

Alignment of employability skills in management education: students', faculty and employers' perceptions

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Abstract

This study explores the alignment between undergraduate students' and faculty members' perceptions of employability skills and employer expectations in management education. Using an externally derived employer skill ranking as a benchmark, survey data were collected from 464 undergraduate students and 68 faculty members at a leading Peruvian university. Rank-based nonparametric analyses were conducted to examine overall alignment and identify competency-level gaps. The findings reveal substantial agreement between academic stakeholders and employers regarding the general importance of employability skills. However, persistent discrepancies emerge in the relative prioritization of specific competencies, which tend to be systematically underestimated by students and faculty. These results suggest that, beyond formal curricular alignment, greater emphasis on the development and application of these skills within teaching and learning processes is needed to enhance graduates' labor market readiness.

Keywords: *Employability Skills, Management Education, Graduated Skills gap, Students' perceptions, Faculty perceptions, Employer expectations*

1. Introduction

In recent years, accelerated transformations in the labor market have intensified mismatches between available skills and those required by organizations. The World Economic Forum (2025) highlights the growing relevance of transferable soft skills in contexts characterized by technological disruption and uncertainty.

From an alternative perspective, skills development in higher education is regarded as a key determinant of employability, occupying a central position in models that seek to conceptualize and clarify the precise meaning of graduate employability (Jackson 2012); this process requires the collaborative effort of multiple stakeholders beyond universities—students, graduates,

faculty, and employers—to ensure that professionals are employable and capable of working in volatile environments (Gupta & Mahajan, 2023).

Despite the growing body of research on graduate employability, earlier studies largely adopted fragmented approaches, examining employability from single-stakeholder perspectives (Osmani et al., 2019; Tran, 2014). More recent research has emphasized the need to conceptualize employability as a multidimensional construct shaped by the interaction of multiple stakeholders within specific institutional and labor market contexts (Mahajan et al., 2020; Tushar & Sooraksa, 2023) and beside to explore perceptions and expectations of each stakeholders (Pujol-Jover et al., 2023).

This study analyzes the degree of alignment between the perceptions of undergraduate students and faculty members regarding required employability skills and compares them with the expectations of Peruvian employers as reported in an IPSOS Peru (2024) survey conducted for multiple clients.

Accordingly, the following research question is addressed: To what extent do employers, students, and faculty members in a school of management at a Peruvian university concur in their perceptions of the importance of a set of employability skills required by largest Peruvian companies?

1.1. Literature Review

Graduate employability is conceived as a multidimensional construct integrating skills, knowledge, personal attributes, and experiences that enhance graduates' capacity to obtain and sustain employment across diverse professional contexts (Yorke, 2006). Rather than representing an immediate outcome of higher education, employability develops dynamically through interaction with the labor market and multiple stakeholders.

Recent literature conceptualizes employability as an integrated portfolio of human capital shaped by individual, organizational, and market-level factors, emphasizing its relational and contextual nature (Smaldone, 2023; Williams et al., 2016). From this perspective, employability emerges from the interaction between individual capabilities—such as skills, self-efficacy, and experiential learning—and broader labor market conditions, reinforcing its multi-actor character (Knight & Yorke, 2004; Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007; Tomlinson, 2017).

Within this framework, soft skills occupy a central role in employability models and are widely recognized as critical for professional performance. However, empirical evidence consistently highlights significant mismatches between higher education outcomes and labor market expectations, particularly in management-related programs (Wickramasinghe & Perera, 2010; Osmani et al., 2019; Scrimieri et al., 2024).

This employability skills gap reflects misalignments in the definition, prioritization, and evaluation of skills across key stakeholders, especially graduates and employers (Osmani et al., 2019; Tsirkas et al., 2020).

2. Methodology

2.1. Use of externally derived skill lists

As evidenced by the literature review conducted by Tushar (2023), the key employability skills that employers demand from recent graduates are quite broad. In the present study, the authors use as a reference a list of competencies identified in a study conducted by IPSOS Peru (2024), which aimed to understand the image that 134 human resources managers from the largest Peruvian companies have of university graduates in 2024. This list is used as an analytical framework rather than as a prescriptive benchmark, recognizing that skill prioritization is shaped by the underlying measurement approach as suggested by Suleman (2016).

