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Labor market needs: A qualitative view of the professional profile required in the Brunca Region of Costa Rica

Necesidades del mercado laboral: Una aproximación cualitativa del perfil profesional requerido en la Región Brunca en Costa Rica

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Public universities in Costa Rica enjoy high social credibility and a positive assessment of their work. However, they face limitations in their academic offerings in peripheral regions, which threatens the democratization of access to higher education and calls into question their ability to respond to the current and future needs of the environment.

Methodology: The study focused on identifying the skills and competencies required in the regional professional profile from the perspective of employers and institutional representatives. Using a mixed paradigm with a sequential exploratory multiphase design and a qualitative approach, this article reports the results of the final qualitative phase, based on 12 semi-structured interviews with officials and business representatives from the cantons of the Brunca Region.

Results: The analysis identified seven priority university training topics: comprehensive professional training; job profiles, hiring processes, and non-professional positions; English proficiency; transferable skills; customer service; knowledge of public service; and training in gender issues.

Conclusions: This fulfills the social responsibility of reducing qualification gaps and contributes to the credibility and competitiveness of public higher education.

Keywords: professional competencies in higher education, labor demand in the Brunca Región, human capital labor demand, public university.

JEL Classification: I23; J23; J24

RESUMEN

Introducción: Las universidades públicas en Costa Rica gozan de alta credibilidad social y de una valoración positiva de su labor; sin embargo, enfrentan limitaciones en la oferta académica de las regiones periféricas, lo que amenaza la democratización del acceso a la educación superior y cuestiona su capacidad para responder a las necesidades actuales y futuras del entorno.

Metodología: El estudio se enfocó en identificar las capacidades y competencias requeridas en el perfil profesional regional desde la perspectiva de empleadores y representantes institucionales. Desde un paradigma mixto, con un diseño multifase de tipo exploratorio secuencial y enfoque cualitativo prioritario, este artículo reporta los resultados de la fase cualitativa final, con base en 12 entrevistas semiestructuradas a funcionarios y empresarios representantes de los cantones de la Región Brunca.

Resultados: El análisis identificó siete temas prioritarios de formación: formación profesional integral; perfil de puestos, procesos de contratación y puestos no profesionales; dominio del inglés; habilidades transferibles; servicio al cliente; conocimientos en función pública; y formación en enfoque de género.

Conclusiones: Con esto, se cumple con la responsabilidad social de reducir brechas de cualificación y se contribuye a la credibilidad y competitividad de la educación superior.

Palabras clave: competencias profesionales en educación superior, demanda laboral de la Región Brunca, demanda laboral del capital humano, universidad pública.

Clasificación JEL: I23; J23; J24

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INTRODUCTION

In Costa Rica, public higher education is provided by five institutions: the Universidad de Costa Rica (UCR), the Universidad Nacional (UNA), the Universidad Estatal a Distancia (UNED), the Universidad Técnica Nacional (UTN), and the Instituto Tecnológico de Costa Rica (TEC). Of these five public institutions, only three have a presence in the Región Brunca (RB): UNA, UCR, and UNED. However, UNED does not constitute a traditional campus where educational services are delivered, as it operates under a distance learning model. Given this landscape, the RB has only two universities offering in-person instruction, distributed across three campuses: two belonging to UNA and one to UCR (Golfito) (Barquero Mejías et al., 2022; Pérez Zeledón & Corredores). The limited number of public university campuses in the RB represents a clear disadvantage for professional training in the region. The situation is compounded by the limited and repetitive academic offerings of these two universities. As of 2025, the degree programs offered at these campuses were concentrated in the fields of education (primary education and English teaching), social sciences (administration, tourism, agricultural economics, and agribusiness), languages (English), and science and technology (computer science and engineering in agri-food quality and innovation) (Universidad de Costa Rica, 2025; Universidad Nacional, Sede Regional Brunca, 2025). The scarcity of university academic offerings in the regions drives a struggle for the democratization of access to higher education.

In 2018, the Consejo Nacional de Rectores (CONARE) established the Regional Inter-university Coordination Bodies (OCIR) with the aim of deepening and strengthening regionalization processes and mechanisms. Their action plan includes aligning academic offerings with the market needs of each region, as well as improving university coordination and responsiveness to local needs (Solano, 2020). Likewise, meeting market needs poses a challenge in a society characterized by constant change and slow administrative processes, as the two advance at different paces. Nevertheless, gaining a deep understanding of labor market needs in the RB is crucial for providing a relevant academic offering.

Thus, the general objective of this study is to analyze key labor market demands, the social and economic needs of the RB, and the relevance of higher education academic offerings—based on the perceptions of employers and institutional stakeholders—in order to guide decision-making regarding university activities. Specifically, the study aims to identify the capabilities and competencies most sought after by public and private sector employers, as well as to assess the relevance of current academic programs and proposals for future degree programs or other services needed in the region, thereby supporting strategic planning for the region's universities.

