



Bridging the Skills Gap: An Employer-Centric Focus Group Discussion on Industry Demands and Academic Alignment in Calamba City – A Collaboration Between City College of Calamba and IIPESO

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Abstract

This paper presents a collaborative research initiative between the City College of Calamba (CCC) and the Information, Investment Promotions and Employment Services Office (IIPESO). The study responds to the pressing issue of the skills gap that separates higher education outcomes from industry needs within local economic hubs. Specifically, it investigates how academic programs align—or fail to align—with employer expectations, and how collaborative approaches can enhance workforce readiness. The primary purpose of this study was to identify current hiring practices, future talent requirements, and employer perceptions of CCC graduates. Using a qualitative, exploratory research design, a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was conducted during a job fair in Calamba City. Employers from diverse sectors participated, sharing insights on technical proficiencies, soft skills, and institutional partnerships. Thematic analysis revealed a strong demand for adaptability, problem-solving, communication, and digital literacy, alongside continued emphasis on theoretical knowledge. Employers praised CCC graduates' discipline and work ethic but highlighted the need for more practical exposure, structured internship programs, and regular curriculum updates. Findings suggest that sustained collaboration among the academe, industry, and government is essential for cultivating a future-ready workforce and ensuring sustainable local economic growth. This paper contributes actionable insights for policy and practice, offering CCC and IIPESO a roadmap to enhance their strategic role in addressing workforce challenges.

Keywords *Industry-Academe Collaboration, Workforce Development, Skills Gap, Employer Needs*

INTRODUCTION

The interplay between education and industry has long been recognized as a cornerstone of sustainable economic and social development. In the twenty-first century, this relationship has become increasingly critical as globalization, rapid technological advancement, and shifting labor market demands reshape the nature of work. Institutions of higher education are tasked not only with transmitting knowledge but also with producing graduates who possess the competencies needed to thrive in dynamic professional environments. Employers, on the other hand, require a workforce that is adaptable, skilled, and capable of contributing to innovation and productivity. When these two spheres fail to align, the result is a persistent “skills gap” that undermines both employability and competitiveness.

Globally, the skills gap is not a new concern. Reports from the [World Economic Forum \(2020\)](#) emphasize that by 2030, millions of workers worldwide will require reskilling and upskilling as industries transform under the influence of automation, artificial intelligence, and digitization. Education systems in many countries struggle to keep pace with the rapidly changing skill requirements of employers. Employers increasingly call for graduates who can demonstrate not only technical proficiency but also transversal or “soft” skills such as critical thinking, creativity,

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problem-solving, teamwork, and communication. In many cases, these competencies determine long-term career success more than specific technical expertise, since technologies and industry practices evolve rapidly.

In the Southeast Asian region, these challenges are magnified by rapid industrialization and integration into global supply chains. Countries such as the Philippines, Vietnam, and Indonesia are experiencing shifts from agriculture-based to service- and knowledge-based economies. This transition has heightened the demand for a labor force capable of adapting to diverse work environments and responding effectively to global market pressures. In the Philippines, this demand is particularly acute as the nation positions itself as a hub for information technology, business process outsourcing, and advanced manufacturing. While these industries create significant opportunities, they also expose shortcomings in educational preparation, with many graduates lacking the mix of technical and soft skills demanded by employers.

The Philippine government has attempted to address these concerns through systemic reforms such as the K-12 Basic Education Program and the adoption of Outcomes-Based Education (OBE) in higher education institutions. The K-12 program, implemented in 2013, aimed to align Philippine education with international standards and provide students with competencies that prepare them for either tertiary education or direct entry into the workforce. Meanwhile, OBE frameworks were introduced to shift the focus of higher education from content coverage to demonstrated competencies. However, despite these reforms, studies continue to reveal gaps between what graduates learn in the classroom and what employers expect. [Plaza and Sual \(2017\)](#), for example, found that while technical knowledge is present, employers remain concerned about the lack of problem-solving skills, adaptability, and readiness to handle workplace challenges.

At the local level, these national concerns manifest in specific and often more acute ways. Calamba City, situated in Laguna Province, has emerged as one of the Philippines' most dynamic industrial hubs, hosting multinational manufacturing firms, business process outsourcing centers, and a variety of service industries. This rapid industrial growth has generated substantial demand for a workforce that is both technically proficient and versatile. However, employers in the city frequently express frustration that fresh graduates are not adequately equipped with the practical skills and workplace competencies required to succeed in highly competitive industries.

