

## **Career Planning Strategies of Graduating Law Students in the Philippines: Implications for Legal Education and Workforce Development**

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### **Abstract**

Career planning plays a crucial role in helping university graduates transition from academic study to professional practice. In the Philippines, legal education has traditionally emphasized preparation for the bar examination, often leaving broader career planning underdeveloped. This qualitative descriptive study explored the career planning strategies of graduating law students in the Philippines through three focus group discussions involving fifteen final-year students from selected law schools. The discussions were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using thematic analysis. Findings show that bar examination preparation remains the dominant orientation of career planning; however, students also consider alternative pathways in government service, corporate legal roles, academia, and regulatory work. Participants reported using professional networking, prior work experience, disciplined study routines, mentorship, and experiential learning opportunities as preparation strategies. They also identified major barriers, including financial constraints, work-study balance challenges, psychological pressure, and limited institutional career guidance. The study underscores the need for Philippine law schools to strengthen career development initiatives through structured counseling, mentoring, and expanded experiential learning opportunities to support adaptable and resilient graduates.

*Keywords:* career planning, legal education, employability

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## Introduction

Career planning is widely recognized as a critical component of higher education because it helps students connect academic preparation with long-term professional aspirations. Universities play a central role in developing students' career awareness, professional competencies, and decision-making skills needed to navigate increasingly complex labor markets (Brown & Lent, 2019). Effective career planning is especially important in professional degree programs where academic training is closely linked to licensure, regulated practice, and shifting workforce demands.

For law students, the transition from academic training to professional practice is particularly demanding. Legal education is marked by rigorous coursework, extensive reading requirements, and intense competition. In the Philippines, these challenges are amplified by the high-stakes nature of the bar examination, which continues to function as the primary gateway to legal practice.

Although bar passage remains a significant milestone, contemporary legal education also prepares graduates for a broad range of pathways beyond traditional litigation. Law graduates may pursue careers in government service, corporate compliance, regulatory work, public policy, legal research, and academe, among others (Dinovitzer & Garth, 2019). Despite these expanding opportunities, many graduating law students continue to rely on personal initiative, informal mentoring, and existing networks when making career decisions because structured career guidance in law schools remains limited.

This study examined how graduating law students in the Philippines plan for their professional futures. Specifically, it explored the strategies they use, the barriers they encounter, their views of bar and non-bar pathways, and the forms of institutional support that may strengthen career guidance within legal education. The study is significant for law students, law schools, and educational leaders because it contributes evidence that may inform more responsive career development initiatives in Philippine legal education.

## Literature Review

### Career Planning and Legal Education

Career planning has been described as a developmental process through which individuals assess their interests, competencies, and goals in order to make informed occupational decisions. Super's (1990) life-span perspective explains career development as an evolving process of exploration, establishment, and maintenance, while Savickas' (2013) Career Construction Theory emphasizes adaptability, meaning-making, and the active construction of career narratives. Within higher education, structured career services, experiential learning, and professional development initiatives help students align academic training with labor market opportunities (Brown & Lent, 2019; OECD, 2021).

In legal education, however, professional formation often remains closely tied to doctrinal mastery and preparation for licensure. Scholars have argued that law schools should develop not only intellectual and technical competence but also professional identity, ethical responsibility, and broader career readiness (Sullivan et al., 2007). Research has shown that law graduates increasingly enter diverse sectors beyond litigation, including government, compliance, policy work, corporate legal departments, and academe (Dinovitzer & Garth,

2019). Yet many students continue to view bar passage as the dominant marker of success, which can narrow career exploration and intensify stress during the final stages of legal training (Organ et al., 2016).

### **Career Development Theories**

This study is anchored in Career Construction Theory and Social Cognitive Career Theory. Career Construction Theory suggests that individuals actively build careers through personal narratives shaped by experience, adaptability, and context (Savickas, 2013). Social Cognitive Career Theory highlights the role of self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and contextual supports or barriers in shaping career choices and persistence. Applied to graduating law students, these perspectives suggest that career planning is shaped by the interaction of personal motivations, institutional supports, and broader social and economic realities.

The conceptual framework of the study proposes that individual factors such as aspirations, self-efficacy, and work experience, together with institutional factors such as curriculum, externships, mentorship, and career guidance, and contextual factors such as finances, labor market opportunities, and bar preparation demands, influence the career planning strategies of graduating law students and the professional pathways they eventually pursue.

### **Bar Examination Challenges and Non-bar Career Pathways**

The bar examination represents one of the most significant milestones in the legal profession. Passing the bar is typically required to practice law, making it a crucial determinant of professional opportunities for law graduates.

However, the bar examination is widely recognized as an extremely challenging licensure test. Research indicates that bar exam preparation can create significant emotional, financial, and psychological strain among law graduates (Mertz, 2016). Students often devote months or even years to preparing for the exam, sometimes leaving employment temporarily to focus on review.