Theoretical and contextual framework

The Labor Market in the Región Brunca

An examination of labor market trajectories for the poor population in Costa Rica reveals that these markets perpetuate income inequality and poverty (Izquierdo Vázquez, 2023). In the first quarter of 2024, the labor force comprised 1.74 million people in urban areas and 596,000 in rural areas; this implies that for every three urban residents participating in the labor market, one person does so in a rural area (Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censos [INEC], 2024a). This outcome was to be expected, given that the sectors most dynamic in generating employment, wages, and high-quality jobs are concentrated in the Central Region. Unfortunately, the national picture shows that poverty is highest in regions where quality employment is scarce. Consequently, the evidence conclusively demonstrates that university education is crucial for securing quality employment, as lower educational attainment correlates with greater deprivation.

Meanwhile, low-skill jobs characterized by volatile job creation are associated with monoculture farming, unequal land distribution, and higher rates of unemployment and underemployment. However, a shift in production models is underway, driven by the tourism boom and changes within the industrial sector. Nevertheless, the labor market for the impoverished population is dominated by individuals with incomplete basic education and households headed by women. This social group is characterized by lower incomes compared to men, a higher number of dependents, and participation in agricultural and industrial activities geared toward the domestic market and traditional export production (Izquierdo Vázquez, 2023).

Labor market indicators presented by INEC (2024b) highlight existing inequalities, noting that the RB region experienced the sharpest decline in labor force participation, falling from 49.2% in the first quarter of 2023 to 46.3% in the first quarter of 2024. Furthermore, regarding employment rates, all regions showed year-over-year increases except for Chorotega and Brunca; the latter, however, recorded a decrease in its unemployment rate.

Against this backdrop of regional inequalities and structural labor market limitations in the RB, public universities play a strategic role in developing human capital and improving opportunities for labor market integration. In this regard, these universities have succeeded in increasing the number of graduates in recent years. Data show that while 16,447 individuals graduated in 2017, the figure rose to 21,150 by 2021—an increase of 28.6% (Salom Echeverría, 2023). Along

these lines, Azofeifa-Ureña et al. (2023) reported the successful outcome that over 90% of graduates are employed. Additionally, Grajales Navarrete (2021) reported that, according to the Centro de Investigación y Estudios Políticos (CIEP), public universities held the highest levels of public credibility and the most positive ratings for their work and contributions as of 2021. This assessment was based on a survey conducted as part of a study on ideological perceptions and political culture in Costa Rica.

Jobs and Employers

INEC (2024b) defines a "job" as the term assigned within an establishment to a set of tasks performed by one or more individuals and defined in an employment contract. In this regard, the main sources of employment in the RB are agriculture, livestock farming, forestry, and fishing. Furthermore, its primary export product is oil palm, and it is the country's second-largest producing region for coffee, pineapples, and rice (Ministerio de Planificación Nacional y Política Económica [MIDEPLAN], 2022). Consequently, jobs are concentrated in the agriculture and manufacturing sectors. Examples of jobs in these areas, categorized by occupational group, include: managers, professionals, mid-level technicians, administrative support staff, sales and service workers, craft and related trades workers, machine operators and assemblers, and elementary occupations such as packers, helpers, laborers, and assistants (INEC, 2024b).

Regarding employers in the RB, the study conducted by INEC (2024b) presented data on employability in the agricultural and livestock sector. The results showed that 48.3% of establishments belong to a business association or chamber of commerce. However, regarding the labor market, a study by the Agencia de Desarrollo de la Zona Sur (2019) identifies various areas offering employment opportunities in the RB, namely: arts, entertainment, and recreation; accommodation and food service activities; human health and social work activities; administrative and support service activities; financial and insurance activities; real estate activities; professional, scientific, and technical activities; public administration and defense; agriculture, livestock, forestry, and fishing; wholesale and retail trade; construction; education; manufacturing industries; information and communication; and compulsory social security schemes. repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles; water supply; sewerage, waste management, and remediation; supply of electricity, gas, steam, and air conditioning; transportation and storage, among other service activities.

In this production and employment landscape, the relevance of vocational training plays a strategic role in improving employability conditions in the RB. In this regard, UNESCO et al. (2016) highlight that technical and vocational education and training systems must strengthen their capacity to respond to labor market demands by fostering technical, transversal, and innovation skills that support employment, entrepreneurship, and sustainable development. However, a major challenge in Latin America and the Caribbean is the disconnect between the training provided by the education system and the skills required by the productive sector, which directly affects labor market entry and job quality (Hernández-Carrera et al., 2020; UNESCO et al., 2016). Consequently, higher education institutions face the challenge of aligning their academic programs with local dynamics, promoting contextualized training that addresses market needs as well as local development goals and the reduction of inequalities.

