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Shifting employabilities: Skilling migrants in the nation of emigration

Yasmin Y. ORTIGA
Singapore Management University, yasmino@smu.edu.sg

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Yasmin Y. Ortiga

School of Social Science, Singapore Management University, Singapore

Email: yasmino@smu.edu.sg

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Abstract

This paper examines how Philippine state agencies sustain its labour-exporting strategies by encouraging aspiring migrants to invest in their own training and education, taking on the responsibility of turning themselves into desirable workers for employers overseas. Based on a document analysis of newspaper articles and Philippine government reports, this paper uses the case of Philippine nursing education to show how the Philippine state alters these discourses of skill when overseas opportunities decline, channelling aspiring migrants sideways to other sectors of the labour market. Discourses of employability justified these career detours to aspiring migrants by assuring them that such experiences will still contribute to their overseas employability and eventually lead to future emigration. This paper shows how the employability agenda allows the migrant-sending state to avoid accountability in a volatile global labour market, thus serving as an ideal tool in the neoliberal production of migrant labour.

Keywords: Skill, nursing, employability, immobility, Philippines

Introduction

Studies on immigration provide us with a rich account of how 'skill' is socially constructed, simultaneously shaping the desirability of some immigrants, while limiting the incorporation and social mobility of many others (Bonizzoni 2018; Cerna 2016; Chatterjee 2015; Oishi 2020). Yet, in the context of emigration, there have been fewer scholarly responses to the question of skill. Most studies on migrant-sending countries portray skill as a resource that nations lose as people move across borders – a narrative that sustains a long-running debate on the issue of brain drain. Only recently have scholars begun to investigate how such skills are actually produced and how migrant-sending states can use such notions of skill to pursue their own interests.

Ironically, existing studies have largely focussed on the proliferation of training courses for construction and domestic work – jobs that are viewed as 'unskilled' by receiving countries. These studies criticise state-led skilling programmes as mere attempts to regulate aspiring migrants' behaviour by promoting the image of a docile and industrious employee (Chang 2018; Guevarra 2014; Killias 2018; Rodriguez 2010; Rodriguez and Schwenken 2013). In contrast, fewer scholars have investigated the deliberate skilling of professionals for overseas work within migrant-sending countries. Here,

academic critique centres on educational institutions that exploit students' migration aspirations by selling expensive credentials with the promise of overseas jobs after graduation (see Kingma 2007; Masselink and Lee 2010; Xiang 2007).[1] Scholars portray these schools as commercial entities, competing in a migration industry driven towards maximising profits.

Yet, as noted by Hein De Haas (2005), state agencies are highly complicit in this process as well. Within large migrant-sending nations, governments have come to use skilling for export as a development strategy, encouraging the overproduction of particular professions in the hope that these individuals will migrate overseas and send remittances back to the country. Cabanda (2017) argues that export-oriented education can even define policy discussions on issues that have nothing to do with labour migration. His analysis of the Philippine Nursing Act of 2002 shows how lawmakers crafted *local* standards for nursing education in order to ensure Filipino nurses' ability to obtain jobs overseas.

Current research also tends to portray the skilling of aspiring migrants as a process that naturally leads to employment in a global market for migrant labour. Most research studies are based on short-term training programmes run by labour recruitment agencies or state institutions directly engaged in labour export. As such, it is easy to assume that all individuals skilled for export are deployed to overseas employers. For example, Rodriguez's (2010) study shows that the Philippine state's pre-employment process moves neatly from screening to pre-departure training to matching with employers. Yet, in the case of professional jobs such as nursing or engineering, skilling is a longer process that involves a 4-year university degree, multiple board examinations, language assessments, and certification of relevant work experience. In the course of skilling oneself for emigration, new immigration policies and changing economic conditions may affect one's access to overseas work. What happens when demands for particular professions wane, and there are too few opportunities for too many skilled would-be migrants? How can we think about the question of skill, not just in the context of people's mobility but their immobility as well?

In this paper, I argue that migration studies must look beyond employment, and investigate how notions of *employability* drive the production of migrant workers for the global economy. Loosely defined as an individual's capacity to obtain and retain work, employability has encouraged the belief that people must invest in enhancing their own capabilities, whether it is through work experience or education (Forrier, De Cuyper, and Akkermans 2018; Smith 2010). This paper demonstrates how migrant-sending states benefit from the pursuit of employability in two ways. First, the employability discourse makes aspiring migrants responsible for turning themselves into desirable job candidates for foreign employers, thereby allowing the state to outsource the cost of skilling future workers, while still benefitting from the remittances they will eventually send home. Second, this discourse also allows the state to avoid responsibility when overseas opportunities become unavailable, instead placing it upon aspiring migrants to reskill themselves for alternative careers.

