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Graduate employability: Interpretation versus expectation

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This article addresses the issue of graduate employability in higher education in Vietnam. It draws on the findings of a doctoral research dissertation on enhancing graduate employability and aims to examine the contrasting interpretations and expectations of students, recent graduates and employers regarding workplace requirements in Vietnam. It is suggested that the skills agenda that has generally been used to generate the 'work readiness' of university students does not adequately take account of the important issue of identity of both students and employers nor does it consider the contextual relationship of power that surrounds and is embedded within the students' practices to build up their employability assets. A contrasting perspective is used to present debates about 'what is needed for graduates to be employable' in the specific context and culture of Vietnam. It is suggested that in Vietnam, not only do work-related skills matter, but also that there is a mismatch between the supply factors and the demand factors that need to be addressed in order to bridge the gap between higher education training and the labour market in Vietnam.

Keywords: graduate employability, Vietnam, higher education

Introduction

Vietnam is a socialist country with the internal economy developing quickly since the adoption of the economic reforms which changed Vietnam from a central planned economy to a market oriented one in 1986. As a result, the economy has developed rapidly, and been driven mainly by market mechanisms. The higher education system has also been expanding very quickly to meet the manpower needs of the economy. However, although each year thousands of students graduate, many have difficulties finding work, and employers still complain that they have difficulties in finding graduates with the requisite knowledge and skills. University graduates, which are considered as the outcome of the training process in higher education in Vietnam, are considered to be weak in planning their future, to have impractical professional knowledge and to lack the necessary skills required by the contemporary workplace (Le Chien Thang & Truong Quang, 2005; MOET, 2008; Nguyen Thuy Anh, 2009; Nguyen Van Lich, 2009; Pham Thi Huyen, 2008; Tran Ngoc Ca, 2006; Tran Quang Trung & Swierczek, 2009; Tran Thi Tuyet, 2010).

This paper discusses some of the research findings of a doctoral research project entitled '*enhancing graduate employability: from the perspective of students and graduates in Vietnam*'. It aims to examine the contrasting interpretations and expectations of students, recent graduates and employers regarding the requirements of the workplace in Vietnam. This research has been concerned with the gaps between students' and graduates' understanding and the expectations of employers in the wider socio-cultural context of graduate employability in Vietnam.

Literature review

Over the last two decades organizations have been increasingly influenced by the effects of globalization. Under the globalized economic competitive pressures, organizations in both the developed and developing worlds have undergone massive restructuring through downsizing and de-layering, leading to job insecurity and emerging new career patterns (Clarke, 2007). In response, there has been increasing educational attention paid to what are variously called transferable skills, soft skills, core skills, key skills, generic skills, basic skills, cross-curricular skills, or, more recently, employability skills in higher education (Bridges, 1993, p. 45; Hager & Holland, 2006, p. 2). Sometimes they are referred to as ‘competencies’, ‘capacities’, or ‘abilities’ rather than skills. In Vietnam, ‘soft skills’ is the term used popularly to refer to the similar concept. It is suggested that students need to develop these attributes during their university time in order to be employable after graduation. There has been great deal of research investigating graduate quality to ensure the success of these graduates in entering and maintaining employment after graduation.

One of the current trends in research is to develop a definite list of generic skills that enhance graduate employability. For example, Cox and King (2006, p. 264) identify skills sets of transferable skills and subject specific skills to embed employability in course design and suggest that the sub-set of transferable skills are communication, analysis, design, evaluation, ethics, project and process management skills. Raybould and Sheedy (2005) also drive students, academic staff and employers to the transferable skills that are supposed to be important for university graduates to become ‘work ready’. In Vietnam, there is also some initial research investigating the shortage of work related skills of Vietnamese higher education graduates. Truong Quang Duoc (2006), for example, carried out a large survey with university graduates, staff and employers on skills which he claims to represent the quality of graduates from business master programmes in Vietnam. Tran Quang Trung and Swierczek (2009) also conducted quantitative research to explore the status of skills development in universities in Vietnam, and to identify the factors that have impacts on skill development. These research projects normally ended up providing a long list of skills and considering these are the core skills students need to develop in order to be ready for work.

