



# Employers' Desired Employability Skills in Pre-Service Teacher Graduates: A Case Study of Kyambogo University, Uganda

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**Abstract:** *The study explored the key employability skills sought by employers of graduate teachers in Uganda, examining how these competencies can be integrated more effectively into pre-service teacher training programs. Guided by an interpretivist philosophical orientation, this qualitative single-case study was conducted at Kyambogo University. Purposive sampling included 2 heads of department, 8 lecturers, 22 final-year pre-service teacher trainees, and 8 head teachers from both public and private secondary schools. Data collection encompassed key informant interviews and focus group discussions. Thematic analysis was used to derive key themes. Trustworthiness was reinforced through peer debriefing, triangulation, and member checking. Findings revealed that employers consistently emphasized a set of ten core employability skills communication, collaboration, critical thinking, creativity, leadership, emotional intelligence, adaptability, problem-solving, time management, and self-sufficiency. These competencies were deemed vital for newly hired teachers to manage dynamic classroom environments, innovate within resource constraints, and contribute effectively to school communities. The study recommended that pre-service teacher training programmes should systematically embed these employability skills and assess them through practical experiences and mentorship. Stakeholders, including policymakers and educational leaders, must also offer institutional support such as professional development and structured collaborative opportunities to foster ongoing skill enhancement.*

**Keywords:** *Employability skills, Higher education institutions, Human Capital, Pre-service teacher training programme, Uganda.*

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## 1. Introduction

Employability skills are now a focal point in global education systems due to the rising competitiveness and skill-orientated nature of the labour market. Employability skills refer to the general competencies and attributes that enhance a graduate's ability to secure employment, excel in their role, and contribute meaningfully to their workplace (Yorke, 2006). These skills, including effective communication, innovative thinking, analytical reasoning, problem-

solving abilities, collaboration, and flexibility, are essential for preparing graduates to meet the challenges of today's job market (Thornhill-Miller et al., 2023).

In the education sector, acquiring employability skills is particularly vital for teachers, who play multifaceted roles beyond classroom instruction. Teachers are now expected to showcase leadership qualities, engage with the community, and create a positive environment within schools (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). Pre-service teacher training programmes play a vital role in providing future teachers with both academic

knowledge and the essential employability skills needed for success. In Uganda, Vision 2040 underscores human capital development as one of the main drivers of economic growth, with particular emphasis on improving education outcomes (Uganda National Planning Authority, 2013). By equipping pre-service teachers with the necessary skills and knowledge, Uganda can work towards achieving its vision of developing a highly skilled workforce to drive economic growth. This highlights the importance of aligning teacher training programmes with national development goals to ensure a prosperous future for the country. This study aimed to explore employers' desired employability skills for graduate pre-service teachers from higher education institutions in Uganda in order to inform the design of teacher training programmes that will meet the needs of the workforce. By understanding what skills employers are looking for, educators can better prepare future teachers to contribute effectively to the field of education.

## 1.1 Problem Statement

A graduate teacher with essential employability skills, such as decision-making, logic, communication, and workplace integrity, demonstrates a strong integration of necessary hard and soft skills crucial for success in today's educational setting. This gap is influenced by employer expectations of graduate teachers. Employers expect teachers to adapt to school demands, engage with students, and collaborate effectively with education stakeholders, as noted by Cheng (2022). However, a significant gap exists between employers' expectations and the competencies of graduate teachers, particularly in key employability skills like decision-making, logic, communication, and workplace integrity, as highlighted by Tagulwa et al. (2023). Employers assert that graduate teachers are deficient in decision-making, logic, communication, and workplace integrity (Oraison et al., 2019). If this gap is not addressed, it could lead to challenges in the recruitment and retention of high-quality teachers in the education sector, ultimately impacting student learning outcomes and overall educational quality. Acknowledging these vital employability skills could guide the restructuring of pre-service teacher training programs to better align with the changing needs of the education sector. Understanding employers' perspectives on essential employability skills is crucial for improving teacher training programs for graduate teachers in Uganda.

## 1.2 Research Question

This study was guided by the following research question: What employability skills do employers desire from pre-service teacher training graduates from higher education institutions in Uganda?