I base my arguments on the case of nursing education in the Philippines, where schools have sought to produce nurse migrants for popular destination countries like the US, UK, and Canada. While most studies on nurse migration focus on periods of high demand for migrant nurses (see Guevarra 2010; Pyle 2006), this paper investigates how Philippine

state agencies and private school owners use discourses of skill during a period of restricted emigration and poor job prospects for Filipino nurses in the West. I describe how, in promoting export-oriented education, the Philippine state found itself in a unique predicament: dealing with an excess of employable aspiring migrants who are unable to fulfil their aspirations of leaving the country. While low-wage positions (domestic work, housekeeping) remain widely available overseas, few aspiring nurse migrants were willing to take on jobs seen as 'below' the work of a professional registered nurse (Ortiga 2018). As such, I discuss how the Philippine government attempted to channel unemployed nursing graduates *sideways*, towards other sectors of the labour market deemed to fit the purpose and potential of professional nurse education. In particular, Philippine state officials tried to reconstruct and redefine the value of nursing skill, often contradicting its earlier agenda of tailoring local nursing education in line with foreign hospital needs. As these sideways shifts encountered resistance, state discourse resorted to appeasing concerned citizens with the promise that such career detours will still increase their chances of obtaining overseas jobs in the future, thereby reinforcing the belief that the nursing profession's true 'value' is found in its export to foreign employers. This paper concludes with a discussion of how the employability agenda allows the Philippine government to maintain its neoliberal production of migrant labour, despite an unpredictable and fast-changing migrant labour market.

Skilling and the employability agenda

While hardly a new concept, employability had recently become a prominent feature in neoliberal state policies, largely driven by the anxiety of how to prepare people for a competitive global market (Smith 2010; Tomlinson 2012; Waters 2009). In this paper, I discuss how notions of employability are crystallised into a state *agenda*, where government institutions dedicate resources and policy efforts towards producing workers who possess the qualities that potential employers supposedly need and desire. This agenda is rooted in an ideology of human capital development, where nations' economic growth purportedly depends on the skills and knowledge of its citizens (Becker 1964; 2002). An employable citizenry is one that has obtained enough 'human capital' through higher education, with the assumption that more education represents a higher level of skill. In places like the UK, scholars have shown how the employability agenda has altered the purpose of higher education, compelling universities to align academic programmes with the demands of the industry (Boden and Nedeva 2010; Tomlinson 2012).

Alongside state pressure on educational institutions, the employability agenda has also framed gainful employment as an *individual* responsibility, where citizens must take on the task of developing their own abilities to obtain work through further study and training. The state acts on the employability agenda by providing opportunities for individuals to skill themselves, rather than address the bigger problem of generating jobs for unemployed citizens. As a result, states have poured resources into offering and subsidising skills courses, prompting the rapid growth of a for-profit training and certification industry (Arora 2015; Lafer 2002). Proponents of employability have rationalised this process with the argument that higher investments in skilling will likely lead to positive outcomes, not only for individuals but the broader nation as well (Forrier, De Cuyper, and Akkermans 2018).

Yet, studies on education and work have shown how, beneath this rhetoric of personal development, the employability agenda largely serves the interests of the market. Individuals are increasingly expected to prepare themselves to perform jobs they have yet to obtain, often by seeking more and more education and training. Meanwhile, corporations have come to expect job applicants to be completely ready to do the required work, thereby outsourcing the cost of training new employees (Brown 2003; Handley 2018; Tomlinson 2008). Worsening this issue is that fact that there is little evidence that investment in skilling necessarily leads to better economic outcomes (Arora 2015; Shan and Fejes 2015). In fact, scholars have raised concerns regarding the rising number of college graduates who are struggling to find work commensurate with their qualifications and skills (Brown, Lauder, and Ashton 2011).

However, even within this burgeoning literature, critiques of state employability agendas have been mostly contained within the national boundaries. In these studies, state discourses of employability aim to produce desirable workers who will fill labour needs within a national labour market or attract multinational corporations into the country. Fewer studies have investigated how governments can also deliberately encourage local institutions to educate and train workers for *foreign* employers. In the case of the Philippines, the state's labour-exporting practices created an employability agenda that also worked to predict and define what skills overseas markets may demand in the future. State agencies urged Filipino students and their families to pursue particular skills in order to ensure overseas success, thereby encouraging a massive demand for particular professional degrees like nursing. In this paper, I focus on how the state transforms its employability agenda in response to changing demands and opportunities in the global labour market. In particular, I use the Philippine case to understand how an employability agenda frames not only individuals' mobility, but also their potential *immobility* as opportunities for immigration decline or disappear.

