

Employership Before Employment? Rethinking Curriculum Priorities for Industry-Ready Graduates

Jason V. Chavez

Zamboanga Peninsula Polytechnic State University, Zamboanga City, 7000, Philippines

Corresponding email: jasonchavez615@gmail.com

The rapid transformation of the global workforce has fundamentally altered the purpose of education. While obtaining employment remains an important outcome of higher education, employers increasingly seek graduates who possess more than academic credentials and technical expertise. They demand individuals who demonstrate adaptability, critical thinking, collaboration, communication, ethical decision-making, digital competence, and lifelong learning. These qualities collectively define what many scholars describe as employership—the ability to continuously create value, remain relevant, and contribute meaningfully within changing professional environments. As industries continue to evolve through automation, artificial intelligence, and digital transformation, educational institutions must reconsider whether their curricula are preparing students merely to secure jobs or to sustain meaningful careers. This shift requires educational leaders to rethink curriculum priorities from employment alone toward the broader concept of employership.

For decades, higher education has traditionally measured success through graduate employment rates. Universities proudly report the percentage of graduates who obtain employment shortly after completing their degrees, often using these statistics as indicators of institutional quality. While employment remains an important benchmark, it provides only a limited perspective on graduate success. A graduate may secure employment but struggle to adapt to organizational change, solve complex workplace problems, or continuously upgrade professional competencies. Consequently, employership represents a more sustainable educational goal because it emphasizes long-term professional growth rather than immediate job placement. Yorke & Knight (2004) argued that employability extends beyond obtaining employment; it encompasses the knowledge, skills, achievements, and personal attributes that enable graduates to gain employment, remain employable, and succeed throughout their careers.

The changing nature of work further reinforces the need for curriculum transformation. Advances in artificial intelligence, automation, digital technologies, and Industry 5.0 continue to reshape occupations across virtually every economic sector. Many routine tasks are becoming automated, while emerging professions increasingly demand creativity, analytical reasoning, innovation, emotional intelligence, and interdisciplinary collaboration. According to the World Economic Forum (2025), employers increasingly prioritize analytical thinking, resilience, technological literacy, leadership, and continuous learning as essential workforce competencies. These trends suggest that educational institutions should prepare graduates not merely for existing occupations but also for careers that may not yet exist. Curriculum development therefore requires continuous alignment with evolving industry expectations while preserving the broader educational mission of developing responsible and adaptable citizens.

Educational leadership plays a central role in this transformation. Curriculum reform does not occur solely through policy directives or regulatory compliance; it requires visionary leaders who understand both educational philosophy and workforce dynamics. Academic leaders must continuously evaluate whether existing programs remain responsive to industry demands while maintaining academic integrity. This responsibility involves strengthening partnerships with employers, consulting industry experts during curriculum review, promoting interdisciplinary learning, and encouraging faculty members to adopt innovative teaching approaches. Curriculum leadership therefore becomes a strategic function that connects higher education with economic development, technological advancement, and societal needs.

An employership-oriented curriculum also challenges the misconception that technical competence alone guarantees professional success. While discipline-specific knowledge remains indispensable, employers increasingly recognize the importance of transferable skills that enable graduates to navigate diverse workplace contexts. Communication, teamwork, adaptability, leadership, ethical reasoning, intercultural competence, and problem-solving frequently determine career progression as much as technical expertise. Tomlinson (2017) described these broader competencies as forms of graduate capital that enhance employability by integrating human, social, cultural, and identity resources. Educational institutions must therefore create learning environments where students develop both professional knowledge and the interpersonal capabilities required for sustained career success.

Experiential learning provides one of the most effective pathways toward developing employership. Internships, community engagement, industry immersion, service-learning, entrepreneurship projects, undergraduate research, and multidisciplinary collaborations expose students to authentic workplace challenges while strengthening practical competencies. Such experiences encourage learners to apply theoretical knowledge within real-world contexts, develop professional confidence, and cultivate reflective practice. Educational leaders should therefore promote experiential learning as a core component of curriculum design rather than treating it as a supplementary activity. Strong partnerships between higher education institutions and industry also facilitate curriculum responsiveness by ensuring that graduates acquire competencies relevant to contemporary labor markets.

