employment-Quality Assurance link than the view of the HEIs and alumni. The alumni's view could point to the need to continue to engage them even after they have already graduated, as they may need to be made aware of their schools' initiatives toward the employment of graduates. The students' stronger views than the HEIs indicate that they perceive their schools' initiatives toward graduates' employment as adequate. In contrast, the schools might have higher aspirations for their graduates than they can accomplish, thus indicating the need to strengthen their current efforts further.

4. Mean Comparisons

Table 8 illustrates that respondents perceive the importance of (a) integrating employability into Quality Assurance and (b) implementing employment promotion activities as significantly higher than the current state in both aspects.

Table 8
Mean Comparisons on the Integration of Employability Indicators in QA and Employment Promotion Activities

Variables		Sig.	Interpretation
Importance of Integration of Employability Indicators in QA	Current State of the Integration of Employability Indicators in QA	0.000*	Significant
Importance of Employment Promotion Activities	Current State of the Employment Promotion Activities	0.000*	Significant

**Significant at 0.01 level of significance*

These findings underscore the imperative for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to augment and refine their existing efforts in (a) incorporating employability indicators into Quality Assurance and (b) enhancing initiatives for promoting the employability of graduates. These results align with Pham's (2020) observation that employability outcomes may stem from a university's initiatives to adequately prepare its graduates for employment.

CONCLUSIONS

Notable disparities exist in the assessments of the importance and current state of integrating employability indicators into quality assurance. Industry professionals and students express stronger perspectives compared to HEI administrators and alumni members. Additionally, the evaluations highlight that the perceived importance of integrating employability indicators into quality assurance and employment promotion activities significantly exceeds their current levels of integration and implementation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study recommends that HEIs adopt a framework for integrating employability outcomes in their quality assurance roadmap to guide their graduates from the school's portals to the employment corridors. This framework can help HEIs minimize the learning curve and speed up realizing their objectives for the employability of their graduates.

Furthermore, this study recomme[22] conducting a similar study involving a more significant number of respondents and covering multi-county locations, developing approaches for engaging their various stakeholders in developing dove-tailed policies, programs, and activities suitable for their specific circumstances in implementing employment promotion activities while they recognize the demands and requirements of local and international employers; developing various retooling and developing approaches to equip their students with as near-to-the-job knowledge-skills-and-values needs and requirements of potential employers; and developing various ways to engage alumni even long after they have graduated to keep them abreast with the trends in the local and international job market and keep them attractive to employers.

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AUTHOR'S PROFILE

Dr. Reno R. Rayel is currently the School Director of the University of Perpetual Help-Molino Campus. Dr. Rayel received his Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) degree—with Distinction--from De La Salle University- Manila, Master in Development Management (MDM) from the Asian Institute of Management, and Diploma in Industrial Relations and BA. Economics (Cum Laude), both from the University of the Philippines. Before joining the University of Perpetual Help System-DALTA (UPHSD), he served as ABS-CBN Bayan Foundation's Executive Director for seven years. His other recent jobs were as General Manager of a Medical Center and Vice President for Corporate Development of a hotel-resorts-casino company.

Mr. Omar B. Jordan is the Head of the Research and Development Center and concurrently the Planning Officer of the University of Perpetual Help System Dalta Molino Campus. He is also the designated Lead Auditor for the university's ISO 9001:2015(QMS) and ISO 21001:2028 (EOMS) certifications. Mr. Jordan completed his Bachelor of Secondary Education (Major in Physics) under a DOST scholarship. He had his Master's in Physics Education as a Fund Assistance for Private Education (FAPE) scholar. He completed the academic requirements for a Doctor of Philosophy in Curriculum and Instruction and currently completing a Ph.D. in Development Administration, major in Education Governance.

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