Methods

This paper is based on a larger project on how the Philippines' labour export strategies impact higher education institutions within the country. In particular, I draw from a document analysis of two sources of primary data. The first source comprises newspaper articles from 1999 to 2018, a time period that encompasses the beginning and end of the most recent cycle of 'demand' for nursing degrees (I outline the details and implications of this demand in later sections of this paper). These media reports revealed how state officials, government agencies, and private school owners sought to frame public discourse on nurse education and migration. I focussed specifically on sources from the Philippines' English language news publications such as the *Manila Bulletin*, the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, and the *Philippine STAR*, among others. I used keyword indexing (i.e. nursing, skill, employability, migration) at Factiva and reviewed a total of 452 newspaper articles.

I complemented these sources with a review of annual reports, internal newsletters, and press releases from Philippine government agencies involved in the recruitment and deployment of migrant workers: the Department of Labour and Employment (DOLE) and the Philippine Overseas Employment Agency (POEA). I compared these sources to similar documents obtained from the Philippine Commission on Higher Education

(CHED), the agency tasked with regulating and monitoring higher education institutions within the country. I gathered documents beginning from the Philippines' labour export policies in the 1974 to the present period.

While these sources do not provide a complete picture of the public discourse and policy-making decisions that surround nurse education and emigration, they represent a significant part of how state officials and school owners rationalise and promote the skills needed among aspiring nurse migrants. More importantly, such discourse demonstrates how these same actors change or alter their views on skilling when overseas opportunities for Filipino nurses decline and more aspiring migrants are unable to leave the country.

Educating for export: from 'Excess' to employability

The Philippines' long history of emigration has made it a popular subject of study among migration scholars. Researchers have been particularly interested in the role of state agencies in recruiting, marketing, and deploying Filipino labour to foreign employers (Acacio 2008; Tyner 2009). Rodriguez (2010:, 8) defines these practices as the state's 'labour-brokering strategies,' where institutional and discursive practices work to generate profit from the remittances that migrants send to their families back home.

While labour-brokering is a strategy well established in the Philippines, the usefulness of the employability agenda in exporting migrant labour only emerged more recently. In the early years of the Philippines' labour export policies, DOLE described its overseas programme as 'a systematic export of excess skill' or, simply put, a means of channelling unemployed Filipinos to other countries. Training courses mainly catered to out-of-school youth and retrenched workers, offering lessons in welding, industrial sewing, and electronics (DOLE 1990; NMYC 1968). While one can question whether such skills were truly in excess, the notion of intentionally training students for export was relatively absent in both state and public discourse. Well into the 1980s, state agencies portrayed college graduates as individuals whose high-level skills would contribute to *national* needs (MEC 1984). Filipino graduates who sought overseas work were seen as those unable to find jobs locally, or whose skills could not be absorbed by domestic industries. While the outmigration of professionals continued to rise during this period, Philippine state discourse lamented the departure of highly educated individuals as brain drain, a loss of valuable human resources that could be detrimental to national development.

It was only in the 1990s when Philippine state documents revealed a distinct shift from channelling excess skill to deliberately educating employable workers for overseas jobs. This shift has to do with a combination of two factors. First, this period saw the prominence of what scholars have called the 'knowledge-based economy' or the belief that the world has moved beyond industrial manufacturing, towards a market driven by knowledge production and innovation. Nations seeking to get ahead in this economy were then expected to invest in creating a highly educated pool of citizens who could compete on a global stage (Powell and Snellman 2004). These beliefs reignited national interests in human capital development, where higher education and lifelong learning were seen to have direct links to economic prosperity and wellbeing (Guile 2006).

Second, the popularity of the knowledge-based economy coincided with a shift in the Philippine government's stance towards emigration. In the 1990s, Philippine state officials

retreated from its earlier position that labour export was merely a temporary measure, and began to publicly refer to migration as a permanent institution that will shape national policy. Then president Fidel Ramos referred to overseas Filipino workers as 'internationally shared human resources' (DOLE 1995, 3), and broader government discourse celebrated migrants as *bagong bayani* (modern-day heroes) whose remittances kept the country's economy afloat.[2]

The intersection of this migrant-hero discourse with the global emphasis on education and skilling created a paradoxical version of human capital ideology within the Philippine context. In general, human capital logic dictates that a nation must produce a highly skilled workforce in order to attract investors *into* the country and develop local industries. Yet, in the Philippines, overseas Filipino workers are seen as key contributors to the country's economic progress and wellbeing. As such, Philippine state officials argued that education and training institutions must also ensure that Filipinos have the skills that would make them desirable for jobs *outside* the country's borders. This shift towards employability defined the state's preparation of potential migrants across a wide range of workers. The 1990s saw the establishment of state-led programmes on technical-vocational skills (e.g. welding, electronic installation, and housekeeping) – most of which were driven towards training Filipinos for jobs in other Asian countries and the Middle East (Rodriguez 2010). The POEA also mandated household work training programmes for domestic workers before they left the country, combining basic cooking and cleaning techniques with lessons on 'empowerment' and strategies to minimize 'vulnerability' (Guevarra 2006; 2014). Often less researched in the migration literature is how this period also saw rising expectations for Philippine colleges and universities to produce graduates who could serve as human capital for *other nations* (Ortiga 2018). Moving away from the brain drain discourse of the 1970s, Philippine state officials highlighted the overseas success of Filipino teachers, accountants, nurses, and engineers. Former secretary of the Department of Education, Gonzalez (2000), even went as far as to emphasise the need for Philippine schools to develop a more 'systemic' way of educating professionals for these 'global opportunities.'