Employability skills and competencies

According to Recomendación N.º 195 de la OIT (2004) (2004) on Human Resources Development, the term "competencies" encompasses how knowledge, professional aptitudes, and know-how are applied in a specific context. Likewise, the term "qualifications" designates "the formal expression of the worker's professional skills, recognized at international, national, or sectoral levels" (p. 4). These aspects underpin a worker's employability, understood as a set of transferable competencies and qualifications that enhance individuals' ability to take advantage of education and training opportunities available in their environment. Furthermore, this condition enables individuals to find and retain an occupation or profession while adapting to evolving technology and labor market conditions.

Currently, the concept of employability integrates both individual and external factors, emerging as a dynamic, multidimensional, and interactive construct. From a systemic perspective, employability cannot be understood merely as a personal characteristic, but rather as the result of the interaction between an individual's capabilities, their personal circumstances, and the structural conditions of the socio-labor context (Jiménez-Ulate, 2022). On one hand, individual factors include employability skills and attributes, demographic characteristics, health and well-being factors, job-seeking strategies, and adaptability and mobility. These skills enable individuals to respond flexibly to changing work environments and increase their opportunities for labor market entry and mobility. On the other hand, external factors consist of job availability within the national, regional, and local economies; the business sector's attitudes toward unemployment; and the macroeconomic and structural factors that influence employability (Sistema Nacional de Empleo, 2023). Complementarily, Barrios Zarta and Sáenz Trujillo (2020) demonstrated that skills such as effective communication, teamwork, problem-solving, critical thinking, and professional autonomy are highly valued by employers and constitute determining factors for entering and remaining in the labor market.

Employability skills and attributes—which are individual characteristics—comprise basic social skills (reliability,

personal competencies, diligence, motivation, and confidence); basic transferable skills (literacy and numeracy); key transferable skills (problem-solving, communication, adaptability, work process management, and teamwork); and high-level transferable skills (self-management and commercial awareness). This set of skills does not exclude educational qualifications and achievements, job-related knowledge, work experience, professional competencies, or labor market attachment factors—such as employment duration, unemployment, and work history (Sistema Nacional de Empleo, 2023). In this regard, employability should be understood as a relational process involving the convergence of individual responsibilities and institutional, social, and state commitments aimed at reducing structural inequalities and strengthening sustainable labor market integration.

METHODOLOGY

Based on a mixed-methods paradigm with a multiphase design—starting with a sequential exploratory process and prioritizing a qualitative approach—this article reports the results of the final stage of a broader analysis (Centro de Investigación, Docencia, Extensión y Producción de la Sede Regional Brunca, 2021; Creswell, 2015). The in-depth inquiry involved individual semi-structured interviews with key participants from the Región Brunca (RB). The general purpose of these interviews was to answer the question: "What are the main labor market demands, the social and economic needs of the RB, and the relevance of higher education academic offerings in the RB?" and, through the responses obtained, to gather in-depth, firsthand information from employers.

Purposive sampling was used to select the participating institutions and companies. Sampling criteria included: having participated in the survey conducted during the research's previous quantitative stage; being located in one of the seven cantons of the RB; being available to meet and willing to have the session recorded; and belonging to or representing the public or private sector. Recruitment was carried out via email invitation, with ten individuals agreeing to participate.

The research was conducted in accordance with the institution's ethical principles, which do not require approval from a formal ethics committee. Prior to data collection, all participants signed an informed consent form explaining the study's purpose, the use of the information, and the guarantee of confidentiality through the use of pseudonyms in the reporting of results.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted virtually via the Zoom videoconferencing platform; they were recorded with express authorization and subsequently transcribed for analysis. Participant identities were safeguarded at all times—including those of the six public officials in leadership positions at various regional institutions and the six business sector representatives (one per canton). Separate interview guides were used for the public and private sectors. Officials answered 12 questions organized into four sub-themes (hiring of university graduates, relevance of regional academic offerings, proposals for future degree programs, and other required services). In comparison, business representatives answered nine questions divided into three sub-themes (relevance of current degree programs, future degree programs needed in the region, and other necessary services). Each interview lasted between 40 minutes and one hour, and pseudonyms were used when reporting the data.

Context of the participating population

Costa Rica's Brunca Region is located in the south of the country. According to MIDEPLAN (2022), this region comprises seven cantons: Buenos Aires, Corredores, Coto Brus, Golfito, Osa, Pérez Zeledón, and Puerto Jiménez. These cantons contain 40 districts and have a population density of 39 people per km^2, making it the region with the lowest density in the country; additionally, it records a high unemployment rate of 8%. These factors drive up the percentage of households living in poverty, which stands at 34%. Regarding the region's main economic activities, these center on agriculture and livestock farming, public administration, and trade and repair services, followed by transportation and communications, construction, and business-related real estate activities; this directly influences the workforce requirements of companies and entities located in the area. Table 1 details the participating organizations, as well as the type of institution and its economic activity.