The skills agenda, however, has not gained the support of many academic staff in higher education. The introverted nature of academic organizations does not seem to support the change as the production of academic knowledge “tends to privilege theory and conceptual knowledge over practical application” (Rae, 2007, pp. 608-609). Moreover, the building up of a list of generic attributes may easily lead to the misunderstanding that these attributes are discrete or atomic entities to be acquired and transferred singly, and that we can readily recognise them easily when we see them (Hager, 2006, p. 18). In practice, these attributes “overlap and interweave like the threads in a carpet” (Hager, p. 34). For example, we cannot go far into consideration of teamwork before communication becomes an issue. Besides, when talking about skills or competence, we need to beware of the difference between competence (can do) and performance (does do) (Knight & Yorke, 2004), and also the notion of “cultural fit” (Holland, 2006, p. 272). In short, the lists of generic skills may be interpreted, understood and recognised differently in different context, and by different stakeholders.

Since employability is the propensity of graduates to secure a job and progress in their career, it is not just about getting a job, it is about developing attributes, techniques, or experience for life (Harvey, 2005). It is more than skills and wish-lists. It is culture dependent, context dependent, and not always verbalisable as individual knowledge is both tacit and explicit (Beckett & Mulcahy, 2006). Thus, the skill agenda can only address part of the problem.

The research

In order to get away from the skill agenda, this study employed a broader concept of ‘employability assets’ provided by Hillage and Pollard (1998) in their employability framework. They suggest that employability assets include not only skills, but also professional knowledge (what you know) and attitudes (the way you use what you know).

This study is an exploratory study conducted via focus group interviews with university students and in-depth interviews with recent graduates and employers. The study employed three focus group interviews of 10 final year university students in each group. Group members were from different universities, different disciplines (such as law, telecommunication engineer, electrical engineer, social science, teacher training, business and commerce). Individual, face to face, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 recent graduates from different disciplines and six employers. For the purpose of this study, only graduates who had graduated in the previous five years were invited. Participating employers were from both public and private sectors. Three employers were from big corporations and the other three were from small and medium enterprises.

This paper aims to report the contrasting perceptions and interpretations of students, graduates and employers on the work requirements that university graduates need to satisfy to enter the workplace. It aims to argue that skills are not the only things that matter in the transition from university to the workplace of Vietnamese university graduates. Other issues, including the perception gap between students, graduates and employers are worth to be taken into consideration and to be addressed in the process of enhancing graduate employability in the Vietnamese context.

Work requirement – students and graduates’ interpretation

Work-related knowledge, skills and experiences and the knowledge of English were repeatedly indicated by participating students and graduates to be particularly important, specifically in relation to ‘employability’. Both students and graduates including the ones whose work did not have a linear relation to their subject matter studied at university stated that the most important asset for them in employment was professional knowledge. The explanation for this thinking was often that if one possessed good professional knowledge, he/she was more likely to have higher working ability, which was highly appreciated by the employer and in turn increased his/her confidence when seeking job.

Apart from work-related knowledge, students and graduates also seemed to agree that soft skills were very necessary and important in job searching, maintenance and satisfaction. Some of the soft skills that most students and graduates considered important in the labour market were team work, communication skills, planning, independent working skills, presentation skills and decision making skills. They indicated that these were the important skills because employers were looking for them. They suggested that enterprises needed high quality people who could do the job and who had both good professional knowledge and skills in dealing with job requirements.

English language skills were also considered as vital. Especially since Vietnam opened its door to the world to create a quickly developing foreign investment sector which offered much higher quality of work and salaries, English has been considered as a key to help graduates to enter this desired working environment. Moreover, as a result of Vietnam’s integration with

the outside world, not only in the foreign investment sector, but also in other economic sectors, strong English proficiency often brings advantages in a competitive labour market.

Employment experience was also considered as an essential asset for employment. Students were all aware that most job vacancies in the market required some kinds of work-related experiences. Thus, without work experience, there seemed to be a very narrow door for anyone who wanted to enter the employment market.

What do they have to offer employers?