These changes coincided with the high migration aspirations of Filipino youth and their families (Asis and Batistella 2013), prompting scholars to note that the large proportion of Filipino migrant professionals was not due to a lack of employment within the country, but Filipinos' deliberate effort to 'become professionals to work abroad' (Di Gropello, Tan, and Tandon 2010, 25). Private higher education institutions also played an integral role in this process, actively seeking labour gaps overseas and restructuring school spaces and academic programmes to offer degrees that supposedly address these needs (Ortiga 2017). Reports have highlighted the problematic outcomes of such export-oriented education, from shoddy academic programmes to the rise of substandard schools that cheat parents of their hard-earned money (Masselink and Lee 2010; Overland 2005). Given that 80% of Philippine higher education is privately owned, most of these issues were attributed to the lack of government regulation and the political power of private school owners (Tan 2011).

Yet, in many ways, the Philippine state was very much present in the production of future migrant workers. While private schools dominated the skilling of aspiring migrants, state agencies provided an environment that allowed these schools to thrive. State officials also encouraged aspiring migrants to seek training and qualifications that would enhance

their chances in obtaining work overseas. In the following sections, I use the case of nursing to discuss how this employability agenda allowed state agencies to reap the benefits of nurse migrants' remittances as well as avoid responsibility for those who fail to leave.

Philippine nursing education: skilling for the competition

Philippine nursing education can be traced as far back as the early 1900s, when American colonial officials established the first nursing schools in the country (Choy 2003). However, the move towards producing nurses for foreign employers is a more recent phenomenon, as growing healthcare needs within developed nations led to a worldwide demand for migrant nurse labour (Yeates and Pillinger 2019).[3] In the early 2000s, hospitals in the US were particularly aggressive in recruiting foreign nurses, with policymakers predicting a labour shortage of close to 1 million nurses by 2020 (Aiken 2007). While the Philippines and India retained their positions as the top sources of migrant nurse labour, the early 2000s also saw an increasing number of migrant nurses from other parts of the world. Brush and Sochalski (2007) note that in countries like Korea and China, state agencies actively sought to copy the 'Philippines model,' investing in education in order to deliberately produce nurses for export.

This growing competition, along with the high overseas demand for nurses, pressed Philippine state officials to ensure that Filipino nurses would continue to have a positional advantage over counterparts from other nations (Guevarra 2010). For example, in 2004, a POEA officer noted that while the deployment of nurses is likely to increase, the Philippines must 'prepare for very steep competition,' as countries like Bangladesh, India, Vietnam, and China begin training nurses for overseas employment (Capistrano 2004). Private labour recruitment agencies reinforced this discourse, openly pushing government agencies to keep Filipino nurses competitive in the migrant labour market. In a *Manila Standard* article in 2002, the Federated Association of Manpower Exporters (FAME) reported that Filipino nurses were 'losing their edge' to other foreign nurses in popular destination countries. They noted a case in the UK, where nursing homes reported 'an alarming breakdown in communications' between Filipino nurses and British staff, despite the Filipinos' ability to speak English. Such issues were contextualised against a growing concern that China was building more nursing schools in a bid to replace Filipino nurses in the UK market. The group then urged the Philippine government to 'counteract this disturbing trend' through better English courses and a curriculum more in line with the needs of overseas hospitals.

Rodriguez and Schwenken (2013) had previously noted how the Philippines' labour exporting agencies portray nurses as an ideal alternative to domestic workers, given that they were professionals, high wage-earners, and migrant women in less need of protections from the state. Yet, in the early years of the Philippine state's labour export policies, such statements rarely reached mainstream media, given negative public sentiment on nurse migration and brain drain. With the shift towards a strong employability agenda, the most recent outflow of nurses took on a polished sheen of positivity, where outmigration is not a result of desperation but an indicator of Filipino nurses' superior abilities and global popularity (Capistrano 2004). Nursing schools then took on the role of ensuring that Filipino nurses would continue to have an advantages over nurse migrants from

other nations, not only in terms of their ability to provide care, but supposedly their unique skill and specialised training (Ortiga 2014).