Data analysis

Data analysis followed a deductive process, grounded in the constructs of the research question and utilizing Microsoft Word to organize the information. This process encompassed the verbatim transcription of all interviews, two coding stages, the grouping of categories, the definition of themes, and the final reporting of results. The coding procedure integrated an open coding phase followed by a descriptive one. During the second coding stage, codes were grouped by identifying relationships and commonalities among them, generating a list of categories from which the list of themes was defined.

Table 1.
Participating organizations from the private or public sector

Private sector		Public sector	
Type	**Economic activity**	**Institution**	**Legal nature**
Private educational center	Education	Municipalidad Buenos Aires	Municipality
Supermarket chain	Commerce	Instituto Nacional de las Mujeres (INAMU)	Autonomous institution
Private educational center	Education	Ministerio de Planificación Nacional y Política Económica (MIDEPLAN)	Ministry
Transport company	Transport	Instituto de Desarrollo Rural (INDER)	Autonomous institution
Tourism company	Tourism	Municipalidad de Coto Brus	Municipality

Note: Prepared based on information from the interviewees.

To ensure the study's reliability, strategies such as theoretical saturation, co-coding among authors, the use of verbatim quotes to directly support findings, and the acknowledgment of potential biases were employed. Saturation was determined based on information repetition—specifically, when participants reiterated the same ideas, demands, issues, and proposals—indicating an absence of new emerging codes. Furthermore, the collected data provided a sufficient explanation of labor market demands and the relevance of the academic offerings. Potential biases, such as the selection of only one representative per canton, were acknowledged; to address this, sample composition was informed by findings from the study's first phase, which had identified the most representative economic activities and institutions playing a pivotal role in regional development.

Regarding rigor, the criteria of credibility, dependability, and confirmability—key elements in qualitative research (Denzin et al., 2023)—were taken into account. These criteria ensure that the results are credible, coherent, and impartial. Elements considered in this study included inter-rater reliability, confirming the consistency of the analysis across evaluators. In this instance, three evaluators independently coded the data as a first step before reaching a consensus on the results. Another element was peer debriefing, which was carried out through working sessions involving critical reviews by external parties. Finally, twelve interviews were conducted, enabling the collection of diverse information and a deeper exploration of the topic.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis identified seven themes that make it possible to recognize the main factors influencing labor demand in the RB.

Comprehensive university education

Comprehensive university education emerged as a significant demand from both companies and public institutions. In this regard, one of the goals of the Universidad Nacional, as established in its Organic Statute, is comprehensive education. This is understood as the training of professionals who are thinkers, scientists, and artists with a humanistic vision, and who seek to achieve the common good and "good living" (buen vivir) (Universidad Nacional, 2014). This goal reflects the university's origins; since its founding, its aim has been to promote, democratize, and nationalize a growth model requiring the integration of technical-scientific contributions with the country's aspirations for general well-being. This entails a balance between the individual's personal path and their coexistence with society and its demands. Furthermore, social demands can be understood as a unity of national purposes or the integrated values of a society. Likewise, efforts directed toward a nation's goals both presuppose and generate transformations that enable it to successfully adapt to the modern world (Núñez Vargas, 1974).

Analysis of the interviews reveals that the required comprehensive education is grounded in principles of the common good or well-being, encompassing not only technical-scientific knowledge but also attitudes of respect and commitment. The collected data highlighted the importance of an educational approach that fosters empathy, ethics, sensitivity, and social commitment—values that ensure social cohesion. Interviewees also shared Sandra's desire for professionals to be "true agents of change within the society or community where they live." Consequently, this change must be well-informed, arising only from direct, sensitive engagement with the various social groups in which these professionals operate. Similarly, social demand drives the transformations necessary to achieve regional or national objectives.

Significantly, the interviewees maintained that comprehensive education must include technical knowledge relevant to the workplace, as this ensures work quality. In this context, Wiliam emphasized that "one must envision a professional holding the specific qualification that accredits them for the position to which they are to be appointed." Thus, hiring university-educated professionals guarantees that employees are empowered individuals who make an impact on their immediate communities through their skills. This empowerment and expertise are inherent when hiring specialists in their respective fields. Unfortunately, such hiring entails high costs for companies, and not all possess the resources to

invest in university-educated professionals.

Job profiles, hiring, and non-professional positions

The defined job profile emerged as a key topic in interviews conducted with both company representatives and officials. Added to this are the implications of hiring—or not hiring—professionals with university degrees. However, it is currently crucial for organizations to have a clear understanding of these profiles to ensure staff can perform their duties effectively and efficiently; given that the labor market is saturated with professionals possessing diverse characteristics and skills, documents like this one serve as a guide for selecting the right individuals for a position. A job description is understood as a manual containing the details of all job roles within an organization. Furthermore, this document typically presents information comprehensively and exhaustively, identifying the defining characteristics and factors of each role. In this regard, it is important to acknowledge that there is no standardized method for creating one, as each organization adds or removes elements it deems necessary and appropriate.