Studies on bar exam preparation have also highlighted the financial burden associated with review programs, study materials, and delayed employment. These costs can disproportionately affect students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Organ et al., 2016). For graduates who do not pass the bar or who choose not to take it immediately, alternative career pathways are increasingly recognized. These include roles in government agencies, corporate compliance, legal research, policy development, human resources, and academia (Dinovitzer & Garth, 2019).

The emergence of these alternative pathways reflects broader changes in the legal labor market. As organizations face increasingly complex regulatory environments, professionals with legal training are increasingly sought after in non-traditional roles such as compliance officers, policy analysts, and corporate advisors (Boon & Whyte, 2019).

Nevertheless, research suggests that law students often lack awareness of these opportunities. Without structured guidance, many students assume that traditional legal practice is the only viable career option after graduation (Hamilton & Bilionis, 2022).

## **Career Guidance and Employability in Legal Education**

Career guidance services are widely recognized as an essential component of student success in higher education. Effective career services help students develop professional competencies, identify career pathways, and connect with potential employers (Brown & Lent, 2019).

In legal education, career services may include career counseling, job placement assistance, internship programs, mentorship initiatives, and professional networking opportunities. These services can significantly influence graduates' employment outcomes and professional development (Hamilton & Billionis, 2022).

However, studies have shown that many law schools still lack comprehensive career guidance systems. Instead, students often rely on informal networks, personal initiative, or online resources to explore career opportunities (Jackson, 2017).

Employability research highlights the importance of transferable skills such as communication, problem-solving, adaptability, and professional networking. These skills enable graduates to navigate evolving labor markets and pursue diverse career paths (Yorke, 2006).

Experiential learning programs have also been identified as key drivers of employability in legal education. Clinical legal education allows students to apply legal knowledge in real-world contexts while developing practical skills and professional confidence (McConnell, 2022).

### **Gaps in the Philippine Context**

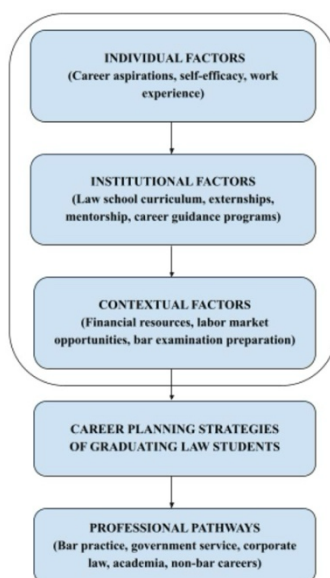
Although career development has become an important focus in higher education globally, structured career guidance programs remain limited in many Philippine law schools. Legal education in the Philippines continues to emphasize bar examination preparation as the central objective of law school training.

While bar passage remains an important milestone, the lack of formal career planning programs may leave students underprepared for diverse professional pathways. Many students rely on personal networks, internships, or workplace experiences to navigate career decisions.

This gap highlights the need for research that documents how law students plan their careers and what forms of institutional support may enhance their professional development.

By exploring the experiences of graduating law students, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of career planning within Philippine legal education and offers insights that may inform improvements in career guidance services.

**Figure 1**  
*Conceptual Framework of the Study*



## Methodology

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to explore the career planning strategies of graduating law students in the Philippines. Qualitative description is appropriate when the goal is to provide a rich, straightforward account of participants' experiences while staying close to their own perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Sandelowski, 2000). Focus group discussions were used because career planning is shaped not only by individual experiences but also by shared academic environments, institutional cultures, and professional expectations within legal education.

The study involved fifteen graduating law students from selected Philippine law schools. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling based on the following criteria: they were final-year or graduating law students, were either planning to take the bar examination or considering alternative pathways, were willing to participate in a focus group discussion, and were able to provide informed consent. The participants were organized into three focus group discussions, a size consistent with recommendations for meaningful qualitative group interaction (Krueger & Casey, 2015).

The focus group discussions were conducted online through a video conferencing platform to accommodate participants from different locations. Each session lasted approximately 90 to 120 minutes. A semi-structured guide covered four areas: career planning approaches, strategies for career preparation, challenges and barriers, and support systems and recommendations. Sessions were audio-recorded with permission, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed through thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process of familiarization, coding, theme development, review, definition, and report writing.

To strengthen research rigor, the researchers used peer debriefing during coding and analysis, compared patterns across the three focus groups, and presented findings with thick description supported by participant quotations. Ethical safeguards included informed consent,

confidentiality through pseudonyms and removal of identifying details, secure storage of recordings and transcripts, and the participants' right to withdraw from the study at any time.

## Results and Discussion

The analysis generated four major themes: career planning approaches, strategies for career preparation, challenges and barriers, and the role of law schools in career preparation. Across the three focus group discussions, participants described career planning as dynamic, adaptive, and shaped by economic realities, prior work experience, institutional support, psychological readiness, and professional aspirations.