Though students and graduates could identify quite clearly what was expected from them in the labour market, they did not appear to be confident about the things they could offer employers at the point of graduation. Most students and graduates involved in this study were likely to be critical of their knowledge and skills. For them, the knowledge and skills they could develop at university were far poorer than expected. They generally blamed their ill-preparation on the training at university.

In the eyes of these students and graduates, the professional knowledge provided by universities was considered to focus overly on theory. The complaints were often about text books which in many cases, were considered ‘boring and irrelevant’ and on the curriculum which was described as ‘heavy’, ‘outdated’ and too ‘theory-focused’. The poor and outdated infrastructure of universities also contributed to the low level of practical knowledge students acquired.

Some students and graduates who did not believe that professional knowledge was the most decisive factor in the job searching process also articulated other areas of university training to criticize:

Our education system is lagging far behind the development of the society. The professional knowledge is sometimes not so important, but the social understanding and the sensitivity in communication are the most essential. Universities do not help us to understand this.

Understanding the importance of soft skills at work and in the transition to work, most students and graduates however, were not satisfied with the skills they could be able to develop in universities. They thought that their skills were generally weak and could not meet the demands of their future work. Interestingly, most students and graduates blamed their lack of proper soft skills on their universities. They either said that “soft skill teaching is one of the shortages of every university, apart from knowledge, we cannot learn anything about soft skills” or “we cannot get any instruction about soft skills, universities do not have any instruction, teachers do not teach either”. Some students stated naively, “we do not have a soft skills subject in our universities”, or “our universities should teach us soft skills, but they don’t”. They even considered soft skills in a similar way to knowledge where the university teacher should teach them in class, thus they heavily criticized their universities “my university doesn’t equip me with any skills at all!” and considered ‘that’s a shortcoming of Vietnamese universities’. They also criticized the situation in Vietnamese universities, where students normally only focused on the marks in their exams. They come to class just to “get the necessary knowledge from the teacher” to prepare for the exam. Thus, many of them did not seem to see the link between being actively involved in class activities and the process of skills development.

Because of the lack of appropriate environment for skill development in universities, and because skills were considered essential in job obtaining for graduates to seek initial jobs,

many students and graduates suggested that they should go for the skill classes offered in many private soft skills centres in the market.

Not only was soft skill development in higher education criticized, but the English teaching practice in the system was also heavily criticized as being weak and ineffective. For most students and graduates involved in this study, they could not develop their English proficiency in universities. As currently, most students from non-English specialized universities had to study English in the first two years of university. However, with only a few hours a week in a class of 50 to 70 students and the traditional method of the teacher transmitting knowledge, students often said that their English was getting worse.

Apart from English, students and graduates also expressed their worries about their lack of practical experience at work. Being final year university students, some of them “have not done any kind of work”. Some others had been involved in some types of popular part time work, for example, tutoring, café shop assistants and some other kinds of simple work in the retail market. This kind of work experience, as most of the students and graduates claimed, was irrelevant to the professional experience expected by employers. In addition, although all participating students had been involved in some types of professional internship (compulsory for about a month as part of the curriculum), the work during the internship did not bring them much understanding about their work in the future as they were often not given real work tasks.

This was also confirmed by the employers. The intern students were normally given menial office work (such as photocopying, typing, reading some old reports, or even making tea) instead of work requiring the use of their professional knowledge. The reason employers did not want to give students some ‘real’ work was that it would take time to train students, who would not work long for the organization and these students may also release confidential organizational information to competitors or outsiders.

The lack of real work experience made it hard for students to develop some practical sense of the workplace. They did not know what the real requirements of employers were, how they would carry their tasks in practice and how they should prepare to be better qualified for the job. Most importantly lacking experience created a lack of confidence in many students. Most graduates recalled their hard time in searching jobs after graduation and suggested that they were not ready for work at that point, as they all seemed to know what was expected from them in the employment market and that they did not possess sufficient skills and knowledge to meet the employer expectations. Several students and graduates followed second degree courses in other universities or joined different soft skills or English courses in order to, according to them, develop more knowledge and attributes, thus helping them to become more employable.