That said, both companies and organizations must be clear not only about the required profiles but also about the importance of establishing them. A profile is understood as a set of skills considered crucial for the proper performance of tasks carried out by employees (Sebastião et al., 2023). Properly designing the profile enables the company, prospective candidates, and current employees to identify and communicate the nature of each person's work, as well as expectations regarding their performance within the organization. Moreover, this clarity involves distinguishing between roles that require professional qualifications, those that are technical, and those requiring no formal training at all. However, while economic and budgetary implications are not the only factors influencing hiring decisions, they are a significant factor cited by company representatives. Alonso notes, "One would like to hire university graduates, but the problem is that we have to bring them in from outside; that entails travel allowances and location-based pay premiums, making it very expensive for us." Furthermore, while hiring professionals with specific qualifications often entails a high salary, it has become evident that hiring inexperienced individuals requires an investment in training and skill development—with no guarantee against turnover—potentially rendering the effort fruitless.

Hiring university-educated professionals is clearly a necessity with positive implications, though the associated economic cost is a decisive factor. Such hiring benefits organizations by ensuring work quality, as these professionals possess reliable expertise. Additionally, interviewees recognized universities as agents of change that foster proactivity, confidence, and empowerment—qualities that ensure successful, high-quality processes.

Naturally, needs vary significantly by sector. In education, for instance, a professional degree is not merely a requirement; there is also a need for broader profiles that extend beyond a single discipline. Schools require professionals qualified to teach primary education (Cycles I and II) who also hold a degree in English Teaching, as well as secondary school teachers across various subjects (Science, Mathematics, Arts) who are similarly qualified in English Teaching. Public institutions refer to this as a "cross-cutting" or "multidisciplinary" profile, acknowledging that hired professionals need knowledge in areas beyond their primary specialization—such as legislation, gender issues, human rights, and public administration.

A distinct situation was identified in management and administration. While accounting and administrative roles require university-educated professionals, positions such as receptionist or office clerk require only a mid-level technical qualification. In the tourism sector, however, an advanced level of English was highlighted as more important for hiring than a university degree. Ulises pointed out that "when we were hiring a receptionist, someone would show up with a good university degree, and we would evaluate, assess, and interview them; then someone else would arrive without a degree but having lived in the United States for two or three years, speaking perfect English. Guess whom we hired? The one who spoke perfect English."

Regarding customer service, non-professionals are hired in this area because the trade is learned on the job. Such positions include shelf stockers, butchers, and produce clerks. Furthermore, it was evident that public institutions hire very few non-professionals, with technical roles mostly found in general services. The preference for hiring non-professionals stems from companies' desire to provide in-house training and pay lower wages, as hiring professionals entails high costs.

Regarding job profiles, hiring practices, and non-professional roles, both companies and organizations clearly understood the importance of establishing such profiles. It was also evident that hiring university-educated professionals is both necessary and beneficial, yet it comes with an economic cost that not all employers are willing to bear. This can drive skilled individuals to leave for more dynamic regions elsewhere. Likewise, staff training represents a significant expense when companies shoulder the responsibility; however, this does not guarantee staff retention, as trained employees may eventually leave for other companies. Miguel noted, "We pay for whatever courses they need. If we have to send them to San José for a course, we do that too. We've even sent colleagues as far as Mexico. The problem is that other companies woo them away... it's a risk we face in a rural area." Positions in the education sector require specific degrees, though it was also

suggested that hiring profiles be broadened. Similarly, the need for professionals skilled in accounting and administration was identified for administrative roles. Likewise, as previously mentioned, a mid-level technical qualification may suffice for office or reception positions.

Along these lines, the results indicate that future university graduates are viewed as a workforce capable of performing roles in both the private sector and public administration. However, discussions among the participants revealed that the perspective held by prospective employees might not fully align with the expectations and realities facing future professionals. For instance, in the case of students pursuing education-related degrees, it is anticipated that their future employers could be private educational institutions or entities affiliated with the Ministry of Education. Yet, it is also possible that graduates may show greater interest in offering their services through mechanisms that do not currently exist but could emerge in the short term, driven by Costa Rica's changing demographics—specifically, a shrinking child and youth population that is leading to the closure of some schools due to declining student numbers.

English proficiency

English proficiency stood out as a necessity for accessing jobs in the private sector and as an asset for those securing positions within institutions. This is particularly important for working in the business world, given that English has become the predominant language of international communication. In this regard, Charles-Leija and Torres García (2022) described English as the language of business and science, noting its establishment as the *lingua franca* that facilitates commercial exchange. Consequently, English language skills are essential for maintaining competitiveness; they open up broader employment opportunities, whether at the local or international level.