## 2. Literature Review

This study was guided by Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1993), which posits that education and training are investments that enhance an individual's productivity, thereby increasing their employability and market value. In the context of pre-service teacher training, the theory underlines the critical role of higher education institutions (HEIs) in equipping graduates with employability skills (Olaniyan & Okemakinde, 2008). These include communication, critical thinking, creativity, adaptability, and professional ethics (Yorke, 2006). Strengthening these skills not only enhances the job readiness of pre-service teachers but also helps meet the evolving expectations of employers seeking a workforce capable of delivering high-quality education (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2020).

Employability skills are defined by different researchers in varying ways but generally refer to the fundamental skills that individuals need to obtain, retain, and succeed in employment (Shinwari, 2023). Mello and Wattret (2021) conceptualize employability as a blend of achievements, understandings, and personal attributes that increase one's prospects of gaining employment and succeeding in a chosen occupation. This multifaceted view of employability skills highlights their broad relevance, extending beyond technical knowledge to encompass emotional and interpersonal competencies (Agrawal & Rahul, 2023).

Employers increasingly prioritize a diverse set of skills in newly hired graduate teachers. The ability to communicate effectively both orally and in writing ranks among the most vital. Teachers must engage students, parents, and colleagues, requiring strong interpersonal competence (Okolie et al., 2022). Collaboration skills are also crucial, given the team-based nature of school environments where teachers work together to plan lessons, supervise extracurricular activities, and manage administrative tasks (Hairida et al., 2021). Problem-solving and critical thinking emerge as high-value skills, enabling teachers to handle unexpected classroom challenges, manage student behaviour, and adapt lesson plans dynamically (Palavan, 2020). Adaptability and creativity remain critical in an era of rapidly changing educational technologies and shifting curricula (Manca & Delfino, 2021). Moreover, leadership skills empower teachers to assume roles such as departmental heads, activity coordinators, or student mentors (Shah, 2019; Suryana et al., 2020). Emotional intelligence has also gained prominence, as teachers frequently navigate the emotional needs of diverse student groups, requiring empathy and constructive conflict resolution (Kovalchuk et al., 2022; Ahmed et al., 2020). Given the broad and ever-evolving demands on educators, employers value a holistic skill set that combines academic expertise with strong employability competencies.

### 3. Methodology

The study adopted an interpretivist philosophical orientation to delve into the social realities shaped by participants' experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This approach allows for a deep exploration of subjective perspectives and meanings. Additionally, it utilised a qualitative research methodology, which enables in-depth exploration of complex phenomena that cannot be quantified (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). A single case study design was chosen to focus on Kyambogo University's School of Education, a prominent institution for teacher training in Uganda. This selection allowed for a holistic, context-specific investigation (Yin, 2018) due to its reputation and expertise in the field. Purposive sampling was used to select 2 heads of departments, 8 lecturers, 22 final-year pre-service teacher trainees, and 8 head teachers from both public and private secondary schools. This ensured that participants possessed firsthand knowledge of pre-service teacher training and employability skills (Patton, 2015). Data collection encompassed key informant interviews with heads of departments, lecturers, and secondary school head teachers from government and private owned secondary schools to gain expert insights into curriculum design and employer expectations (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015), along with conducting focus group discussions (FGDs) with pre-service teacher trainees to foster interactive dialogues regarding skill gaps and training effectiveness (Morgan, 1997). These methods aimed to capture diverse perspectives and in-depth insights. By employing these methods, a triangulated understanding of employability skills was achieved, allowing for a comprehensive view of the skills required in the context of pre-service teacher training. Thematic analysis was meticulously conducted in adherence to Creswell's multi-step process, encompassing transcription, coding, and theme identification. This systematic approach facilitated the organic emergence of patterns and themes from the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Braun & Clarke, 2006). To enhance trustworthiness, the study employed peer debriefing, triangulation, and member checking, allowing participants to validate the interpretations made (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Birt et al., 2016). These steps bolstered the credibility and reliability of the findings. The study meticulously addressed ethical considerations by obtaining institutional approvals, securing informed consent, maintaining confidentiality, and adhering to health guidelines (Cohen et al., 2018). These measures were crucial to upholding the integrity of the research and safeguarding the rights and well-being of the participants. This rigorous methodological approach provided an in-depth, participant-centred investigation into employability skills in pre-service teacher training, offering valuable insights to enhance curriculum design, instructional strategies, and assessment practices.