This emphasis on producing employable migrant workers remained unquestioned, despite worrying signs of other issues within the country's higher education system. In 2008, the *Manila Bulletin* reported that only two Philippine universities were listed in a ranking of the top 500 universities in Asia. While Filipino academics raised concerns regarding falling research output and the lack of qualified faculty within local universities, state officials downplayed the gravity of such rankings. The same article featured an interview with William Medrano, then executive director at CHED who argued,

> The results may be discouraging, but it should not be a big deal. I think what is important here is the employability of graduates. If you produce quality graduates, quality nurses, maritime professionals, world-class accountants … then ranking does not matter at all.

In many ways, this statement reveals how government agencies and private school owners incorporated higher education into the country's larger labour-export strategies, emphasising the value of producing Filipino nurses who are able to fill the labour gaps of destination countries all over the world.

The decline of nursing: an excess of employable workers

The demand for health professionals has remained an important issue among ageing nations in the Global North. Yet, beginning in 2008, a nursing career was no longer a viable step for Filipinos looking to work overseas. Several factors contributed to this decline. First, the global financial crisis slowed the hiring of foreign nurses in the US and Europe, regions that were popular among aspiring nurse migrants (Buchan, O'May, and Dussault 2013). Second, Filipino nurse migration to the US was ground to a halt when visa processing for Filipinos went into 'retrogression' – a term embassy officials use to describe situations where the number of visa applicants exceeds the number of visas available (Acacio 2011). Third and more importantly, the overexpansion of Philippine nursing schools generated an unprecedented number of nursing graduates that local health institutions could not absorb due to a lack of government funds for permanent nursing positions within public hospitals (Ortiga 2018). As a result, aspiring nurse migrants found themselves unable to complete the two years of work experience that most foreign employers required. As noted by Walton-Roberts (2020), intermediaries provided alternative pathways to destinations like Canada. Instead of waiting to obtain enough work experience, nurses could enter educational institutions as international students first then later obtain nursing jobs in Canadian hospitals. Yet, this two-step pathway was too costly for the majority of nurses in the Philippines.

By 2011, Philippine nursing groups began protesting the growing number of nurses who were paying hospitals to allow them to work for free, often under the guise of a professional 'training' programme. In an interview with the *Manila Bulletin* that same year, Teresita Barcelo, president of the Philippine Nurses Association (PNA) lamented, '… never in the past have nurses undergone additional training and paid just to get hired.'

These changes incited a sharp change in state discourse. Having first encouraged nursing as the path to social mobility and overseas employment, Philippine state officials backtracked on their original statements, warning parents to avoid enrolling

their children in nursing programmes (Cimatu 2011). Hoping to stem the overproduction of nurses, CHEd imposed a 'moratorium' that stopped colleges and universities from opening new nursing programmes, with then CHEd commissioner Patricia Licuanan admitting that, '… basically, there's an oversupply of people,' (Ronda 2010). While other fields such as information technology were included in this moratorium, nursing had the biggest share, with almost half a million students pursuing nursing degrees (Quismundo 2010). In 2013, government agencies pushed schools with poor performance in the local board examinations to 'voluntarily phase out' their nursing programmes as well ('83 Nursing Schools Closed' 2013). However, such efforts were too little and too late. As of 2011, newspapers reported that there were close to 300,000 unemployed and underemployed nursing graduates in the country ('Monitor Nursing Schools' 2012).

Faced with rising discontent among nursing graduates and their families, state officials attempted to shift the blame to other parties. Aside from private schools, government officials accused Filipino nursing leaders for failing to provide accurate information on the demand for nursing overseas. Arnel Ty, a congressman, criticised Philippine nursing officials for not doing enough research on 'projecting future labour market conditions, both here and abroad,' thus misleading Filipino families to invest too late on nursing degrees (Romero 2012). State agencies also blamed students and parents themselves, for choosing majors based on their migration aspirations ('CHED Advices' 2011). Formerly praised as national heroes whose future remittances will uplift the Philippines' economy, nursing graduates were suddenly portrayed as Filipino youth who pursued their own migration dreams instead of working in jobs that the country needed (Pefianco 2012).

Yet, shifting the blame was a strategy that could only go so far. State agencies still needed to address the large pool of employable yet unemployed aspiring nurse migrants who were technically 'stuck' within the country's borders. In the past, the Philippines' solution to problems of high unemployment had mainly revolved around facilitating outmigration. In fact, state officials in the 1970s had justified the state's labour brokering strategies as a 'safety valve' for an overcrowded local economy with too few job opportunities (Ruiz 2014, 27). However, with the recent case of nursing graduates, this safety valve could no longer be easily applied. Few nursing graduates were willing to 'waste' their professional training by leaving for available low wage jobs overseas (Ortiga 2018). As such, the Philippine state needed to find new ways of reconstructing and utilising nurses' labours and skills.

