

BEYOND GRADES: THE REAL COST OF ENTRY FOR NON-SCHOLAR MARITIME GRADUATES

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Available Online: May 2026
Revised: April 2026
Accepted: April 2026
Received: March 2026

Volume IV Issue 2 (2026)
DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.20352109
E-ISSN: 2984-7184
P-ISSN: 2984-7176
<https://getinternational.org/research/>

Abstract

This study explored the relationship between funding status and employability among Bachelor of Science in Marine Transportation (BSMT) graduates of the Asian Institute of Maritime Studies (AIMS), Batch 2022–2024. In the highly competitive maritime industry, academic scholarships are frequently regarded as offering graduates a significant advantage in obtaining apprenticeship placements and initial employment. This study sought to assess whether the funding status has a considerable impact on the employability outcomes of maritime graduates. A quantitative, descriptive-correlational research design was utilized. Data was collected from 100 AIMS BSMT alumni via a structured survey questionnaire conducted online. Respondents were classified based on funding status as either academic scholars or non-scholars. Employability was assessed through indicators including employment status, time to secure the initial seagoing position, length of the first contract, employment strategies, job position at the time of hiring, and gross monthly income. Statistical analyses comprised frequency and percentage distributions, as well as the Chi-Square Test of Independence, to assess the association between funding status and employability variables. Findings indicated that academic scholars typically encountered shortened waiting periods for employment and had greater access to staffing agencies in comparison to non-scholar graduates. The Chi-Square analysis demonstrated a significant association between funding status and employability, indicating that scholarship support plays a role in enhancing employment outcomes. However, the findings also indicated that non-academic factors, including personal initiative, employment strategies, and skill development, are significant in securing employment. The research determined that although funding status is markedly correlated with employability, it should not be regarded as the exclusive factor influencing career achievement.

Keywords: *Funding Status, Employability, Marine Transportation*

Recommended Citation:

Babas, J. L. R., Dela Cruz, K. D. P., Gatan, J. L. C., Lico, N. J. G., & Tribo, E. M. M. (2026). BEYOND GRADES: THE REAL COST OF ENTRY FOR NON-SCHOLAR MARITIME GRADUATES. GET INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH JOURNAL, 4(2), 113–124. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20352109>

INTRODUCTION

The maritime industry is highly structured and heavily driven by stringent performance standards. To obtain a professional license, cadets must fulfill both theoretical instruction and practical shipboard training, as mandated by international and national regulatory frameworks. For Bachelor of Science in Marine Transportation (BSMT) graduates in the Philippines, an apprenticeship—officially termed Onboard Training (OBT)—is a strict requirement. According to the Joint CHED-MARINA Memorandum Circular No. 01 (**Commission on Higher Education & Maritime Industry Authority [CHED-MARINA], 2022**), BSMT cadets are mandated to complete not less than 12 months of structured seagoing service, which must include at least six months of bridge watchkeeping duties under the supervision of a Master or qualified deck officer. Securing a placement for this mandatory training through a manning or crewing agency is the most critical hurdle for cadets attempting to transition from the classroom to a professional seafaring career.

Academic standing plays a pivotal role in shaping a cadet's early career trajectory and securing these scarce OBT slots. Recent empirical research statistically verifies that high academic performance, combined with simulator-based operational readiness and regulatory compliance, directly correlates with faster and more successful maritime job placements (**Cruz, 2026**). Consequently, academic scholars tend to find shipboard jobs substantially faster than their non-scholar peers. This is largely driven by the recruitment structures of crewing companies. As noted by **Marine MAN (2025)**, manning agencies maintain strict quotas for their cadet programs—often limiting intakes to just 100 to 150 slots—and explicitly require high academic performance alongside strong English language proficiency as a baseline for consideration.

While this system rewards academic excellence, it creates a systemic disadvantage for regular students. Many non-scholar cadets possess strong practical aptitude but lack formalized academic awards or the institutional backing of a scholarship. Even when these regular cadets meet all fundamental training requirements set by the STCW Convention, they frequently struggle to secure shipboard assignments in an increasingly competitive market. Scholars unintentionally monopolize early opportunities, leaving capable, average-performing cadets marginalized.

