Enhancing Graduate Employability

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Abstract

Employability is a contentious issue in universities (Harvey, 2005, p. 13) and the way it has been conceptualized around the world is of particular interest here. The impact of this issue on the higher education curriculum has also been a topic of debate (Yorke, 2006). However, in many Western countries such as the UK, the US and Australia, evidence suggests that employability skills and other related notions such as core skills, generic skills, soft-skills, and transferable skills are taken into consideration by many researchers, and many universities (Hager & Holland, 2006; Knight & Yorke, 2004). These skills, as widely suggested in the literature, are considered necessary to help graduates not only find jobs more easily, but also achieve success in contemporary life. Recently, countries in the developing world like China, Thailand, or Vietnam have started to turn their attention to this issue, and universities in these countries have also been requested to take ‘employability’ into consideration in their curriculum design (The World Bank, 2008; Tran Quang Trung & Swierczek, 2009). The Vietnamese government, in particular, has urged changes in its higher education system, and asked universities to take responsibility to ‘equip’ students with the necessary skills before graduation. However, ‘what to equip’ them with, and ‘how to equip’ them best are the two questions that challenge the Vietnamese higher education sector before the policy can be implemented.

This paper will critically review the literature in the area. It will examine the changes in the world economy which lead to changes in the graduate labour market. Then the notion of ‘employability’ and other related ideas will be explored, including the contemporary debate over ‘skill agenda against higher education liberty’. Finally it will focus on the issue of ‘graduate employability’ in the specific context of the Vietnamese higher education system and the Vietnamese economy.

Introduction

Finding jobs was not a big problem for university graduates when the demand for employing university graduates was high, and when university education was elite education. However, when the market mechanism changes, organizations change, and higher education also changes toward mass higher education, the graduate labour market also changes accordingly. There are more and more university graduates experiencing difficulties in entering the graduate labour market.

This paper will critically review the literature in the area. It will examine the changes in the world economy which lead to changes in the graduate labour market. Then the notion of ‘employability’ and other related ideas will be explored, including the contemporary debate over ‘skill agenda versus academic freedom’. Finally it will focus on the issue of ‘graduate employability’ in the specific context of the Vietnamese higher education system and the Vietnamese economy. The Vietnamese economy and its higher education system will share many similarities with the rest of the world under the impact of globalization and global village. Nonetheless, the development of the Vietnamese economy, the Vietnamese higher education and the Vietnamese culture is unique, and will require an insider look at the problem. It is suggested that the gap between the Vietnamese economy and its education system should be bridged to make the notion of graduate employability clearer and more explicit for all students studying in the higher education system in Vietnam.
The ‘Age of contingency’ and the changes in graduate labour market

Nobody in employment today could be unaware of the pace of change. The world is changing so quickly. It is not surprising when many authors use such phrases as ‘the world of complexity’ (Barnett, 2006, p. 50), ‘risk society’ (Beck, 1992), and ‘age of contingency’ (Bauman, 1996) to describe the world order in the 21st century. I support Down’s (2006, p. 189) argument that all of these terms accurately describe the conditions under which we work and learn. An environment of radical uncertainty and complexity both brings about changes and calls for changes. In business especially, the global forces of competition, deregulation and new technology are creating the need for international organizations that can respond rapidly to the changes of market demands. As a result, the shape of organizations is changing: ‘down-sizing’, ‘de-layering’, ‘out-sourcing’, and the growth of multi-disciplinary team structures are examples the Association of Graduate Recruiters (2009) uses to describe the changes which affect the way people work.

The matter of complexity and contingency is a matter of general concern, and it affects not only graduate labour market, but the whole labour market in general. Nevertheless, the situations in which graduates are likely to find themselves at work through the rest of their lives are likely to be open-ended (Barnett, 2006, p. 51). In order to be adaptable, graduates also need to be aware of the changes taking place in graduate careers, which are suggested in the international literature as follows:

- Permanence is no longer a significant feature in graduate jobs (Fallows & Steven, 2000b, p. 5). As a result of ‘down-sizing’ and ‘de-layering’, businesses have adopted a flatter management structure. ‘Down-sizing’ and ‘de-layering’ have also resulted in huge numbers of redundancies, and overwork for the remaining employees (The Association of Graduate Recruiters, 2009). The result of all these is that the established career paths for graduates have disappeared, and there is no longer a job for life for any graduate.

- When many traditional jobs have disappeared, gone also are the clear functional identities and the progressive rises in income and security, yet, the new world creates new opportunities and new careers for graduates (Harvey, 2000, p. 6). When traditional jobs could not absorb the growing number of graduates, new opportunities open for them in smaller businesses, especially in the growing number of SMEs all over the world. Graduates also need to be ready to join a new world of ‘customers and clients, adding value, lifelong learning, portfolio careers, self-development and an overwhelming need to stay employable’ (The Association of Graduate Recruiters, 2009).

- New skills and new direction needed: The greatest challenge for graduates in the new era will be to develop themselves to become employ-able (Harvey, 2005; Yorke, 2006). The new world of work requires new skills such as negotiating, networking, problem solving, and skills to manage process rather than functional skills (Harvey, Moon, & Geall, 2009). Finding a good job after graduation is not the end of the story, as ‘to be employed is to be at risk, to be employable is to be secure’ (Hawkins, 1999, p. 263). As new technologies are making established practice and experience irrelevant (Fallows & Steven, 2000b, p. 5), as soon as one cannot satisfy the requirement of the given job, he/she will be replaced immediately. This situation calls for a fundamental review of the way universities and their staff are rewarded for teaching and learning to be more responsive to changes.