Reconstructing skills for immobile nurses: new 'Employabilities'

Before opportunities for Filipino nurses declined in 2008, Philippine nursing schools were actively driven towards educating their students for 'export,' altering course curricula to cater specifically to hospital settings in wealthy nations, while prioritising specialities considered useful for nursing jobs overseas (e.g. geriatric care) (Ortiga 2014). These practices reinforced Filipino parents' belief that paying the price of a nursing degree would ensure their children a chance to leave the country *as a professional nurse*. Such expectations regarding the purpose and value of higher education are not unique to the Philippines. Education scholars have shown how human capital ideals have driven the increasing commodification of higher education, where the value of a university degree is measured in terms of the advantages it will bring to a student's future career (Molesworth, Nixon, and Scullion 2011; Naidoo and Williams 2015). Yet, in the case of the Philippines, this narrowing of educational purpose

and the export-oriented bias of nursing schools eventually worked against the labour-brokering state, as nursing graduates could not be pushed 'downward' towards jobs that were not commensurate to the price they paid for their nursing degrees. As a result, state agencies shifted towards redirecting nurse graduates *sideways*, promoting jobs in other sectors in the Philippine labour market that fit the value of their professional training. This section outlines how, from a narrow construction of nursing skills geared towards 'first world' hospitals, Philippine state officials attempted to repackage and reconstruct the value of nursing as labour desired in contexts beyond the foreign hospital.

Redeployed skill: nurses as agents for rural development

The first strategy that the Philippine state enacted was finding ways to deploy unemployed nursing graduates to rural health centres. Under the presidency of Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, the state first implemented the Nurses Assigned in Rural Service (NARS) Project in 2009, a quick fix to the outcry against the number of nurses working in hospitals for free (Poblete 2011). Marianito Roque, then secretary of DOLE framed the programme as a 'training-cum employment scheme' where nursing graduates were hired to provide 'basic health services to needy folks in rural areas' and perform 'clinical functions under the guidance of participating hospitals and other medical facilities.' Roque went on to add that with close supervision from the Department of Health, nurse participants will obtain 'the essential skills and knowledge for employment *locally and eventually overseas*' (emphasis added) (Philippine News Agency [PNA] 2009).

State officials were careful to frame NARS as an experience that would allow nursing graduates to continue to make use of their nursing education and training. In some ways, the programme was effective in that the state received an overwhelming number of applications, many from nurses who were just desperate for work (Burgonio and Nunez 2009). Yet, after a year of implementation, feedback from those who joined the NARS programme highlighted the shortcomings of such claims. For one, nurses found themselves stationed in remote village health centres, initiating public health campaigns, assisting with home births, and immunising children. Nursing graduates did not see such work as useful in applying for jobs overseas (Ortiga 2018). PNA national president Teresita I. Barcelo admitted to reporters that while NARS provided nurses with 'additional competence,' it was not providing the kind of skills needed for work in places like the US and UK (Tubeza 2009). Further exacerbating nurses' discontent was the fact that NARS only paid participants a small allowance of 8000 pesos,[4] an amount lower than what they would receive working in the hospital.

Nonetheless, state officials continued to justify rural deployment as an experience that improves nurses' clinical skills (Guinto 2009). One congresswoman, Emmylou Taliño-Mendoza sent media agencies a statement that argued for the NARS programme as a form of 'specialised training' that would help nursing graduates find 'lucrative jobs overseas.' In an interview with the Philippine Daily Inquirer in 2009, she addressed complaints that nurses were working more as midwives by arguing,

> In America, for instance, there is growing demand for certified nurse-midwives. They are considered advanced practitioners there, with specialised education, training, and experience in both nursing and midwifery.

New rural deployment programmes were enacted in 2011 and 2018, as different administrations inherited the problem of providing employment for nursing graduates. Throughout these different programmes, state officials worked to emphasise the development potential of deploying 'idle' nursing graduates to underserved communities in the country's rural communities (Boncocan 2011). The most recent iteration (renamed the Nurse Deployment Programme) listed among its objectives a need to provide better access to quality healthcare services in the country's rural provinces. Yet, underlying such discourse was also a clear emphasis on overseas employability – an explicit attempt to placate aspiring migrants who comprise politicians' main constituency. As argued by Arnel Ty, a congressman, 'The program will provide short-term work to our unemployed nurses and midwives, while they obtain extra training that will make their skills more marketable and enhance their future employability here or abroad' (Romero 2012).

Spillover skill: nurses as call centre agents

Faced with limitations for rural deployment, state officials also sought to have nursing graduates 'spillover' to the country's business process outsourcing (BPO) industry, colloquially known as the call centre agencies. At this time, large numbers of nursing graduates were already working in BPO centres (Thompson 2018), yet such work often suffered the stigma as a job that required few skills. Nursing graduates often felt ashamed to admit that they worked at a call centre because it felt like they had wasted the time spent on training to be a professional nurse (Ortiga 2018).