The City College of Calamba (CCC) plays a central role in this context. As the city's flagship higher education institution, CCC is tasked with producing graduates who can serve the local industries and contribute to economic development. At the same time, the Information, Investment Promotions, and Employment Services Office (IIPESO) of the City Government of Calamba functions as a bridge between employers and the labor force, facilitating employment, investment attraction, and workforce development. The collaboration between CCC and IIPESO is therefore uniquely positioned to address the skills gap at the local level by aligning academic programs with employer expectations and fostering partnerships that enhance employability.

This study situates itself within this collaborative framework. By conducting a focus group discussion (FGD) with employers during a job fair organized by IIPESO, the study aimed to gather firsthand insights into current hiring trends, anticipated future skill demands, and perceptions of CCC graduates. Specifically, the study aimed to answer two key questions: (1) What are the current and emerging talent needs of industries operating in Calamba City? and (2) How do CCC's academic programs and graduates align with these needs? By answering these questions, the research provides evidence-based recommendations for curriculum development, institutional planning, and local government strategies to strengthen workforce readiness.

In doing so, this paper contributes to broader conversations about industry-academe-government collaboration in addressing workforce challenges. It demonstrates how localized, employer-centric research can offer actionable insights that complement national and global

studies on the skills gap. The ultimate goal is to highlight the importance of sustained dialogue between educational institutions, employers, and government agencies in creating a workforce that is not only employable but also resilient, adaptable, and capable of driving sustainable economic growth in Calamba City and beyond ([Rosario, 2025](#)).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Workforce development and graduate employability have been widely discussed in the literature. Previous studies emphasize industry-academe partnerships, curricula responsiveness, and the role of qualitative approaches such as FGDs in capturing stakeholder perspectives ([Lanuza, 2017](#)). However, localized employer feedback in Calamba City remains limited, warranting this research ([George Mason University, n.da.](#); [George Mason University, n.db](#)).

RESEARCH METHOD

This research adopted a qualitative, exploratory approach using Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). The setting was a job fair organized by IIPESO in Calamba City. Participants included employer representatives from various industries. Data were collected through a semi-structured FGD protocol, audio-recorded with consent, and analyzed using thematic analysis. Ethical considerations such as informed consent and confidentiality were observed ([George Mason University, n.d.-a](#); [George Mason University, n.d.-b](#); [University of Minnesota Libraries, n.d.](#); [Utah Valley University, n.d](#)).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings from the focus group discussion (FGD) reveal a nuanced and multi-dimensional picture of employer expectations in Calamba City. The discussion centered on current hiring trends, anticipated future needs, and specific perceptions of City College of Calamba (CCC) graduates. These themes were analyzed alongside existing literature to highlight alignments, gaps, and opportunities for institutional and policy intervention.

Hiring Trends

Employers consistently emphasized that while technical knowledge remains essential, it is seldom the sole basis for recruitment. Foundational competencies—such as programming in the information technology sector, basic machine operation in manufacturing, and customer service in the BPO industry—were cited as entry requirements. However, participants stressed that these technical skills are often teachable within the workplace. What differentiates strong candidates, in the eyes of employers, is their attitude, discipline, and willingness to learn.

One employer remarked, “We can provide training for technical tasks, but attitude and work ethic cannot be taught easily. Those qualities must already be there.” This sentiment mirrors [Plaza and Sual's \(2017\)](#) findings that Philippine employers value adaptability and positive disposition more than mere technical proficiency. Thus, the hiring trends observed in Calamba reflect broader national patterns where employability hinges on a balanced mix of knowledge and character.

Future Needs

Employers in the FGD unanimously pointed to digital literacy as a non-negotiable competency for future hires. Across industries, the rapid integration of digital technologies requires workers who can use software, analyze data, and adapt to new tools. Beyond technical skills, employers called for higher-order competencies such as problem-solving, creativity, and adaptability. These qualities are critical in responding to unforeseen workplace challenges and in sustaining competitiveness in industries increasingly shaped by automation and globalization.

Another notable concern was the demand for industry-recognized certifications and practical exposure. Employers expressed a strong preference for graduates who had completed internships or apprenticeships, noting that such experiences reduce onboarding time and enhance job readiness. As one participant observed: “Graduates who have done internships are ahead because they already understand the pace and pressure of a real workplace.” This echoes [Rosario et al \(2025\)](#) research, which demonstrated the positive impact of on-the-job training (OJT) on graduate competencies.

