

A Diploma Isn't Enough: Focus on Skills, Not Just Grades

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For generations, Filipino families have seen a diploma as the key to a better life. It is a symbol of hard work and sacrifice, and a badge of honor for parents who dream of seeing their children succeed. But more and more young Filipinos are discovering that a diploma, by itself, doesn't guarantee a decent job. Skills matter just as much, if not more, and that's a lesson the country must take seriously.

The old stereotype that only academic excellence matters is holding many Filipinos back. In countless homes, there is pressure to chase high grades and medals, but little understanding of how these numbers translate to real skills. The stigma that practical skills like carpentry, caregiving, or welding are somehow less valuable than office work is still strong. This thinking leaves many graduates with impressive transcripts but no idea how to use their knowledge in the real world, a concern echoed by Velasco (2012), who found that employers increasingly look for more than just academic achievements.

Employers are clear about what they want, a worker who can think critically, adapt, and solve problems, not just recite memorized facts. But too many schools still treat these abilities as optional, not essential. This gap becomes painfully obvious when graduates start working. They know the theories but struggle to meet the day-to-day challenges of the workplace (Melguizo & Perea, 2016). Many students from rural schools feel this even more, lacking the equipment and opportunities to develop real skills before they leave school.

True change means understanding that skills give dignity, not just diplomas. It means creating an education system that values both knowledge and application, that respects the learner who can fix a car or care for a patient as much as the one who aces a test. This respect must start with schools, which should build programs that teach skills employers actually need and students can use in real life. As noted by Bustos (2024), higher education in the Philippines must respond directly to shifts in the job market to remain relevant and effective.

However, societal definitions of success remain narrowly focused on elite degrees and high-prestige professions. Many students are pressured into career tracks that do not suit their interests or talents simply because these paths are seen as the "ideal" route. Nyström et al. (2018) argued that higher education programs often create rigid constructs of success that ignore diverse forms of achievement, including those grounded in technical expertise and hands-on skills.

Students' self-confidence and work ethic are also influenced by the environment they are trained in. A study by Alilio et al. (2024) highlighted how the quality of work-life and occupational self-efficacy directly affect how Filipino Gen Z workers commit to their roles, indicating that building practical competencies early can contribute to more confident, committed professionals in the future.

Filipinos are known for their resourcefulness and ability to adapt. It's time for the country's schools to catch up. Students should leave school ready to earn, not just to pass exams. Let this be a call to action for school leaders, teachers, and policymakers to

put skills first and a dignify every kind of work. Let diplomas be more than paper, let them be proof that a student has learned how to build, create, and thrive in the real world.

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