As such, state officials worked to emphasise how the BPO industry utilised nursing skills and needed nursing graduates to fill an important need. Doing so also meant highlighting the 'health' aspects of the business process outsourcing industry. In 2012, DOLE Secretary Rosalinda Baldoz appealed to nursing graduates to 'go out of the box' and pursue jobs in 'other emerging medical and health-related careers.' She argued that she was not encouraging nursing graduates to become the 'common "headset with microphone" type of worker in call centres' and instead, wanted nurses to take on jobs where they were expected to 'process and analyse knowledge, information, and technical data' (Crisostomo 2012). A year later, Baldoz continued to advertise opportunities in the call centre industry, arguing that the healthcare information outsourcing can 'offer over 100,000 medical-related jobs to nursing graduates' (Estuye 2013).

Ironically, part of framing this appeal was in emphasising that while such call centre jobs did not explicitly offer overseas mobility, a bulk of the clients in this industry were still foreign companies and institutions. State officials encouraged the notion that such work experience could enhance the profile of nursing graduates who still aspired to pursue overseas careers in the health industry in the future. For example, state media reports highlighted the rise of a 'healthcare information sector,' where nursing graduates could obtain work as medical transcriptionists for American hospitals (PNA 2015). Another private company advertised positions as 'medical butlers' and 'medical concierge management' where nursing graduates could 'help people arrange everything – from appointments to hospital options to rest and recreation activities in any part of the world.' The owner of the firm also believed that such experience could still work towards helping nursing graduates emigrate in the future, 'The additional training and

skills they gain from the program will set these nurses apart from their peers, thus making them more appealing to employers' (Salazar 2009).

Skills for reskilling: nursing new careers

While rural deployment and the BPO industry provided an outlet for nursing graduates, the bulk of government discourse actually encouraged them to invest in additional skilling and certification. Such discourse was ironic given that the oversupply of nursing graduates was largely caused by the pursuit of credentials for overseas work. The push for reskilling took a variety of forms. In some instances, state officials encouraged nurses to enrol in short term technical vocational courses in order to qualify for jobs outside hospitals. They specifically promoted 'in demand skills' that had some relation to health, such as training in 'spa or massage therapy' for the wellness industry. In response to critique that conjured images of sleazy massage parlours, Secretary Baldoz argued that massage therapy has gained 'growing acceptance among medical practitioners.' She also underlined the fact that health and wellness jobs were available both locally and *overseas* and that these professions obtain an 'average earning of US$ 6,351 per month.' Nursing graduates who enrolled in tech-voc programmes for the wellness industry were 'likely to have very good job opportunities' given that they were licensed health professionals with formal training in massage therapy (PNA 2011).

Meanwhile, nursing graduates with more economic resources were simply advised to shift careers by taking on a second major. In a distinct change from earlier discourse on skilling oneself for emigration, state officials encouraged nursing students and unemployed graduates to move towards academic majors associated with *local* needs. For example, former CHEd commissioner Licuanan highlighted her commission's list of 'priority' fields such as Science and Technology, Agriculture, and Fisheries (PNA 2016a; 'The Real Score' 2011). Other state officials argued that nursing graduates would also qualify as skilful teachers for public elementary and high schools. One article in the *Manila Standard* noted that interested nursing graduates need not invest in a lengthy four-year degree, and can qualify for schools by only taking 18 units of education subjects and logging in a specific number of teaching practicum hours. The article went on to explain that nurses would actually serve as ideal public school teachers,

> By hiring nurses-cum-teachers, it will be getting the services of a health professional and an education professional all rolled into one. As it will be getting double board passers, it will be putting classes under dual discipline professionals who can both teach children and take care of their health, those who will be able to nurture body and mind at the same time.

It is interesting to note that despite the promotion of reskilling for other professions, media reports were careful to emphasise the ability of nursing graduates to return to nursing jobs when opportunities for overseas work return. As noted in the same article pushing nurses to reskill as teachers:

> For nurses, [the shift to teaching] affords the attainment of a second license, the practice of a second profession, one that will burnish one's CV and buttress one's chance of getting hired as a nurse, should one swerve back to it after detouring to teaching.

These statements show that while the Philippine state reconstructed nursing skill as abilities that provide benefits beyond the prospect of emigration, they couched such

statements with the continued assurance of overseas employability. In this sense, state officials are well aware that despite the current lack of opportunities for migrant nurses, Filipino nurse graduates still aspired to fulfil what they believed was the true 'value' of their skills: practising clinical nursing in a first world hospital overseas (Ortiga 2018). As such, state reconstructions of 'skill' always came with the promise that reskilling, rural work experience, and spillovers to non-nursing (but still health-related) careers still contribute to enhancing one's capability to leave the country in the future.

