

EMPLOYERS' ASSESSMENT OF THE PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCIES OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION GRADUATES: IMPLICATIONS FOR CURRICULUM REFORM IN THE CONTEXT OF DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION AND INTERNATIONAL INTEGRATION

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Abstract: *This paper examines employer feedback on the professional competencies of Early Childhood Education graduates from Hong Duc University, based on survey data collected across three consecutive years (2023-2025). The study uses a quantitative descriptive approach combined with document analysis. Findings indicate consistently positive evaluations of graduates' professional attitudes and foundational knowledge. However, employers increasingly emphasized the need for foreign language proficiency, digital skills, and soft skills, reflecting changing professional demands in the context of digital transformation and international integration. Based on these findings, the paper proposes strengthening early professional practice and integrating adaptability-related competencies into teacher education programs.*

Keywords: *Graduates, employers, professional competencies, digital transformation, early childhood teacher education, graduate employability.*

1. Introduction

Digital transformation and international integration are reshaping education and creating new expectations for teachers that existing training programs have not yet fully met. In addition to disciplinary knowledge, pre-service teachers are now expected to develop professional competencies, including digital, communication, and collaborative skills during their university training. This requirement is especially critical in early childhood teacher education, where professional adaptability has become essential. The current Early Childhood Education Program (Ministry of Education and Training, 2021) and the Professional Standards for Early Childhood Teachers (Ministry of Education and Training, 2018) both emphasize pedagogical organization, communication, and self-directed learning, while the National Digital Transformation Program for Education 2022-2030 (Prime Minister of the Government, 2022) highlights digital competence as an essential requirement for teachers in contemporary education.

Employer feedback is widely regarded as an important source of evidence for identifying gaps between graduate outcomes and professional requirements in practice. Tran

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(2022) argues that employer expectations are closely shaped by local contexts, providing perspectives that internal institutional assessments may not fully capture. Within the Vietnamese early childhood education sector, recent studies have examined teacher professional competencies in relation to curriculum implementation (Ha et al., 2025), information technology (IT) proficiency (Ho Sy Hung, 2023), and the development of digital competencies (Nguyen Quynh Anh & Nguyen Huu Tuan, 2024). However, these studies have mostly focused on the perspectives of in-service teachers or on policies and training programs. Longitudinal employer feedback on graduates in Early Childhood Education from local teacher-training institutions remains limited. This gap highlights the need for further research using employer feedback to identify changes in professional competency requirements and to provide practical evidence for curriculum and training reform.

This study addresses that gap through an analysis of employer survey data collected from Hong Duc University during the 2023-2025 period. The 2023 and 2024 data directly reflect feedback on graduates from the Early Childhood Education program, while the 2025 data are used mainly for broader trend comparison. The study aims to identify strengths and gaps in graduates' professional competencies and to discuss implications for curriculum reform in Early Childhood Teacher Education at Hong Duc University.

2. Theoretical Framework and Research Methodology

2.1. Theoretical Framework

Professional competence in early childhood education is understood as a combination of attributes that enables effective performance in specific contexts (Nguyen Thi Thu Ha & Vu Thi Ngoc Minh, 2023). From a competency-based perspective, graduate quality includes disciplinary knowledge, professional skills, and the ability to adapt to changing professional environments (Nguyen Thi Thu Ha & Vu Thi Ngoc Minh, 2023). In the context of digital transformation and international integration, digital competence and foreign language proficiency have become increasingly important in teaching practice (Nguyen et al., 2026). Hong Duc University's evaluation framework is aligned with the Professional Standards for Early Childhood Teachers (Ministry of Education and Training, 2018) and the current Early Childhood Education Program (Ministry of Education and Training, 2021), focusing on three main components: knowledge, skills, and attitudes. In addition to assessing current competencies, the framework also collects employer feedback on training needs and collaboration with the university, making it possible to examine changes in professional expectations over time.

Within this competency-based perspective, the integration of digital competence into teaching is well captured by the Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) framework (Mishra & Koehler, 2006), which conceptualizes effective technology use as the intersection of technological, pedagogical, and content knowledge rather than as an isolated technical skill. For early childhood teachers, this implies that digital competence is

meaningful only when embedded in pedagogical and disciplinary contexts - for example, designing digital learning materials appropriate to young children or using technology to support communication with parents. This framework provides a useful lens for interpreting employers' expectations regarding graduates' digital and adaptive competencies.