However, tourism is a significant part of the economic activity in the RB, creating direct and indirect job opportunities across various industries; furthermore, English proficiency is indispensable in this sector. By way of context, it was estimated that in 2022, 71,295 people were insured by the Caja Costarricense de Seguro Social for employment in the hotel and restaurant sector nationwide. Yet, when considering other sectors that—directly or indirectly—form part of the tourism industry's supply chain, the figure exceeds 1,639,248 insured individuals (Instituto Costarricense de Turismo [ICT], 2023). A portion of these jobs is located within the RB. For this reason, study participants highlighted the importance of English for the region, particularly for the private sector. For instance, one participant stated: "Perfect command of English is fundamental—important for absolutely everything." Another remarked: "In the tourism sector, English proficiency carries more weight than a university degree."

Regarding the institutional sector, English proficiency is valued, though it is reported as "not fundamental." This is because government institutions generally serve the domestic population and, consequently, primarily use Spanish when interacting with the public. Given that tourism is a sector with growth potential in the region—driven by state organizations that launch projects to foster community development—one informant noted the benefit of having project managers who are "proficient in English, given that we have a tourism office."

While the specific level of language proficiency required in the area is not precisely defined, there is an emphasis on the importance of English certification to verify competence when candidates are being considered for employment. In this regard, one participant expressed the view that "a university degree should be accompanied by English proficiency." Nationally, efforts have been made to train individuals to communicate in English by offering courses starting at the General Basic Education level. Furthermore, the Ministerio de Educación Pública (2021), through its «Towards a Bilingual Costa Rica» educational policy, has set a goal for General Basic Education students to graduate with an English proficiency level equivalent to B2 under the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). This level enables individuals to communicate fluently in both everyday and professional situations.

According to the Council of Europe (2023), the B2 level—or "Independent User"—describes a person who understands the main ideas of complex texts dealing with both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions within their field of specialization. However, these efforts have not yet been sufficient, and initiatives to reach this goal are still being promoted, particularly in the country's rural areas (Quesada Pacheco et al., 2023). Therefore, English proficiency is essential for meeting the challenges of the labor market. This competency is particularly significant in the private sector, especially when considering the future dynamics of tourism projected for the short and medium term.

Life Skills

Both companies and state institutions agree on the need for individuals possessing life skills; consequently, these skills have become highly valued. As Cid Pineda et al. (2022) note, they "enable individuals to succeed in the various processes involved in their personal and collective development, particularly when facing circumstances that arise as challenges, trials, or problems requiring solutions" (p. 22). Furthermore, it is worth noting that developing appropriate skills must be

accompanied by the ability to manage personal aptitudes and behaviors.

Life skills are transferable and linked to interpersonal capabilities and emotional intelligence—such as communication, motivation, responsibility, problem-solving, and the ability to give and receive feedback. Participants in the study highlighted specific skills; across both the private and public sectors, they identified the ability to manage emotions while working under pressure and the capacity for emotional control as essential requirements. In this regard, one interviewee remarked, "You find people who are committed and customer-service oriented, but conflict management is the hardest part." The informant further noted the difficulty of finding individuals with self-control who can react assertively to conflict, as this requires a foundation built at home.

Public sector officials also identified two additional transferable skills they consider important: teamwork and assertive communication. Teamwork fosters a positive work environment and keeps individuals motivated and committed (Alatrista Oblitas, 2020). Meanwhile, assertive communication shapes an organization's effectiveness, productivity, and work environment. It has been shown to have a positive influence on workplace settings and even on the achievement of objectives (Almengor et al., 2024). Regarding public organizations, one participant explained that while staff members are often highly sensitive when working with service users, "working among themselves [within the team] is very complicated" because they struggle with interdisciplinary collaboration. However, the ability to listen to and consider others' views respectfully is essential for understanding the needs, concerns, and perspectives of team members.

Leadership skills stand out among the competencies identified; they were reported as essential for fostering a productive, collaborative, and satisfying work environment, as well as for creating a setting conducive to individual and collective growth. These skills encompass innovation, trust, respect for others, courtesy, and sensitivity (Kebede, 2021). In this regard, one participant highlighted the leadership role public institutions should play vis-à-vis the public. He suggested that "there could be outreach to all these grassroots organizations to assist with the submission of documentation and similar matters." This illustrates the potential for both the public and private sectors to support the development of management capacity. Similarly, another participant working in the public sector noted that professional staff "require extensive contact with groups organized for development purposes."

Customer service

Customer service was cited as a required competency for companies and institutions when hiring personnel. It is understood as the actions taken by companies or organizations before, during, and after the purchase of products or the provision of services. The goal is to foster user and customer loyalty through value systems that meet their needs. Furthermore, the value a customer or user assigns to a product or service can serve as a competitive advantage for companies. Opstal and Thomassen (2023) proposed a progression of service quality across three levels of experience. At the first level, customers are made to feel welcome, and basic aspects—such as professionalism, reliability, and competence—are addressed to prevent dissatisfaction. The second level emphasizes convenience by making life easier for customers and reducing their effort and mental load. The third level focuses on personalization and excellence by tailoring the service, surprising customers by exceeding their expectations, and leveraging the service recovery paradox to turn problems into opportunities. Likewise, effective and efficient customer service aims to provide experiences that make customers feel important and valued. To achieve this, organizations must establish values aligned with their mission and vision as part of a value-creation philosophy (Altamirano, 2021).