**Table 1**

*Thematic Analysis of Career Planning Strategies of Graduating Law Students*

Initial Codes	Categories	Emergent Themes
Preparing for the bar exam; prioritizing bar review; planning to take the bar immediately	Bar-focused career planning	Career Planning Approaches
Considering government work; interest in corporate legal roles; exploring teaching or compliance positions	Exploration of alternative career pathways	Career Planning Approaches
Building professional networks; seeking mentorship; maintaining study routines; leveraging prior work experience	Career preparation strategies	Strategies for Career Preparation
Joining externships; observing practicing lawyers; gaining real-world exposure	Experiential learning opportunities	Strategies for Career Preparation
Financial constraints; working while studying; family responsibilities	Financial and personal pressures	Challenges and Barriers
Stress from law school workload; uncertainty about the future; pressure to pass the bar examination	Psychological and academic pressures	Challenges and Barriers
Lack of structured career guidance; reliance on personal research; limited exposure to non-bar careers	Institutional gaps in career development support	Role of Law Schools in Career Preparation
Value of externship programs; mentorship from professors or practitioners	Institutional support mechanisms	Role of Law Schools in Career Preparation

## **Career Planning Approaches**

The bar examination emerged as the central reference point of career planning. Most participants framed their immediate futures in relation to whether they would take the bar examination right after graduation, delay it, or prepare through alternative work arrangements. Even students considering non-bar roles still viewed the bar as a major professional milestone. This finding suggests that bar preparation continues to organize how graduating law students imagine success and readiness within Philippine legal education.

At the same time, participants did not plan rigidly. Many described flexible and contingent pathways shaped by timing, finances, family responsibilities, and labor market opportunities. Existing employment functioned as a strategic anchor for many working students, who viewed their current roles as sources of income, experience, and future opportunities. These findings support Career Construction Theory by showing that career development is shaped by adaptation to context rather than by a single linear pathway (Savickas, 2013).

## **Strategies for Career Preparation**

Participants reported several practical strategies for career preparation, including disciplined study routines, time management, self-assessment, networking, and the strategic use of prior work experience. For working students, time management was described not merely as a productivity technique but as a condition for survival within the overlapping demands of work, study, commuting, and family responsibilities.

Professional networks and mentors also emerged as important informal resources. Participants relied on classmates, alumni, professors, former employers, and legal practitioners for information, recommendations, and access to opportunities. Externships and practical exposure expanded participants' understanding of legal work and helped them imagine more concrete pathways. These findings are consistent with Social Cognitive Career Theory, which emphasizes self-regulation, contextual support, and goal-directed action in career development (Brown & Lent, 2019).

## **Challenges and Barriers**

Financial pressure was the most pervasive challenge across the focus groups. Many participants were working students, breadwinners, or parents, and financial realities directly influenced decisions about whether to resign from work, when to take the bar examination, and what pathways appeared sustainable. Time scarcity and role overload further complicated planning, as participants balanced classes, employment, family obligations, and bar preparation.

Participants also identified uncertainty, self-doubt, and the lack of structured career guidance in law school as major barriers. Many reported relying on personal research and informal conversations because formal career counseling specific to law students was largely absent. These findings suggest that career planning is not only an informational task but also a psychological process shaped by pressure, fatigue, and institutional gaps.

## **Role of Law Schools in Career Preparation**

Participants valued supports such as clinical legal education, externships, exposure to legal offices, moot court activities, and institutional bar support. These experiences strengthened

confidence, practical understanding, and professional identity. Law school was also described as formative in teaching prioritization, discipline, and endurance.

Despite these strengths, participants repeatedly called for stronger and more structured career guidance. They wanted clearer information about bar and non-bar pathways, more relatable mentors, and support systems that recognized the realities of working students and financially constrained learners. The findings indicate that law schools may be strong in doctrinal and bar-oriented preparation but less consistent in supporting the wider career development needs of future graduates.

### **Conclusion**

The findings show that career planning among graduating law students in the Philippines is highly adaptive, pragmatic, and context-sensitive. Although bar examination preparation remains the dominant orientation, students increasingly recognize alternative and law-adjacent pathways in government, compliance, corporate legal work, academe, and public service. Their preparation strategies include networking, disciplined study routines, prior work experience, mentorship, and experiential learning. At the same time, their choices are shaped by financial strain, time scarcity, psychological pressure, and limited institutional career guidance.

These findings suggest that legal education institutions would benefit from adopting a more holistic approach to career preparation. Structured career counseling, mentoring systems, pathway mapping, and expanded experiential learning opportunities may help students make informed decisions and transition more effectively into varied professional roles. In particular, law schools should consider how to support working students and financially constrained learners whose career planning is inseparable from material realities and competing responsibilities. Future research may extend this work by examining a broader range of law schools and by comparing pathways across different student backgrounds and post-graduation plans.

### **Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process**

The authors declare that Grammarly, an AI-assisted writing tool, was used only for proofreading and language enhancement in the preparation of this manuscript. Its use was limited to the correction of grammatical and spelling errors and the refinement of wording for clarity and accuracy. No other AI or AI-assisted technologies were used to generate, analyze, or write the content of the manuscript. The ideas, research design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are original to the author and are derived from the careful and systematic conduct of the research.

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