2.2. Research Methodology

This study employs a quantitative descriptive design combined with document analysis, using a cross-sectional trend approach to examine employer evaluations over the 2023-2025 period. Data were collected from annual survey reports conducted in 2023 (n=9) (Faculty of Early Childhood Education, 2023) and 2024 (n=10) (Faculty of Early Childhood Education, 2024) on Early Childhood Education graduates, together with a broader faculty-level survey conducted in 2025 (n=30) (Faculty of Education, 2025). While the 2023 and 2024 data directly reflect the Early Childhood Education program, the 2025 data were used mainly to identify broader trends following institutional restructuring. The survey questionnaire used a five-point Likert scale to measure employer satisfaction across 16 criteria grouped into three areas: knowledge, skills, and professional attitudes (Hong Duc University, 2025). The same questionnaire was used consistently throughout the study period to ensure comparability across years. Each year, the faculty identified employing institutions that had recruited graduates and distributed questionnaires directly, by email, or via social media. The response rate reached 100% in all three years, as institutions were contacted directly and followed up until responses were received.

The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, mainly frequencies and percentages. The analysis focused on employer satisfaction across competency groups, additional training needs identified by employers, and the willingness of institutions to cooperate with the university. Findings from the three survey years were then compared to identify changes in professional expectations over time.

It should be noted that this study draws on secondary data. The surveys were designed and administered annually by the Faculty and the University for internal quality-assurance purposes, not specifically for this research. This approach allows the use of systematically and continuously collected data across multiple years, and because the instrument was issued centrally and applied consistently, the data remain comparable over time. However, the instrument was not developed for research purposes and has not undergone formal reliability or validity testing; the findings should therefore be read as trend indicators rather than as inferential statistical results. A further limitation is that the 2025 data were collected at the faculty level and cannot be disaggregated by program, which is addressed in the interpretation of results and in the conclusion.

3. Research Findings and Discussion

The overall results from the three survey rounds are summarized in Table 1, providing an overview of changes in employer evaluations over time before moving to a more detailed analysis of each competency group.

Table 1. *Selected indicators of employer evaluations and training needs (2023-2025)*

Employers' assessment of the professional competencies of early childhood education graduates: Implications for curriculum reform in the context of digital transformation and international integration

Content	2023	2024	2025
Sample size	9 institutions	10 institutions	30 institutions
Overall evaluation	Positive overall evaluation, especially professional attitudes and foundational knowledge	Most criteria rated “satisfied” or “very satisfied”	Positive evaluations maintained, especially professional attitudes
Highest-rated competencies	Professional attitudes and discipline	Discipline, responsibility, listening skills; theoretical knowledge	Professional attitudes, responsibility, listening skills (66.7% “fully satisfied”)
Areas requiring additional training	Professional practice (3), IT (3), foreign languages (2), specialized knowledge (2)	Soft skills (6), foreign languages (5), IT (2), specialized knowledge (1)	Foreign languages (10), soft skills (7), IT (5), specialized knowledge (4), professional practice (3)
Notable issues	Foreign language and IT skills identified as training needs	Foreign languages and soft skills most frequently mentioned	43.3% uncertain about foreign language communication
University cooperation	77.8% willing to accept interns/student teachers	100% willing to accept interns/student teachers	73.3% willing to accept interns/student teachers

(Source: Compiled from reports by the Faculty of Early Childhood Education (2023, 2024) and the Faculty of Education (2025))

Note: The 2025 data cover 30 employing institutions across the Faculty of Education and are not disaggregated by program; figures for this year are therefore used as broader disciplinary-level reference points rather than as ECE-specific indicators. Only the 2023 and 2024 data reflect the Early Childhood Education program directly.

3.1. Positive employer evaluations of graduates

Survey data from the 2023-2025 period presented in Table 1 show that employers consistently gave positive evaluations of graduates in Early Childhood Education across all three survey years, particularly in relation to professional attitudes. In the 2024 survey, all 10 institutions reported being “very satisfied” with graduates’ sense of discipline, personal responsibility, and ability to listen and learn from feedback (Faculty of Early Childhood Education, 2024). A similar pattern was observed at the faculty level in 2025,

when 20 out of 30 institutions (66.7%) selected the highest level of satisfaction for these qualities (Faculty of Education, 2025), suggesting the trend holds more broadly across the education disciplines. These findings are consistent with Tran's observation that professional attitudes and responsibility are among the qualities most valued by employers in local contexts, especially in community-oriented professions such as early childhood education (Tran, 2022).