Curriculum reform should likewise embrace the principle that learning does not end at graduation. The accelerating pace of technological and economic change means that graduates must continually acquire new knowledge and competencies throughout their professional lives. Consequently, educational institutions should cultivate lifelong learning habits by encouraging curiosity, self-directed learning, critical reflection, and continuous professional development. Rather than preparing students for a single occupation, universities should prepare them to navigate multiple career transitions across their working lives. UNESCO (2021) emphasized that education must establish a new social contract that equips learners with the capacity to adapt, collaborate, and contribute responsibly within rapidly changing societies. This vision positions employership not merely as workforce preparation but as an enduring commitment to lifelong personal and professional growth.

Educational leaders also bear the responsibility of ensuring that curriculum innovation remains inclusive and responsive to local realities. While global competency frameworks provide valuable guidance, curriculum decisions should reflect national development priorities, regional labor market needs, and community aspirations. Higher education institutions must balance international competitiveness with local relevance by preparing graduates capable of contributing to both global industries and national socioeconomic development. This balanced approach requires ongoing dialogue among educators, employers, policymakers, professional organizations, alumni, and students. Curriculum review should therefore become a continuous and collaborative process rather than a periodic compliance exercise.

Assessment practices must also evolve to reflect the broader objectives of employership. Traditional examinations remain useful for measuring academic knowledge, but they often provide limited evidence of graduates' workplace readiness. Authentic assessments—including portfolios, case analyses, simulations, capstone projects, industry-based problem solving, reflective journals, and competency demonstrations—offer richer opportunities for students to integrate knowledge with professional practice. Educational leaders should encourage assessment systems that evaluate not only what students know but also how effectively they apply knowledge, collaborate with others, solve unfamiliar problems, and communicate solutions in real-world contexts.

Furthermore, strengthening employership requires institutions to cultivate entrepreneurial thinking alongside employability. Graduates should be encouraged not only to seek employment but also to identify opportunities, innovate, create value, and respond proactively to emerging societal challenges. Entrepreneurial competence nurtures initiative, resilience, creativity, and responsible risk-taking—qualities that remain valuable whether graduates pursue corporate careers, public service, self-employment, or social enterprise. An employership-oriented curriculum therefore broadens students' perspectives by preparing them to become contributors, innovators, and future leaders rather than passive participants in the labor market.

International evidence further supports the importance of aligning education with changing workforce demands. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2023) noted that education systems must continuously strengthen learners' cognitive, technical, and socio-emotional competencies to remain responsive to increasingly complex economic and social environments. This perspective reinforces the idea that graduate success depends not solely on disciplinary expertise but also on adaptability, collaboration, and lifelong learning—competencies that define employership in the twenty-first century.

Ultimately, the question is no longer whether higher education should prepare students for employment, but whether it prepares them for sustained professional relevance in an unpredictable future. Employment represents the beginning of a career journey, whereas employership represents the capacity to learn, adapt, lead, and contribute throughout that journey. Educational leaders therefore occupy a pivotal position in shaping curricula that extend beyond immediate labor market demands toward developing graduates who possess the resilience, creativity, and ethical responsibility necessary for long-term success.

As higher education institutions continue responding to technological disruption, demographic shifts, and evolving workforce expectations, curriculum leadership must remain proactive rather than reactive. Preparing industry-ready graduates requires educational systems that integrate disciplinary excellence with transferable competencies, experiential learning, lifelong learning, and entrepreneurial thinking. By prioritizing employership before employment, educational leaders can ensure that graduates are not only capable of securing meaningful work but also of shaping the future of industries, communities, and society itself. In doing so, higher education fulfills its broader mission of developing individuals who are prepared not merely for their first job, but for a lifetime of purposeful contribution and continuous growth.

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