2.2. Sample and data collection

Data were collected from two academic stakeholder groups within the School of Business of a top-ranked university in Peru, specifically from its undergraduate management program. Student data were gathered in person during regular class sessions in September 2025, yielding 464 valid questionnaires from a population of 1,022 undergraduate students. Faculty data were collected online in November 2025 through a self-administered questionnaire distributed to all academic staff, resulting in 68 responses from a population of 143 faculty members. In both questionnaires, respondents were asked to rate the perceived importance of 20 skills that a recently graduated professional should possess, as identified by the largest Peruvian companies according to an IPSOS Peru (2024) multi-client survey. Responses were recorded using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("Not important at all") to 5 ("Very important"). In addition, respondents provided basic demographic information, including age and gender, which enabled subsequent descriptive and comparative analyses. The same 20 skills and 5-point Likert scale were used across both academic stakeholder groups, consistent with the structure of the external report (Ipsos Peru, 2024).

Table 1. List of skills in a recent university graduate, for largest Peruvian companies (IPSOS Peru, 2024)

Skills in a recent university graduate, for largest Peruvian companies		
1. Adaptability and flexibility	8. Social influence	15. Service orientation
2. Openness to technology	9. Initiative	16. Analytical thinking
3. Listening skills	10. Innovation	17. Critical thinking
4. Communication skills	11. Emotional intelligence	18. Perseverance
5. Creativity and originality	12. Leadership	19. Problem-solving skills
6. Willingness to learn / active learning	13. Time management	20. Teamwork
7. Resilience and stress tolerance	14. Organization	

2.3. Research Design

The study employs a comparative, multi-stakeholder survey design in which equivalent skill dimensions are assessed across academic actors to examine convergence and divergence in perceived importance. Using a common skill framework enables systematic comparison between students and faculty members, contributing to research on perceptual alignment within higher education. The analytical strategy and statistical procedures used to assess these differences are presented in the following section.

2.4. Statistical Analysis

A quantitative, cross-sectional, comparative approach was used to examine differences in the prioritization of employability skills across academic stakeholders. Analyses focused on ordinal rankings derived from perceived employer-valued competencies, using an externally derived employer ranking as a benchmark.

2.4.1. Participants and data sources

Three data sources were considered for the comparative analysis: Students (ST–EMP): Undergraduate students ($n = 464$) evaluated the importance they believe employers assign to a set of 20 competencies. Faculty (FA–EMP): Faculty members ($n = 68$) completed the same instrument, assessing perceived employer priorities. Employer benchmark (EMP): An empirical ranking of competencies derived from a prior employer survey (IPSOS Perú, 2024) served as an external reference point.

2.4.2. Instrument and ranking construction

All surveys used a five-point Likert scale to assess perceived importance. For each competency and stakeholder group, arithmetic mean scores were computed and subsequently ordered to construct complete ordinal rankings (1–20), where rank 1 indicates the highest perceived importance.

Although Likert-type data are ordinal, mean scores were used solely to generate comparative rankings. This approach is methodologically acceptable when inference relies on nonparametric techniques and does not assume interval-level measurement, while allowing greater differentiation among competencies (Norman, 2010; Boone & Boone, 2012).

2.4.3. Statistical Procedures

The following nonparametric analyses were conducted: 1) Kendall's Tau-b to assess pairwise ordinal concordance between: Students and faculty, Students and the employer benchmark and Faculty and the employer benchmark. 2) Kendall's W to evaluate overall concordance among the three rankings ($H_0: W = 0$, indicating no global agreement). 3) Friedman test as an omnibus test of equality in rank distributions (H_0 : equal rank distributions). 4) Wilcoxon signed-rank tests with Holm–Bonferroni correction for post-hoc comparisons. 5) Competency-level gap analysis, based on absolute differences in ranking positions. All statistical tests were conducted using a significance threshold of $\alpha = 0.05$.