In terms of knowledge, 9 out of 10 institutions rated graduates' foundational theoretical knowledge as "very satisfied" in 2024 (Faculty of Early Childhood Education, 2024), while in 2023 all responses across the three knowledge criteria fell within the "satisfied" and "very satisfied" categories (Faculty of Early Childhood Education, 2023), indicating a relatively solid academic foundation.

3.2. Competency gaps that still need to be addressed

Alongside these positive findings, the survey data across the three years also show a growing demand for additional training related to professional adaptability. This is one of the clearest gaps between graduates' competencies and employers' practical expectations in the current context.

As summarized in Table 1, the focus of additional training needs shifted markedly over the three years. In 2023, professional skills and IT were mentioned most frequently; notably, professional skills disappeared from the 2024 needs, suggesting improvement in this area. From 2024 onward, soft skills and foreign languages became the most emphasized needs, and by 2025 foreign languages were identified most frequently (10 responses), followed by soft skills (7) and IT (5) (Faculty of Early Childhood Education, 2023, 2024; Faculty of Education, 2025).

Another notable issue concerns communication in foreign languages. The 2025 survey showed that 13 out of 30 institutions (43.3%) remained uncertain about graduates' foreign language communication skills, representing the highest proportion among all skill-related criteria (Faculty of Education, 2025). This finding is consistent with previous studies on digital and foreign language competencies among early childhood teachers in Vietnam. While professional knowledge and attitudes have generally been developed effectively, digital competence and foreign language proficiency continue to remain insufficiently addressed in current training programs (Ho Sy Hung, 2023; Nguyen Quynh Anh & Nguyen Huu Tuan, 2024). These findings point to the need to review expected learning outcomes related to foreign languages and digital competence in early childhood teacher education programs, in line with the Digital Competency Framework for Learners (Ministry of Education and Training, 2025) and the National Digital Transformation Program for Education for the 2022-2030 period (Prime Minister of the Government, 2022).

The role of early childhood teachers today extends beyond traditional childcare to include using technology in designing activities and communicating with parents (Ha et al., 2025). Although local settings may not yet require high foreign language proficiency, this competency is becoming increasingly important amid international integration (Tran, 2022).

The persistent emphasis on foreign language and IT competencies across all three years can be interpreted from several perspectives. First, these are the two competencies most directly and rapidly affected by digital transformation and international integration, so professional demands evolve faster than curricula can be adjusted. Second, as Ho Sy

Hung (2023) found in preschools in Thanh Hoa, early childhood teachers' IT proficiency still lags behind practical requirements, suggesting a systemic pattern rather than an issue specific to a single institution. However, the available survey data do not allow precise measurement of year-on-year improvement in graduates' competencies or of the effectiveness of curricular adjustments in these two areas; this remains a direction for further research using data that directly link graduate outcomes with training content.

3.3. Employer feedback on training activities and collaboration with the university

In addition to direct evaluations of graduate competencies, the survey data also provide two additional sources of information that are valuable for curriculum adjustment: qualitative feedback from employers on areas of training that need improvement, and their willingness to participate in specific forms of collaboration with the university.

Across the three survey years, employers consistently emphasized two main recommendations. The first was the need to expand opportunities for practicum, internships, and extracurricular activities. The second involved adjusting the curriculum to include knowledge and skills more closely aligned with practical demands, particularly in IT, foreign languages, and soft skills. Notably, the 2024 survey recorded a specific recommendation to increase practicum credits and integrate early childhood education settings sooner in the training process, rather than deferring professional practice until the final internship. These suggestions align with competency-based teacher education, which emphasizes that early and continuous professional practice is essential for developing practical competencies and cannot be substituted by theoretical instruction alone (Nguyen Thi Thu Ha & Vu Thi Ngoc Minh, 2023).

Regarding collaboration with the university, Table 2 presents the proportion of institutions selecting different forms of cooperation across the three survey years. The figures were converted into percentages to ensure comparability across years with different sample sizes.