### 4. Results and Discussion

This study revealed that effective communication is a crucial skill for employment in Uganda. The findings show that respondents unanimously identified communication skills as the foundational employability skill for effective teaching. Employers emphasised clarity, eloquence, and the ability to convey information to learners of varying abilities. Several interviewees noted that poor communication undermines teacher effectiveness and hinders students' academic progress. A 45-year-old female employer explained:

*"Communication is very key when it comes to eloquence. You must be very eloquent as a teacher ... if you are not communicating effectively, learners will not understand."*

Focus group discussions with pre-service teachers reinforced the importance of clear instructions, constructive feedback, and the ability to establish rapport with students, parents, and colleagues. *"When it comes to communication skills, if a teacher doesn't know how to communicate with students, it's detrimental to their learning. There is a strong connection between these skills and effective teaching."* (FGD 1). This data implies that secondary school employers in Uganda place a high value on communication skills for pre-service teacher training graduates, highlighting the importance of clarity, eloquence, and effective interaction with students, parents, and colleagues for successful teaching and student learning outcomes.

Another essential skill for employment desired by secondary school employers in Uganda is collaboration, which was identified as critical in this study. The findings show that employers stressed that collaboration is essential in school environments, which often require teamwork to conduct examinations, monitor student welfare, and coordinate extracurricular activities. A 55-year-old employer commented:

*"Internally, collaboration skills are essential for teachers to work together smoothly and support each other ... All of this requires effective teamwork."*

Collaboration fosters a sense of community and shared responsibility among educators, enhancing overall school performance, as stated by a 55-year-old employer:

Collaboration skills are critical because they help us to know what is beyond us and to leverage the strengths of others to achieve common goals. Working together also promotes a sense of community and shared responsibility in the educational setting. This implies that collaboration is not just about working together but also about recognising and utilizing the unique skills and perspectives of each team member to achieve success collectively.

This study found that another critical employability skill desired by secondary school employers from graduate

teachers in Uganda is critical thinking. The findings show that teachers with critical thinking abilities can handle complex classroom situations, adapt lesson plans, and encourage analytical thinking in learners. A 55-year-old employer stated:

*“You can’t have a teacher who doesn’t have critical thinking skills. You must be able to think quickly, solve problems, and adapt to various situations in the classroom.”*

These skills also help teachers address students’ questions in real time, fostering confidence among learners and ensuring academic rigour. This implies that critical thinking is not only important for teachers to effectively manage their classrooms but also to promote a dynamic and engaging learning environment for students. Teachers who possess strong critical thinking skills are better equipped to support student growth and development, ultimately leading to improved academic outcomes.

This study found that another critical employability skill desired by secondary school employers of graduate teachers in Uganda is creativity. Creativity was highly valued for designing engaging, contextually relevant lessons, particularly in resource-constrained environments. As one employer noted:

*“Creativity is essential because sometimes schools lack enough resources. A teacher must find ways to teach effectively even with limited materials.”*

Creative educators employ diverse teaching strategies that cater to multiple learning styles, keeping students motivated and invested. This implies that graduate teachers must be adaptable and willing to try new approaches to effectively engage students and promote a positive learning environment.

This study found that another critical employability skill desired by secondary school employers of graduate teachers in Uganda is leadership skills. The findings revealed that employers seek teachers who can exhibit strong leadership within the school community. A 50-year-old male employer observed:

*“Leadership skills... you must present yourself as a role model so that students and colleagues see you as someone who can inspire positive change in the school environment.”*

This implies that developing leadership skills is essential for teachers to not only excel in their careers but also positively impact the school community.

The study found that emotional intelligence is a critical skill desired by secondary school employers among graduate teachers. The findings revealed that emotional intelligence is crucial for managing a diverse student population and fostering a supportive, empathetic classroom. A 45-year-old female employer noted:

*“They deal with young people and must know how to handle them with care and sensitivity ... Teachers with emotional intelligence can build strong, trusting relationships with students.”*

This skill enables teachers to navigate conflicts, handle stress, and provide emotional support to their learners, thereby improving the classroom climate. This implies that emotional intelligence is crucial for teachers, as it directly influences student success and overall well-being, making it an essential quality for educators to possess to create a positive, inclusive, and supportive learning environment.