According to the interviewees, customer service is a desirable value in personnel when it aligns with the organization. This value is accompanied by traits such as being pleasant, showing respect, and building close relationships with customers through empathy and emotional connection. Additionally, competencies associated with customer service include commitment, conflict management, collaborative work, emotional intelligence, communication, analytical skills, and leadership. Daniel highlighted the importance of "knowing how to handle or interact with people—treating them well and communicating effectively—as well as managing groups, working under high pressure, and being highly organized." Given the significance attached to this competency, its development is fostered through internal training provided by companies and institutions. However, it is believed that hiring professionals offers a greater assurance that some of these competencies are already well-developed. Furthermore, while companies indicate a willingness to provide training to individuals without a university education, they expect candidates selected for a position to already possess a high level of proficiency in these competencies.

Knowledge of the civil service

Representatives of public institutions identified knowledge regarding the civil service as a desired competency for prospective staff. In this regard, a study by Karmsteen (2025) concluded that the administrative work performed by civil servants fulfills three central functions within the dynamics of accountability: knowledge production, the representation

of user interests, and the provision of protection. Analyzing the impact of the civil service requires considering the cultural context in which it operates, independent of circumstantial changes or political tensions within government and state structures. Furthermore, the Dirección General del Servicio Civil has established that the civil service encompasses employment within specific institutional settings that enable a professional public administration (Delgado Paniagua & Ramírez Artavia, 2010). This entails a philosophical approach grounded in principles such as merit, equity, objectivity, and a commitment to public service, alongside an appropriate regulatory framework and mechanisms to ensure the administration's professionalism.

The civil service is regulated by the Ley General de la Administración Pública—which applies to the State and other public entities—as well as by other sources of the legal system, such as the Political Constitution (Asamblea Legislativa de la República de Costa Rica, 1978); international treaties and Central American Community regulations; statutes and other acts with the force of law; Executive Branch decrees implementing laws; acts of the Supreme Powers within their respective spheres of competence; Executive Branch regulations; statutes and regulations of decentralized entities; and regulations subordinate to these rules, whether at the central or decentralized level. Likewise, it is stipulated that the Public Administration must act in compliance with the legal order and may only perform acts or provide public services authorized by that legal order, in accordance with the hierarchical ranking of its sources (Asamblea Legislativa de la República de Costa Rica, 1978). To this end, an analysis of the interviews reveals that the knowledge required by public officials relates to the specific workings of the State and the regulations and procedures governing it—such as the General Public Administration Act, the Municipal Code, and public procurement regulations, among others. Alonso highlighted the importance of knowledge regarding "municipal legislation specifically within the realm of administrative contracting, as well as internal matters, risk management, and legislation relevant to the public sector." Emphasis is also placed on the vital importance of public officials demonstrating dedication, ethics, and a willingness to serve, alongside sensitivity toward the populations they serve and an understanding of community needs; this entails providing excellent customer service while avoiding conflicts or confrontations with the public. Furthermore, the findings indicate that officials must remain attuned to the national reality, approach it analytically, and—as Inés noted—"maintain contact with the population."

Gender Perspective Training

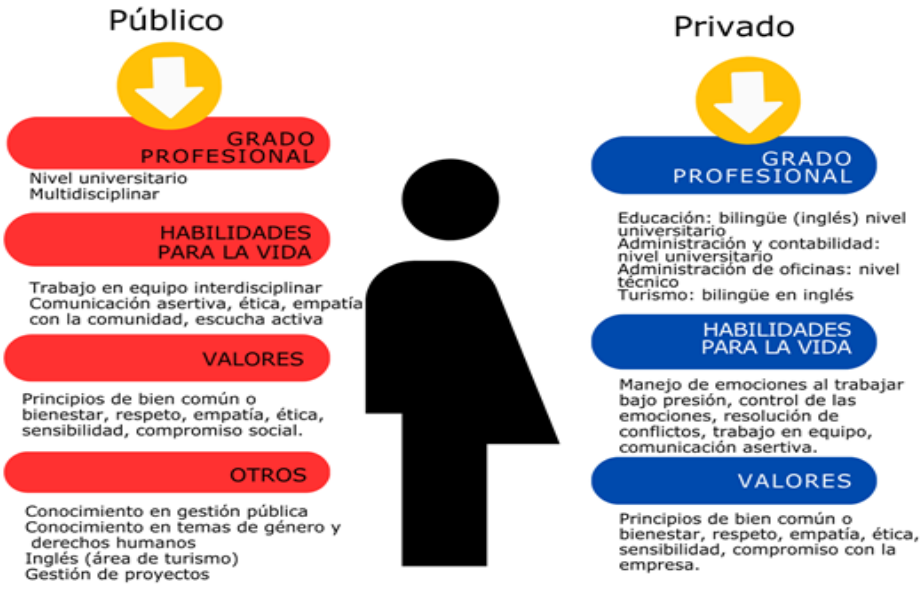
Training with a gender perspective is a key demand from public institutions. The gender perspective addresses inequalities and inequities regarding the status, role construction, and societal positioning of men and women—issues that must be tackled in public policies and interventions to avoid gender-based discrimination. Furthermore, equal opportunities must be promoted, with a special emphasis on strengthening women's capacities and competencies through their empowerment as rights-holders (MIDEPLAN, 2017). In this regard, Costa Rica has undertaken international commitments concerning women's human rights and substantive equality. It seeks to fulfill these commitments through public policy instruments aimed at significantly increasing investment to reduce the gender gap, while also strengthening institutional support for gender equality and women's empowerment at global, regional, and national levels (Instituto Nacional de las Mujeres [INAMU], 2018).