Table 2. *Proportion of employing institutions selecting different forms of collaboration with the university during the 2023-2025 period (%)*

Forms of collaboration	2023 (n=9)	2024 (n=10)	2025 (n=30)
Accepting student interns/practicum students	77.8	100.0	73.3
Professional exchange and experience sharing	44.4	70.0	40.0
Providing workplace learning opportunities for graduates	22.2	50.0	16.7
Organizing institutional visits for graduates	44.4	90.0	13.3
Recruiting graduates	88.9	50.0	13.3
Cooperation in skills training	44.4	10.0	3.3
Research collaboration / knowledge transfer	11.1	0.0	3.3

(Source: Compiled from reports by the Faculty of Early Childhood Education (2023, 2024) and the Faculty of Education (2025))

As shown in Table 2, accepting graduates for internships was the only form of collaboration consistently high across all three years (77.8%-100%-73.3%), providing a stable foundation for university-employer cooperation. Professional exchange ranked second but varied considerably, indicating it has not yet become stable.

The proportion of institutions recruiting graduates declined sharply (88.9% to 13.3%). This decline should not be interpreted as a decrease in training quality. Rather, it reflects the change in sample scope and composition: the 2025 survey covered multiple programs within the Faculty of Education, so a smaller share of the responding institutions were direct recruiters of Early Childhood Education graduates than in 2023. Research collaboration and technology transfer remained almost absent throughout (11.1%-0%-3.3%), indicating that cooperation stays focused on practicum support rather than curriculum innovation or applied research. Taken together, the competency gaps in Section 3.2 may be addressed not only through curriculum adjustment but also through restructuring professional practice - a feasible direction given the consistently high willingness of institutions to accept interns across all three years.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

4.1. Conclusion

This study examined employer feedback on graduates from the Early Childhood Education program at Hong Duc University during 2023-2025. The findings show that graduates were consistently evaluated positively in foundational knowledge and professional attitudes. At the same time, noticeable gaps remain in competencies related to professional adaptability, with growing demand for training in foreign languages, soft skills, and IT, and 43.3% of employers in 2025 uncertain about graduates' foreign language communication skills (Faculty of Education, 2025). These findings reflect changing professional expectations in the context of digital transformation and international integration. Furthermore, as the study relies on secondary data from quality-assurance surveys, the instrument has not undergone formal reliability and validity testing by research standards (such as Cronbach's alpha or factor analysis). The findings should therefore be understood as trend indicators reflecting employers' practical evaluations rather than as inferential statistical conclusions. Future studies should employ formally validated survey instruments to enhance reliability and generalizability.

The study provides empirical evidence from a local teacher-training context. Although the survey samples were not fully consistent across years, the findings offer useful implications for curriculum review at Hong Duc University.

4.2. Recommendations

Based on the findings, three recommendations are proposed for improving Early Childhood Teacher Education at Hong Duc University.

First, rather than adding separate general courses in IT or foreign languages, digital and language competencies should be integrated directly into the pedagogical method courses of the Early Childhood Education program - for example, courses on organizing artistic, linguistic, and exploratory activities for young children. Following the TPACK

framework (Mishra & Koehler, 2006), this means designing course tasks in which technology is not taught in isolation but is applied to specific pedagogical and content goals: student teachers might design digital learning materials for a language-development lesson, use classroom-management platforms during teaching practice, or prepare simple bilingual activities appropriate to young children. Learning outcomes of these method courses should be revised accordingly, in line with the Digital Competency Framework for Learners (Ministry of Education and Training, 2025) and the National Digital Transformation Program for Education (Prime Minister of the Government, 2022).

Second, professional practice should be organized earlier and more continuously. The consistently high willingness of institutions to accept interns across the three years (73.3%-100%) provides a concrete basis for establishing a formal network of partner preschools. This network could host structured early-practicum activities from the first years of training - such as observation sessions, assisted teaching, and short professional tasks - rather than concentrating practice in a single final internship. A memorandum of cooperation with partner institutions would help make this network stable and sustainable, converting the currently high but informal willingness to cooperate into a systematic training resource.

Third, employer feedback should be used as a regular source of evidence for quality assurance and curriculum review. In addition to measuring satisfaction levels, survey results should be used to update learning outcomes and course content. Stronger collaboration between the university and early childhood education institutions, including professional mentoring and participation of practitioners in training activities, may also help reduce the gap between teacher education and professional practice.

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