Beyond grades and funding status, modern employability in the maritime sector is heavily influenced by soft skills and digital literacy. The **Nautical Institute (n.d.)** emphasizes that while the cognitive and technical skills mandated by the STCW are foundational, "*soft skills*" such as communication, teamwork, and leadership are essential for the safe and smooth running of any vessel, as human performance at sea is heavily driven by social context. Furthermore, the global shipping industry is undergoing rapid technological transformation. The **International Maritime Organization (IMO, n.d.)** continuously adapts its training paradigms to address the rapid global digitalization of maritime operations, highlighting the necessity for technologically adaptable seafarers. This shift, however, introduces new occupational pressures. A 2025 study from the World Maritime University identified "*technostress*" as a growing burden on seafarers, concluding that rapid digitalization, persistent system alarms, and a lack of adequate IT support can severely compromise crew well-being (**Lagdami & Stana, 2025**). Employers now seek cadets who not only have high grades but also possess the soft skills and digital resilience to manage these complex environments.

The imbalance in cadetship opportunities can severely exacerbate the psychological pressures already inherent in the maritime profession. The seafaring life is characterized by long shifts, fatigue, and intense social isolation. **Senbursa (2024)** highlights that the separation from loved ones and the multicultural, confined nature of

merchant ships directly lead to loneliness and a decline in psychological well-being, necessitating high levels of personal resilience. The **Australian Maritime Safety Authority (AMSA, 2024)** corroborates this, explicitly guiding the industry to prepare seafarers for the stressful environment caused by long work hours and operational hazards. If average-performing cadets are continually sidelined by manning agencies in favor of scholars, the resulting dissatisfaction and lack of occupational progression can compound these psychological stressors, ultimately discouraging them from staying in the seafaring field.

Currently, there is a significant gap in understanding how this dichotomous system affects the average-performing cadet. Therefore, this study aims to examine the relationship between funding status (scholar vs. non-scholar) and the employability of BSMT graduates from Batch 2022 to 2024. It will compare the experiences of academic scholars and regular, non-scholar cadets in securing apprenticeships through manning agencies. Ultimately, this research seeks to provide a clear picture of equity, motivation, and occupational preparedness within maritime career paths, offering insights into how maritime education institutions can better support all cadets regardless of their scholarship status.

Furthermore, this study fully aligns with the 17 United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, particularly with Target 4.3 of Goal 4 and Target 8.6 of Goal 8 that ensuring "*equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university*" and to "*substantially reduce the proportion of youth not in employment, education or training*" (**United Nations, n.d.**).

Objectives

This research investigated whether a significant relationship existed between funding status and employability of AIMS BSMT graduates. Specifically, this study aimed to answer the following questions:

1. What is the demographic profile of the respondents?
2. What is the funding status of the alumni graduates of AIMS of batch 2022-2024?
3. What is the extent of employability of AIMS Graduates?
4. Is there a significant correlation between the funding status of BSMT batch 2022 to 2024 graduates and their employability in manning agencies?

METHODS

Research Design

This study utilized a quantitative, descriptive-correlational, and non-experimental research design. A correlational design measures the relationship between two or more variables in a single population without manipulating them (**Devi & Lepcha, 2023**). This approach was appropriate for our study. It allowed the researchers to determine the existence, strength, and direction of the relationship between funding status and employability. Because it is non-experimental, the study does not establish cause and effect. Instead, it forecasts potential

outcomes and helps interpret the specific advantages of being a scholar for BSMT graduates from the 2022-2024 batch

Population, Sample Size, and Sampling Technique

The target population consisted of 1,272 graduates from the BSMT Batch 2022-2024. Using Slovin's formula with a 5% margin of error, the initial sample size was calculated at 224. However, because many alumni are currently working onboard ships, the researchers were advised to reduce the target sample. The final sample size was set to 110 alumni.

To ensure fair representation, the researchers used stratified sampling. This method divides a population into distinct subgroups based on specific traits. The sample was divided evenly into two groups: 50 academic scholars and 50 non-scholars. This equal division prevents bias and ensures a valid comparison of employability outcomes between the two groups.

Research Instrument

Data was collected using a structured survey questionnaire distributed via Google Forms and Messenger. Before administration, the instrument was validated by subject-matter experts. The survey consisted of four sections:

Part 1: Demographic Profile. This section collected basic background information from the respondents.

Part 2: Funding Status. This section used multiple-choice questions to identify if the alumni was a scholar or a non-scholar during their academic years.