Analysis of the interviews highlighted the importance of professionals working in public institutions possessing—as Gabriel notes—a "theoretical, methodological, and cross-cutting grasp of the gender perspective, human rights, diversity, and cultural change," with the ultimate goal of eliminating all forms of discrimination and violence against women and girls. Additionally, universities contribute to training professionals with a gender perspective and researching gender-based violence. Sara noted: "In the region, we have limited gender-disaggregated data—especially at the local, cantonal, and district levels—regarding some of the issues we face; I believe addressing this would be very important."

This is because individuals trained in the gender perspective are understood to be capable of formulating actions aimed at building a fairer, more equitable society—one that respects and promotes the conservation and sustainable management of natural resources. They can develop training processes for working in interdisciplinary teams using participatory methodologies that foster reflection, awareness-raising, and identity formation. They are also capable of integrating a gender perspective into policies, programs, and projects across both public and private spheres, as well as within governmental and non-governmental organizations. Furthermore, they are able to coordinate development projects for national and international organizations, carrying out tasks such as administrative and community management and the monitoring of productive, cultural, environmental, business, and institutional activities—all grounded in the principle and goal of sustainable human development.

Figure 1 summarizes the defining characteristics of the professional profile required in the RB, in both the public (left) and private (right) sectors.

Figure 1.
Professional profile required by sector



Note: The figure is in its original language.

Points of agreement and divergence

Regarding commonalities between the two sectors, both value so-called "life skills," specifically highlighting teamwork and assertive communication. However, the public sector emphasizes the need for more human-centric skills—such as empathy toward the community and active listening—whereas the private sector prioritizes the ability to work under pressure; in that context, emotional control and conflict resolution appear to be linked more closely to productivity. Both sectors identified a similar set of values but differed regarding the nature of commitment: the private sector advocates for commitment to the organization. In contrast, the public sector emphasizes social commitment.

A significant divergence between the two lies in the required level of academic training. The public sector not only requires a university-level education but also seeks multidisciplinary profiles capable of responding to social dynamics, which entails training across multiple fields of knowledge. In contrast, the private sector's professional requirements vary by work area, with technical-level qualifications being the standard in most cases.

Finally, the public sector cites additional requirements not identified in the private sector, such as knowledge of public management, gender issues, human rights, and project management.

Study limitations

The study had a small sample size—limiting the range of perspectives—though it was appropriate for an exploratory qualitative design. Furthermore, the focus on the RB restricts the transferability of the results to other contexts within the country. Since only one representative per canton was interviewed, the results are influenced by the biases inherent in the discourse of these employers and institutional figures. Therefore, it is suggested that this line of research be continued with a larger sample and by incorporating complementary methodologies.

CONCLUSIONS

This article highlights the key findings defining the professional profile demanded by the labor market, as viewed by employers and representatives of organizations within the RB. This profile clarifies for academic institutions the skills, knowledge, and competencies that should be emphasized in their curricula. In doing so, it fulfills the social responsibility of narrowing skills gaps and contributes to the credibility and competitiveness of higher education.

Furthermore, the desired profile entails comprehensive training that combines the theoretical knowledge specific to the role with transferable skills; this fosters positive team dynamics within the institution or organization and enhances the quality of service provided to the public.

Practical implications for universities in the RB

When designing and updating curricula, a key priority is strengthening English proficiency as a strategic employability skill, particularly in response to demands from both the public and private sectors. Specifically, consideration could be given to developing discipline-specific English modules within individual courses. Opportunities for experiential learning in English could also be promoted, allowing students to engage directly and authentically with the language. Another possibility is the development of virtual exchanges—a practice proven to be feasible—which could be incorporated into various courses.

Labor market dynamics necessitate a proper balance between the mission of higher education and the skills demanded by the public and private sectors. This can be achieved through the public university's ongoing assessment of local needs, involving consultation and analysis with the RB community. A concrete practical step involves organizing working groups with representatives from various sectors to foster continuous dialogue and gather data on the skills employers require.

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