The study found adaptability skills as a critical skill desired by secondary school employers of graduate teachers. The findings revealed that employers emphasised adaptability as a key skill in today’s fast-changing educational environment. Teachers often face new curricula, technology integration, and different student backgrounds. A 40-year-old female employer highlighted:

*“The ability to apply what is learnt in the classroom to real-world situations, while keeping up with educational trends and best practices, is crucial for delivering quality instruction.”*

Closely linked to critical thinking, problem-solving skills equip teachers to address challenges—both academic and behavioural in a timely manner. A 45-year-old female employer remarked:

*“Problem-solving goes hand in hand with critical thinking. Teachers must think creatively and devise innovative solutions to overcome challenges in the classroom. This conclusion implies that teachers who are adaptive to changing circumstances and open to trying new approaches are more likely to succeed in providing effective instruction to their students.”*

Another crucial employability skill identified in the study is time management, which plays a significant role in teachers’ effectiveness. The study found that teachers’ ability to manage time effectively affects lesson planning, grading, and other administrative responsibilities. A 45-year-old female employer explained:

*“Time management skills are essential to balance workload and meet deadlines ... leading to a successful teaching career.”* The quote implies that a teacher’s ability to manage time effectively can directly impact their overall job performance and success in the field. Teachers who excel in time management are better equipped to handle the demands of their profession and provide quality education to their students.

The study found another critical employability skill, self-sufficiency. Employers cited self-sufficiency as critical for handling tasks with minimal supervision. Employers seek proactive teachers, solution-orientated, and motivated by professional dedication rather than

extrinsic rewards. A 45-year-old female employer highlighted this expectation, stating,

*Readiness to engage in tasks, particularly when they lack financial incentives, is a key quality that we look for in potential hires. Teachers who demonstrate self-sufficiency are more likely to adapt to challenging situations and find creative solutions without always needing guidance.*

This suggests that teachers who are self-sufficient go beyond just being able to work on their own. They are proactive, creative problem-solvers who remain driven even when the job's rewards aren't purely financial, making it an essential employability skill for teachers to have.

## 4.1 Discussion

The findings from this study indicate that employers of graduate teachers in Uganda, desire a broad set of employability skills namely communication, collaboration, critical thinking, creativity, leadership, emotional intelligence, adaptability, problem-solving, time management, and self-sufficiency among newly qualified teachers. Collectively, these competencies address the multifaceted nature of teaching, where educators are required not only to deliver content but also to foster supportive, dynamic learning environments that adapt to the evolving demands of the 21st-century classroom.

The prominence of communication skills in this study's findings is consistent with Coffelt et al. (2016), who identified clear and coherent communication as essential for effective teaching and classroom management. Employers in this context particularly valued oral communication and the ability to articulate ideas in engaging ways that inspire students. Similarly, collaboration skills emerged as indispensable for coordinating with colleagues in lesson planning, extracurricular activities, and shared responsibilities a finding that resonates with Hairida et al. (2021), who emphasized teamwork as a cornerstone of effective school operations.

The emphasis on critical thinking and problem-solving echoes Palavan's (2020) observation that teachers must think on their feet to address unpredictable classroom situations, such as sudden behavioural issues or the need to adapt lessons to diverse student abilities. In Uganda's increasingly dynamic educational landscape, teachers who cannot quickly assess and respond to challenges risk undermining both their teaching efficacy and student outcomes. This skill set is also vital for empowering learners to become independent thinkers—an objective frequently underscored in contemporary pedagogical frameworks (Franklin & Harrington, 2019).

Creativity and adaptability were highlighted as crucial in resource-constrained settings, where teachers often must devise novel instructional methods with limited materials (Khikmah, 2019). This finding aligns with Manca and Delfino (2021), who noted that teacher's adept in flexibility and innovative thinking can more readily integrate new curricula or instructional technologies, such as those used during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the Ugandan context, where infrastructural challenges exist, creative and adaptable teachers are better able to sustain student engagement and achieve curriculum objectives.

Employers' emphasis on leadership aligns with Shah (2019), indicating that teachers with strong leadership qualities play influential roles in setting school culture, whether as department heads, mentors, or coordinators of various activities. Additionally, emotional intelligence stands out as a vital relational skill, echoing Kovalchuk et al. (2022) in its importance for understanding students' emotional needs, managing classroom conflicts, and building trusting relationships. Employers in this study perceived emotional intelligence as a competency that fosters a nurturing and empathetic learning atmosphere, thereby enhancing student motivation and well-being.

Finally, time management and self-sufficiency were viewed as fundamental indicators of a teacher's professional maturity. This finding parallels Rahmatullah et al. (2024), who noted that a disciplined approach to schedules, lesson planning, and assessment routines is closely linked to quality teaching. Self-sufficiency further underscores employers' desire for teachers who can perform effectively with minimal direct supervision—a quality suggesting strong intrinsic motivation and resilience.