Part 3: Employability Measures. This section assessed the graduates' employment status, job search strategies, time taken to find employment, duration of their first embarkation, and starting gross monthly salary.

Part 4: Open-Ended Questions. The final section contained five questions. It asked respondents to identify the most beneficial programs (such as career guidance, extra training, financial aid, institutional partnerships, or alumni mentoring) to help non-scholars improve their hiring chances.

Data Gathering Procedure

The data gathering process began after securing approval from the researchers' thesis adviser. The researchers then submitted a formal request to the Alumni Office. With the approval of the Head of Alumni Affairs and Services, the researchers obtained the list of BSMT Batch 2022-2024 graduates to verify respondent eligibility.

The survey instrument was validated by a panel consisting of the research adviser, a grammarian, and a maritime professor. Once approved, the survey was converted into a Google Form. An introductory letter and an informed consent form were placed at the beginning of the survey to address privacy and ethical concerns.

The researchers distributed the survey links and respectfully asked the alumni to participate during their free time. Data collection was completed within two weeks. Upon completion, the researchers tallied and organized the responses. The thesis adviser waived the need for a reliability test because the survey was largely descriptive and

open-ended. Finally, the researchers consulted with the Center for Research and Institutional Development (CRID) for statistical endorsement and data analysis.

Statistical Treatment of Data

The researchers used quantitative tools to analyze the data. IBM SPSS Software was utilized to perform the statistical procedures. The main variables—funding status and employability—were treated as nominal, categorical data. The following statistical tests were applied:

- *Chi-Square Test of Independence*: This non-parametric test was used to determine if the differences in job acquisition between scholars and non-scholars were statistically significant or due to chance (**Frimodig, 2023**). It is the ideal test for finding associations between two categorical variables.
- *Pearson Correlation Coefficient (r)*: This test was used to measure the intensity and direction of the linear relationship between the variables

RESULTS and DISCUSSION

Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Table 1

Frequency of Respondents' Age and Gender (N = 110)

Variable	Category	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Age	22 years old and below	22	20.00
	23 years old	27	24.55
	24 years old	34	30.91
	25 years old	17	15.45
	26 years old and above	10	9.09
Gender	Male	100	90.91
	Female	10	9.09

The demographic data reveals a highly concentrated age range, with the vast majority of respondents falling between 23 and 24 years old (combined 55.46%). This distribution accurately reflects the traditional timeline for maritime education and cadetship. Filipino seafarers typically begin their onboard training as cadets between the ages of 20 and 22, subsequently transitioning into full operational roles by age 25. The sharp drop-off in respondents aged 26 and above (9.09%) suggests that older individuals either complete their programs earlier or are less represented in this specific cohort of recent alumni.

Regarding gender, the sample heavily skews male (90.91%), underscoring the enduring historical trend of male dominance within maritime education and the seafaring profession. However, the presence of female respondents (9.09%) is a critical data point. While a minority, this percentage highlights a gradual shift in the

industry's demographics and signifies the increasing, albeit slow, participation and acceptance of women in shipboard training and marine transportation programs.

Table 2

Frequency of Scholarship Type and Graduation Batch (N = 110)

Variable	Category	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Scholarship	Non-Scholar	55	50.00
	Residence Scholar	28	25.45
	Corps of Regiment Officers	15	13.64
	Honor Student	6	5.45
	Baywatch / Polaris	3	2.73
	Student Assistant	2	1.82
	Student Council	1	0.91
Batch	S.Y. 2022–2023	34	30.91
	S.Y. 2023–2024	34	30.91
	S.Y. 2021–2022	24	21.82
	Batch 2025 (CCI)	18	16.36

An analysis of the respondents' funding sources reveals a significant lack of financial assistance. Exactly half of the respondents (50.00%) navigated their maritime education as non-scholars, bearing the full brunt of tuition and associated costs. Among those who did receive aid, the most common forms were Residence Scholars (25.45%) and Corps of Regiment Officers (13.64%). This indicates that institutional support is largely tied to service-oriented, disciplinary, or practical residential assistance programs, rather than purely academic or merit-based grants (such as Honor Students, who made up only 5.45%).

Furthermore, the concentration of respondents in the S.Y. 2022–2023 and S.Y. 2023–2024 batches (30.91% each) contextualize the study's findings regarding employment. Because the bulk of the sample consists of recent graduates, their experiences directly reflect the current realities, challenges, and immediate post-graduation bottlenecks of the modern maritime labor market.