Conclusion: the value of skilling and skills

While often represented through supposedly objective measures of credentials and certification, perceptions of human knowledge and ability have always been subjective, malleable, and context-dependent (Liu-Farrer, Yeoh, and Baas 2020). This special issue has highlighted the role of different actors and organisations in constructing current notions of skill in the context of global migration: receiving nations (Oishi 2020), corporations (Liu-Farrer and Shire 2020), and migrants themselves (Tseng 2020). In this paper, I place particular emphasis on the migrant-sending nation, revealing how labour-exporting states can also predict, define, and reconstruct skill in negotiating a volatile world of changing labour needs and fluctuating citizenship regimes. The Philippine case shows how skill is not just a resource that individual migrants seek to develop, utilise, and have recognised, nor is it simply a category used by destination countries in determining conditions for access and entry. Rather, in the context of the migrant-sending nation, the process of skilling has also become a state-driven effort to produce ideal global labour subjects – would-be migrant workers who are flexible and compliant to the needs of an unpredictable global economy.

In the case of aspiring nurse migrants, the Philippine state moved between two contradictory definitions of Filipino nursing skills. During periods of high outmigration, Filipino nurses were portrayed as specialised workers, specifically trained in line with the needs and priorities of foreign employers. Yet, when these overseas opportunities declined, so did the value of such particular skills, and the Philippine government could no longer capitalise on nursing graduates' supposed export value. State agencies then shifted towards promoting nursing skills as having a more general purpose – important in a wider range of settings and easily channelled sideways, towards rural health units, medical call centres, or the wellness industry.

This paper also shows how a discourse of overseas employability sustains this system, allowing the state to pacify unhappy nursing graduates and justify their career detours as experiences that will eventually lead to future emigration. There are many doubts as to whether this argument is true (see Ortiga 2018), yet in the end, the employability discourse serves its purpose of allowing the labour-exporting state to capitalise on aspiring migrants' labour, even when they are unable to leave the country.

One would think that after the problems brought by export-oriented nursing education, the Philippine state would reconsider its strategies of encouraging the skilling of professionals for overseas employment. Yet, the past few years has seen a gradual shift back to promoting nurse education as a steppingstone to overseas work, with state agencies marketing new venues for Filipino migrant nurses to bring their skills (Jaymalin 2015). In 2016, Secretary Baldoz sent out a press release reporting that

Germany would need 'at least 200,000 nurses until 2020' (PNA 2016b). Baldoz then called for the retooling of Philippine nursing curriculum in order to produce nurses with the skills needed by the German healthcare system, echoing the same discourse that led to the overexpansion of nursing programmes in the early 2000s. Such statements now raise concerns that the country is on its way towards creating another oversupply of nursing graduates.

A few Filipino politicians have questioned the sustainability of skilling young people for export (Hernandez 2015), yet most state officials have continued to search for more rigorous means of anticipating foreign labour market needs and training local citizens accordingly ('Aquino' 2013). It is important to note that the Philippines' employability agenda for migrant workers extends to other professions beyond nursing. In particular, media reports have highlighted the need to produce more competitive professionals in fields such as maritime engineering, accounting, civil engineering, and even hospitality services (see Ortiga 2018). The state advertises and promotes these skills to foreign employers, underlining the talent of Filipino workers in a global economy (PNA 2016c). While no longer the scope of this paper, these trends raise critical questions about how the value and purpose of particular skills are reconstructed when a profession is increasingly defined in terms of its export value to foreign employers. In many ways, this paper illustrates how the question of skill is very much part of this process and how more work is needed in terms of investigating how notions of human talent and capability shapes contemporary labour migration.

Notes

1. There is a rich literature on how educational institutions within popular destination countries like Australia also market particular academic degrees as a steppingstone towards permanent residency, despite much uncertainty as to what the local labour market will truly recognise and absorb (See Baas 2019; Robertson 2011).
2. This period also saw the creation of the Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipinos Act of 1995, where the Philippine government made official its mandate to facilitate the deployment of Filipino workers, while ensuring their rights and protection. Guevarra (2006) provides a rich outline of the events that led to this act and its outcomes for Filipina women seeking overseas work.
3. While the Philippine state deploys nurses to more than 50 countries across the world, the US remains the ideal destination for Filipino nurses – a belief strongly informed by the country's history as a former American colony, but also reinforced by the promise of higher wages and the best possibility of permanent settlement (Choy 2003). As such, the pursuit of nursing degrees in the Philippines has been linked to the opening and closing of opportunities for foreign nurses in the US (Acacio 2011).
4. Eight thousand Philippine pesos is roughly 153 USD (1 USD = 52 Pesos).

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ORCID

Yasmin Y. Ortiga http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1740-0521

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