Taken together, these results offer empirical support for Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1993), illustrating that pre-service teacher training must be seen as an investment that extends beyond disciplinary knowledge to include a comprehensive skill set. Equipping teachers with an integrated suite of communication, problem-solving, emotional, and leadership skills maximizes their productivity and value in the educational labour market (Yorke, 2006). Employers' specific mention of skills like creativity, adaptability, and emotional intelligence underscores the shift from traditional didactic methods toward more holistic educational approaches, aligning with the broader evolution of workforce demands.

Moreover, in line with Olaniyan and Okemakinde's (2008) application of Human Capital Theory to education, the findings suggest that institutions can enhance graduate teachers' employability and future career success by creating training modules and experiences that mirror workplace realities. Such alignment ensures that the capital invested in teacher education translates into tangible returns for individuals, schools, and society at large.

While the existing literature has frequently discussed the importance of employability skills (Harvey, 2001; Succi & Canovi, 2019), fewer studies in the Ugandan context have provided detailed insights into which employability skills employers prioritize most and why. By spotlighting communication, collaboration, and other essential employability skills, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how Ugandan educational stakeholders interpret and apply global standards of teaching competence. This is especially relevant given Uganda's Vision 2040 goals, which emphasize human capital development as a driver of socio-economic progress (Uganda National Planning Authority, 2013).

The findings also highlight potential mismatches between what current teacher training programmes emphasize (often subject mastery and theoretical frameworks) and the evolving needs of employers seeking well-rounded professionals. Such gaps underscore the need for continuous curriculum review, ensuring that pre-service teachers graduate with both solid academic knowledge and the practical skills essential for high-performing educational institutions.

## 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

### 5.1 Conclusion

Employers of graduate teachers in Uganda's secondary education, seek pre-service teacher graduates who demonstrate a comprehensive array of employability skills, particularly communication, collaboration, critical thinking, creativity, leadership, emotional intelligence, adaptability, problem-solving, time management, and self-sufficiency. Teachers who exhibit these competencies are better positioned to thrive in modern, dynamic educational contexts, thereby advancing Uganda's broader educational and socio-economic objectives.

### 5.2 Recommendations

The study recommends the following:

1. Training curricula should systematically embed and assess soft skills rather than treating them as peripheral add-ons. For instance, practicum experiences could include explicit objectives on teamwork and problem-solving, with structured rubrics to evaluate these competencies. Additionally, in-service professional development can reinforce these skills among practicing teachers, supporting lifelong learning and adaptability.
2. The study further recommends that policy-makers and educational leaders must provide institutional incentives or frameworks that encourage the cultivation of soft skills. Examples include mentorship programmes, peer collaboration in lesson planning, and administrative support for teacher-led

innovation in the classroom. By bolstering the capacity of pre-service teachers in these areas, Uganda's education sector can more effectively contribute to the nation's broader development goals.

3. Higher education institutions should conduct regular surveys of employers who hire graduate teachers, focusing on the most desired employability skills. By systematically gathering and analysing this feedback, Pre-service teacher training programmes can stay current with evolving industry needs, ensuring that graduates are well-prepared for the challenges and opportunities of the teaching profession.

### 5.3 Limitations and Future Directions

This study would be incomplete without noting certain limitations. First, the study predominantly relied on qualitative data from a single case (Kyambogo University), which may limit broad generalizability. Second, while employers highlighted several skill deficits, the study did not quantify the relative importance of each skill or assess how proficient new graduates are perceived to be. Lastly, the scope did not include an in-depth examination of the structural challenges in teacher training institutions (e.g., large class sizes, limited resources) that might affect skill development.

To address these gaps, future research should include longitudinal designs that track graduate teachers over time, measuring how effectively they employ these employability skills in real-world settings. Investigations could also compare different universities or pre-service teacher training institutions to identify best practices. Additionally, further studies might incorporate mixed methods to quantify the relative weight of each skill from an employer's standpoint, thus guiding more targeted curriculum revisions.

In summary, the study's findings reinforce that employability skills are critical not only for immediate job placement but also for sustained professional growth in teaching careers. By aligning pre-service teacher education programmes more closely with these skill demands, higher education institutions in Uganda can help produce a cadre of teachers who are better prepared to navigate and shape the rapidly changing educational landscape.

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