Table 3*Employment Status and Time to First Employment (N = 110)*

Variable	Category	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Status	Employed (seagoing)	58	52.73
	Under training/onboard waiting	21	19.09
	Unemployed	21	19.09
	Employed (land-based)	9	8.18
	Independent contractor	1	0.91
Timeframe	9–12 months	38	34.55
	6–9 months	29	26.36
	Unemployed	24	21.82
	3–6 months	19	17.27

While a majority of graduates (52.73%) successfully secured seagoing employment, a concerning 19.09% remain unemployed, and another 19.09% are still in the training or "onboard waiting" phase. The data also highlights a prolonged transition from graduation to employment; the largest segment of employed graduates (34.55%) required 9 to 12 months to secure their first contract.

This delay and the notable unemployment rate can be attributed to several systemic industry bottlenecks. A primary obstacle is the severe scarcity of available shipboard training vessels, which prevents graduates from completing the necessary sea time required for full certification (**Maritime Education, 2025**). Furthermore, graduates face a highly saturated entry-level market characterized by a structural surplus of candidates competing for limited cadetship roles (**Classace, 2024**). This intense competition is exacerbated by a recognized skills mismatch, where academic curricula frequently fail to align with the rigorous technical and practical competencies demanded by modern maritime employers (**Maritime Education, 2025**). Consequently, companies tend to favor experienced seafarers over fresh graduates, creating a catch-22 where alumni cannot gain the experience required to be hired (**Dacre and Sewell, 2025**).

Funding Status of the AIMS Graduates

Table 4

Funding Source and Perceived Sufficiency (N = 110)

Variable	Category	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Source	Self-funded (no scholarship)	47	42.73
	Partially funded (family & scholarship)	44	40.00
	Fully funded by a scholarship	19	17.27
Sufficiency	Sufficient	29	26.36
	Not sufficient at all	20	18.18
	Very sufficient	16	14.55
	Somewhat sufficient	16	14.55
	Insufficient	13	11.82
	Moderately sufficient	7	6.36
	Extremely sufficient	7	6.36
	Somewhat insufficient	2	1.82

The financial landscape for these maritime students is characterized by a heavy reliance on personal and familial resources. A combined total of 82.73% of respondents were either completely self-funded (42.73%) or relied on a patchwork of partial scholarships and family support (40.00%). Only a small fraction (17.27%) enjoyed the security of a fully funded academic scholarship.

Interestingly, there is a disconnect between the source of funding and the students' perception of its sufficiency. While 26.36% perceived their funding as "*sufficient*", a critical mass of students reported severe financial strain, with 18.18% stating their funds were "*not sufficient at all*" and 11.82% calling them "*insufficient*."

This perceived inadequacy is clarified when examining the breakdown of covered expenses. Even for the 56.00% of students who received some form of tuition discount, their scholarships almost universally failed to cover auxiliary educational costs. Overwhelming majorities had to pay out-of-pocket for miscellaneous fees (70.91%), expensive maritime training fees (97.27%), and mandatory uniform attire (98.18%). Because standard scholarships primarily target base tuition, students are left vulnerable to the high, hidden costs of maritime education, which likely drives the high reports of financial insufficiency.

Employability of AIMS Graduates

Table 5

Employment Pathways and Duration Outcomes (N = 110)

Variable	Category	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Pathway	Walk-in application	46	41.82
	Currently looking for a company	27	24.55
	Referred by AIMS / manning agency	20	18.18
	Recommended by senior crew	13	11.82
	Online job application	3	2.73
	Did not practice the course	1	0.91
Contract	9–12 months	40	36.36
	Not yet employed	30	27.27
	6–8 months	22	20.00
	3–6 months	14	12.73
	More than 12 months	4	3.64

When examining how graduates secure their positions, the data heavily favors traditional, proactive job-hunting methods. The largest plurality (41.82%) acquired their first seagoing job through direct, walk-in applications. This underscores the necessity for maritime graduates to possess strong interpersonal skills and the resilience to physically canvas manning agencies. However, institutional networks remain a vital secondary pathway, with 18.18% securing jobs through AIMS or partner manning agencies, and 11.82% relying on recommendations from senior crew or officers. The remarkably low reliance on online job applications (2.73%) suggests that the maritime recruitment sector in the Philippines still heavily prioritizes face-to-face interaction and established institutional pipelines over digital recruitment platforms.