Work requirement – employers’ expectation

While most students and graduates considered professional knowledge as the most important employment asset, most employers however, did not appear to share the same idea. Though suggesting that the need for professional knowledge for ‘technical’ employees was often higher than for administrators, they did not seem to believe that recent graduates could work well with the knowledge provided by universities. Thus, professional knowledge was often considered important but was not of the highest priority in the choices made by employers. Instead, they all seemed to suggest that the first thing they wanted from the new recruited employees was some kind of work-related skills, or enterprise skills (Truong Quang Duoc, 2006). Ideally, they also wanted to find someone who had appropriate experience, who had done similar jobs or

was involved in a similar work environment before. These employees did not require much time for adaptation, their “learning curve” (Mason, William, & Cranmer, 2009) was generally shorter than the others. Thus, according to the participating employers, the training time for these employees, was often shorter.

The question is how could employers expect recent graduates to have working experience? The requirements of the employers seemed to be unreasonable; however, they reflected the real expectation of employers when they wanted to employ new staff. Most participating employers also added that not many positions in their companies, therefore, were open for recent graduates. Nonetheless, they did employ recent graduates for some ‘assistant’ positions to do the work as helpers or technicians. Recent graduates would be placed in those positions to learn how to do the job, to develop work skills and also to show their potential for development. Even with these positions, employers still wanted to find the ones who had rich ‘life skills’. They wanted to find evidence of extracurricular involvement and practical project involvement. In short, employers wanted someone with real world problem solving experience, with the expectation that these graduates “should adapt to the new working environment quicker”.

Apart from suitable work related experience, employers also expected to find employees who had adequate professional knowledge. It was suggested that this would help the new employees become more productive in a shorter time. However, employers often perceived that when applying for a certain job, the job seeker should obtain relevant professional knowledge, thus employers often take professional knowledge for granted. Instead, they all seemed to place high expectation on the enterprise skills, or relevant work related experience, of their potential recruits. English was considered an advantage and sometimes essential in employment. For example, they would prefer someone with good English skills when the position required international interactions. Other requirements all depended on the characteristics of a specific job. For customer service, they preferred someone with good appearance. For some highly ‘technical’ and professional jobs such as IT engineers or accountants, they wanted to see the evidence of competence or the potential of competence in each given position.

Most employers agreed that a university degree was only the first requirement. They also knew that the majority of recent graduates did not have any work experience, and that if the position was open to recent graduates, it meant that they would have to train the new employees from the beginning. What they really wanted to find from recent graduates was some kinds of personal qualities that were “potentially suitable for the job”. Sometimes they just based on their experience to choose one candidate from others. They often did not choose the candidate with the best qualification and the richest experience, but instead, the most suitable candidate for the job.

All employers stated that the attitude of the job seeker was very important. They wanted to have someone confident and ‘serious’ for the job. One employer claimed that “your knowledge or skills may not be very good, we could train you, but the attitude is yours, very personal, it has been built up through your whole life”. That may also be the reason when during job interviews, employers often “look for the overall reaction and manner to see how that person is” before closely looking at the content of each answer.

Some employers did not like to use the words ‘soft skills’, but they used ‘life skills’ instead. They explained their preference:

In Vietnam life skills are important because we live and work in a community culture. Family culture is a significant feature in the Vietnamese workplace. Thus life skills are

important. I didn't mean any specific skills, but you need to make sense of the Vietnamese way at work, and adapt to it quickly in order to succeed.

Another employer complained about the poor life skills of students and recent graduates:

The life skills of all students are weak. Students nowadays go to different soft skills courses to study, but then, in practice, they apply what they learnt as a technique. Many of them have a communication skill certificate but they speak very 'hollow', without feeling.

Discussion and conclusion

Obviously, skills are not the only important factors in the transition from university to the workplace of Vietnamese university students. More profoundly, necessary skills were actually interpreted, understood and recognized differently by the students, graduates and employers.