Perceptions of CCC Graduates

When discussing CCC specifically, employers highlighted both strengths and areas for improvement. Graduates were commended for their strong theoretical foundations, discipline, and sense of community orientation. Employers described them as respectful, hardworking, and motivated—attributes that align with CCC’s institutional mission and values. These qualities were considered an advantage in cultivating trust and reliability in the workplace.

However, gaps were also identified. Many employers noted that while CCC graduates possess the necessary knowledge, they often struggle with applying it in practical settings. Weaknesses in communication skills, teamwork, and critical thinking were mentioned as recurring challenges. Furthermore, some graduates were perceived as underprepared for the fast-changing demands of industries, particularly in fields requiring technical certifications and up-to-date digital skills. This mismatch between theoretical preparation and applied competencies reflects the broader skills gap highlighted in both local and global literature ([World Economic Forum, 2020](#); [Plaza & Sual, 2017](#)).

Comparison with Literature

The findings from Calamba City closely align with international and national reports. The [World Economic Forum \(2020\)](#) identified problem-solving, adaptability, and digital literacy as top skills for the future workforce—precisely the qualities emphasized by employers in the FGD. [Plaza and Sual \(2017\)](#) also reported that Filipino employers value attitude and willingness to learn, consistent with the hiring trends highlighted in this study. Likewise, [Rosario et al. \(2025\)](#) found that structured OJT programs significantly enhance graduate readiness, reinforcing employer calls for more internships at CCC.

These alignments validate that the skills gap observed in Calamba is not unique but rather part of a larger, global challenge. At the same time, the localized feedback from employers offers actionable insights tailored to CCC and its stakeholders.

Implications for Practice and Policy

For City College of Calamba. The feedback from employers presents a clear mandate for CCC to recalibrate its academic offerings.

- **Curriculum Updates:** Programs must be reviewed and revised more frequently to integrate emerging technologies and align with industry practices.
- **Project-Based Learning:** Embedding applied, problem-solving activities across courses can help students translate theoretical knowledge into practical competence.
- **Internship Expansion:** Strengthening partnerships with industries for internships and apprenticeships is critical. Employers expressed willingness to host interns, provided the programs are well-structured and supervised.

For Information, Investment Promotions, and Employment Services Office as a government office tasked with promoting employment and investment, IIPESO plays a crucial coordinating role.

- Platforms for Dialogue: Regular forums between the academe and industry, beyond job fairs, can foster continuous alignment of skills development.
- Incentives for Firms: IIPESO can design policies that encourage firms to host interns, conduct training workshops, or co-develop curricula with CCC. Such initiatives would not only strengthen workforce readiness but also attract more investments to the city.

For Local Policy and Governance

At a broader level, findings suggest that local government strategies should be attuned to the strengths and potential of the local talent pool. By aligning investment promotion with existing workforce capabilities—such as community-oriented graduates with a strong work ethic—Calamba can attract industries that match its human capital. Furthermore, policies supporting lifelong learning, reskilling, and continuous professional development could ensure that the workforce remains competitive amid rapid industrial shifts.

Synthesis

In summary, the FGD findings paint a clear picture: employers in Calamba City value a balanced mix of technical proficiency and soft skills, with a growing emphasis on digital literacy and problem-solving. CCC graduates are appreciated for their knowledge and values, but require more opportunities for practical exposure and soft skills development. These findings resonate strongly with global and national studies, reinforcing the urgency of reform. Most importantly, they point to specific actions that CCC, IIPESO, and local government can take to bridge the skills gap, thereby ensuring that Calamba's workforce is prepared to meet both present and future demands.

CONCLUSIONS

The study concludes that proactive dialogue among academe, industry, and government is vital to address skills gaps. CCC must enhance practical training, internships, and curriculum responsiveness, while IIPESO should strengthen industry-academe linkages. Future research could expand to larger employer samples, longitudinal impact studies, and comparative regional analyses (University of Minnesota Libraries, n.d.). Overall, this study makes a significant contribution by providing localized, evidence-based insights that can guide curriculum reforms, strengthen workforce planning, and reinforce collaborative strategies to ensure that graduates are future-ready and aligned with evolving industry needs.

LIMITATIONS & FURTHER RESEARCH

Future research could expand the scope by involving a larger and more diverse pool of employers across multiple industries and regions. Longitudinal studies would also be valuable in tracking how employer needs evolve over time. In addition, comparative analyses between different localities could highlight best practices and provide broader insights into aligning academic programs with industry demands.

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