Regarding contract length, the standard operational cadence of the industry is clearly reflected in the data. The majority of employed graduates (36.36%) were signed to contracts lasting 9 to 12 months. Perhaps the most alarming data point in this section concerns initial compensation. Over a quarter of the respondents (25.47%) reported a gross monthly salary of below ₱20,000 for their first contract, and another 22.64% earned between ₱20,000 and ₱29,999. Given the exorbitant costs associated with maritime education, pre-employment medical examinations, and mandatory training certificates, this low entry-level wage bracket places immense financial pressure on recent alumni. It highlights a difficult return on investment during the early years of a seafarer's career, where wages barely offset the debt or capital expended to secure the position.

Correlation Between Funding Status and Employability

Table 6

Chi-Square Test of Association Between Tuition Fee Status and Employment Type (N = 110)

Tuition Fee Level	Non-maritime	Seagoing	Shore-based	Unemployed	Total
Level 1.00 (No Discount)	2	29	2	21	54
Level 2.00 (Discounted)	4	43	1	8	56
Total	6	72	3	29	110

To determine if a graduate's financial background systematically influences their career trajectory, Chi-Square statistical analyses were conducted. The results yield a compelling narrative: core financial stability is a significant predictor of early career success in the maritime industry. The analysis revealed a statistically significant relationship between tuition fee status and employment type ($p = .023$). Both the Phi coefficient and Cramer's V resulted in a value of .294, indicating a moderate relationship. Respondents with tuition assistance (Level 2.00) were more likely to secure seagoing employment. Conversely, respondents without tuition assistance (Level 1.00) had a higher rate of unemployment. This suggests that financial stability may positively influence successful job placement.

Table 7

Chi-Square Test of Association Between Tuition Fee and Embarkation Duration (N = 110)

Embarkation Duration	Tuition Fee Level 1	Tuition Fee Level 2	Total
3–6 months	5	9	14
6–8 months	7	15	22
9–12 months	17	23	40
More than 12 months	4	0	4
Not yet employed	21	9	30
Total	54	56	110

A statistically significant relationship was found between a student's tuition fee status and their employment type ($p = .023$, Cramer's V = .294). Specifically, graduates who received tuition assistance (Level 2.00) demonstrated a higher propensity for securing seagoing employment compared to their non-discounted peers (Level 1.00), who exhibited a higher concentration of unemployment. Furthermore, tuition fee status strongly correlated with embarkation duration—the amount of time a graduate had to wait before being deployed ($\chi^2 = 13.72$, $p = .008$, Cramer's V = .35). Graduates with tuition assistance generally secured their shipboard placements faster than those without.

CONCLUSION

Despite completing their academic requirements, these graduates face severe financial constraints that heavily influence their early career trajectories. A vast majority of the students navigated their education by relying on personal wealth or family support rather than comprehensive institutional aid. The data reveals a significant vulnerability to the hidden costs of maritime education. Even among those receiving tuition discounts, institutional aid overwhelmingly failed to cover auxiliary expenses such as mandatory uniforms, miscellaneous fees, and specialized training certifications, resulting in high levels of perceived financial insufficiency among the respondents.

The transition from education to employment is characterized by pronounced systemic bottlenecks and a challenging early return on investment. A substantial portion of graduates either remain unemployed or are delayed in an onboard waiting phase, often requiring nearly a year to secure their first contract. This friction is exacerbated by a saturated entry-level market and the industry's continued reliance on traditional recruitment methods, which require graduates to physically canvas manning agencies rather than utilizing digital platforms. Consequently, fresh graduates must endure long, unpaid waiting periods, only to secure entry-level contracts that offer low initial compensation, further compounding their financial strain.

Ultimately, the findings confirm that early career success in the seafaring industry is intrinsically linked to a graduate's underlying financial stability. The analysis demonstrates a significant positive correlation between receiving tuition assistance and both the likelihood of securing seagoing employment and the speed of deployment. Conversely, graduates lacking financial aid experience notably higher rates of unemployment and longer delays before embarkation. Therefore, the current maritime education and recruitment system operates with a structural barrier: candidates with stronger financial backing are significantly better equipped to absorb the exorbitant costs and survive the prolonged transition from cadet to employed seafarer.

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