When the majority of the students considered the required skills similar as knowledge and some had actually enrolled in skills classes, they seemed to consider these attributes as "discrete or atomic entities" to be acquired and transferred singly (Hager, 2006, p.18). This misunderstanding had not only lowered the self-esteem of university students when there was no skills subject in their university curriculum, but also created the feeling of 'work-unready', of being ill-prepared for employment. However, when students perceived that there was no skill development in their university learning, they reacted differently. Some just 'let it be'; others registered in 'soft skills' classes with the aim to develop skills and to enhance employability after graduation. These efforts by the students seem ineffectual as the employers still claimed that students and graduates generally possessed poor skills. More profoundly, some students went to 'soft skills' classes but the techniques they learned disappointed employers.

Employers, though, seemed to share a similar view with students and graduates that the so-called 'soft skills' or 'life skills' were important for any employee in the contemporary labour market, did not seem to interpret these necessary skills the way the students and graduates did. They generally preferred candidates with rich life skills, the skills necessary for anyone who wants to live and work successfully in a community culture in Vietnam. They wanted to employ someone who was able to make sense of the Vietnamese way at work, and adapt to it quickly. Ideally, job seekers with rich enterprise skills were the ones employers wanted to find. Employers all seemed to favour relevant work experience which often links with the understanding of both tacit and explicit knowledge required at work in their specific working context and culture.

Nonetheless, employers' requirements and complaints about the required skills of recent graduates did not seem to be entirely reasonable. As skills need to be developed in real practice, recent graduates also needed time and guidance to transform what they possessed from study to work, then gradually develop work-related skills (Smith & Comyn, 2003). The employer should also take responsibility in the transition of graduates from university to work. The requirements of employers were generally demanding for recent graduates. This also created a pressure for recent graduates who often 'measure' their capability according to the job requirements in the market. When they did not have good professional knowledge, when they did not have many chances to develop necessary skills, when their English was still not perfect and when they did not have any work experience, they would not feel confident to enter the employment market. This often created a desire to learn more, to collect enough certificates proving that they are qualified. However, the learning of 'what' rather than learning of 'how' of students and graduates often disappointed employers.

The differences in terms of perceptions of required skills for employment between students, graduates and employers had become major obstacles for the process of enhancing graduate employability in the Vietnamese context. This together with the interpretation of the other requirements of the labour market and the ways students perceived their employability assets all affected and limited students' and graduates' self-awareness and opportunity awareness in the new environment at workplace. This, in turn, was reflected in their ability to deploy and present their assets to the market in an accessible way to employers (Hillage & Pollard, 1998). Employers, on the other hand, seemed to keep their power and appeared to be 'picky' when deciding to employ recent graduates. The power gap and the identity of both students/graduates and employers broadened the gap between higher education and the labour market.

In summary, not only the employability skills, but the whole employability assets of recent graduates in Vietnam were poor. With much outdated and irrelevant knowledge received at university, with the poor skills development and the low level of esteem, Vietnamese university graduates were considered ill-prepared for the labour market. The skill agenda and the misunderstanding of the necessary skills required by employers took graduates longer time to transform properly to the labour market.

On the surface, it seemed that universities were responsible for the low quality of their 'products'. However, when the outer layer was peeled away, the inner part revealed other critics. The misunderstanding and misinterpreting of the employer's demands seemed to create a bigger gap between the demand side and the supply side in the labour market. There were also cases when students and graduates did not want to take the responsibility for their own future career and blamed their weak employability on their universities. When they still could not stand on their own feet, they still wanted to blame their problems on their universities and did not make enough effort to enrich their knowledge and skills, success in job finding hardly came. Employers, on the other hand, should also take responsibility in developing work-related skills for recent graduates, as investing in human resources is also a good way to invest in increasing productivity for their companies (Le Chien Thang & Truong Quang, 2004, 2005). Nonetheless, the training and guidance of universities is also essential to help recent graduates to develop more practical knowledge and stronger generic skills both of which are essential for a smoother transition to the workplace of university graduates.

There is a need for a mutual understanding among all related stakeholders in order to build a curriculum and study environment which enhances graduate capability and working potential. The mismatch will only be reduced when every related stakeholder makes a positive effort to work together to find a common solution that works best for the situation.

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