3. Results

3.1. Pairwise Concordance

Kendall's Tau-b coefficients indicate moderate and statistically significant concordance across all pairwise comparisons:

- Students vs Faculty: $\tau = 0.832, p = 0.001$
- Students vs Employers: $\tau = 0.453, p = 0.005$
- Faculty vs Employers: $\tau = 0.547, p < 0.001$

These results suggest that both students and faculty share a broadly consistent understanding of employer-valued competencies, with faculty perceptions showing a slightly stronger alignment with the empirical employer ranking.

3.2. Tripartite Concordance

Kendall's coefficient of concordance reveals a high and statistically significant level of global agreement among students, faculty, and employers:

- $W = 0.784, \chi^2(19) = 44.68, p < 0.001$

This finding indicates that the observed agreement is not random but reflects a shared structural understanding of skills priorities across actors.

The Friedman test was not statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 0.54, p = 0.77$), which is expected when complete ordinal rankings are compared, as overall rank distributions are structurally equivalent

across actors. Post-hoc Wilcoxon tests similarly did not indicate global rank shifts between actors, reinforcing the conclusion that discrepancies are competency-specific rather than systemic.

3.3. Skill-Level Gaps

Despite overall concordance, substantial gaps emerge at the skill level. Both students and faculty systematically underestimate skills such as initiative, leadership, resilience, and emotional intelligence, assigning them rankings up to 8–10 positions lower than employers. Conversely, competencies related to technological openness, organization, and problem-solving tend to be overestimated by academic actors relative to employer priorities.

These competency-level discrepancies provide a basis for interpreting how perceptual alignment coexists with substantive skill mismatches.

Table 2. Skill - Students and Faculty ranking position vs Employers

Overvalued Skills	Students	Faculty	Undervalue Skills	Students	Faculty
Leadership	+8	+6	Creativity	-6	-7
Resilience	+7	+5	Social Influence	-5	-6
Emotional Intelligence	+7	+4	Innovation	-4	-5
Initiative	+6	+3	Organization	-4	-3
Change Adaptability	+5	+3	Communication	-3	-2

4. Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that students and faculty members show a high degree of agreement regarding the overall ranking of employability skills valued by employers. However, notable discrepancies persist in the relative importance assigned to specific skills. This pattern underscores the influence of institutional, disciplinary, and temporal context on employability perceptions, given that the study was conducted among students and faculty members of a School of Business at a Peruvian university between September and November 2025.

Contrary to much of the existing literature, perceptual misalignments between students, faculty members, and employers—often identified as contributing to the higher education–labor market gap (Osmani et al., 2019)—are less pronounced in the present study.

While the results indicate general alignment regarding the importance of employability skills, students and faculty members tend to underestimate certain soft skills critical for long-term employability—such as initiative, leadership, resilience, and emotional intelligence—that are highly valued by employers in Peru (IPSOS Peru, 2024).

5. Conclusions

The findings indicate that differences in the priority assigned to employability skills identified by Peruvian employers are relatively limited between undergraduate students and faculty members, suggesting a shared reference framework regarding the general importance of employability skills. However, persistent discrepancies in the relative weighting of specific skills reveal more nuanced misalignments that are not captured by overall rankings alone.

This mismatch is particularly evident in the systematic underestimation of skills, such as initiative, resilience, emotional intelligence, and leadership, despite their recognized relevance for long-term employability and their high valuation by employers. Even modest perceptual differences may have practical consequences for graduates' transition into the labor market.

From a practical perspective, the results suggest that improving alignment between higher education institutions and labor market needs requires more than curricular adjustments. Greater emphasis on certain skills explicit within teaching, learning, and assessment processes may help recalibrate students' and faculty members' perceptions and better prepare graduates for workplace demands.

The findings of the present study should be interpreted in light of the specific institutional and contextual setting in which the research was conducted. Future research could extend this analysis, including a broader and probabilistic students and faculty sample from multiple higher education institutions.

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