Employ-ability and related terminologies
In the international context, 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 (Bridges, 1993, p. 45; Hager & Holland, 2006, p. 2). Sometimes they are referred to as ‘competencies’, ‘capacities’, or ‘abilities’ rather than skills. Debate on their definition and on how students best acquire them continues in many articles. However, in general, the central aspiration of those who seek to identify these kinds of skills is to find skills which can be applied either or both: (i) across different cognitive domains or subject areas; (ii) across a variety of social, and in particular employment, situations. The terms are used rather loosely, often interchangeable, and it would be somewhat arbitrary to draw distinctions in any very hard and very fast way (Bridges, 1993, p. 45).

In other words, these terms are widely used to refer to a range of qualities and capacities that are viewed as increasingly important in contemporary life. The main focus is usually on their role in work, and education viewed as a preparation for work (Hager & Holland, 2006, p. 3). Since it is widely assumed that these skills denote graduates’ work readiness, it seems reasonable when Mason, Williams, Cranmer, & Guile (2003, p. 4) group all of them together under the heading ‘employ-ability’, with the emphasis more on ‘ability’ and less on ‘employ’. There has been considerable debate on what is meant by employability, and what key skills are. A widely used definition of employability is:

The capacity to gain initial employment, maintain employment and obtain employment if required (Hillage & Pollard, 1998, p. 2).

While many would agree with this statement, ESECT (2005, p.4) argues that it does not consider such external factors as the current supply and demand of the job market, the individual’s ability compared with the abilities of other applicants, the personal circumstances, and the global recruitment market. ESECT, then, works out another definition of employability:

A set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy (ESECT, 2005, p. 4)

This definition, though used by many other authors, is criticised as problematic by Yorke (2006, p. 8) one of the key authors in the area. He suggests five crucial points regarding this definition: (i) there is no certainty that the possession of a range of desirable characteristics will convert employability into employment, (ii) skills and knowledge should not be construed in narrow terms, (iii) the gaining of a ‘graduate job’, and success in it, should not be conflated, (iv) the choice of occupation is, for many graduates, likely to be constrained, and (v) it may not be possible to maximise the benefits to all interested parties (graduates, employers, community and the economy) (p. 8).

Although Hillage and Pollard’s definition is criticised, they do provide three important aspects:

- Gaining initial employment
- Maintaining employment
- Obtaining new employment if required
The only problem is to make clear the meaning of the ambiguous term ‘capacity’ in Hillage and Pollard’s definition, which should be covered by both meanings, first, ‘potential’ or ‘necessary characteristics’, and second, getting employment which then attests to possession of those characteristics (Yorke, 2006, p. 9).

The good points of Yorke (2006) and Knight & Yorke’s (2004, p. 9) argument is that they point out that employment and employability are different concepts. According to them, employability, understood as suitability for graduate employment, refers to fitness, so, it may improve graduates’ chances of getting graduate jobs but it does not assure them. Employment rates reflect the operation of labour market that tend to compound the disadvantage experienced by certain groups of graduates. There is a question of demand for graduate labour to consider as well (Knight & Yorke, 2004, p. 10).

Is employability higher education's job?

The idea that university graduates should be expected to possess certain general qualities and attributes is long established. Mason, Williams, Cranmer, & Guile (2003, p. 3) suggest that both Cardinal Newman in the middle of Nineteenth century and The Dearing Report at the end of Twentieth century recognised the link between higher education and skill development when trying to define the aim of higher education. They quote the words of the Dearing Report defining the aim of higher education as being to ‘inspire and enable individuals to develop their capabilities to the highest potential levels throughout life, so that they grow intellectually, are well equipped for work, can contribute effectively to society and achieve personal fulfilment’ (Dearing, 1997). However, this link, the Dearing Report complains, is often overlooked. Until later, in the 1990s, reports and papers have been increasingly urging the higher education sector to make core, key, transferable and employability skills the heart of students’ learning experiences. Since then, in many countries, there has been increasing pressure on higher education to contribute directly to the demand of ‘meeting the needs of the economy’ (Mason, et al., 2003, p. 4).

Increasingly, educational policy and investment, particularly with reference to higher education is ‘predicated upon the explicit assumption that increased skills and educational achievement levels hold the key to economic prosperity within an increasingly competitive global economy’ (Purcell, Elias, & Wilton, 2004, p. 3). The economy changes and so does the labour market requirements. As a result, the relationship between higher education and the labour market is also changing accordingly. The assumptions of producing professionally qualified students in proportion to the projected needs of each profession suggested by Siegel (1967) is no longer appropriate. As Orivel (1996, p. 11) puts it ‘educational systems must give up on the idea of producing a mass of future employees who are extremely narrowly specialised, unable to adapt to the evolution of labour markets and technologies’. Instead, the skills of employees in the contemporary world must be fluid, flexible and adaptable (Harvey, et al., 2009; Knight & Yorke, 2004; Yorke, 2006).

There is a need for a shift in priorities in higher education. Traditionally, ‘universities have two major functions, to prepare the elite to govern the nation and, latterly, to provide an institutional basis for research into all forms of knowledge’ (Jarvis, 2002, p. 43). Universities now need ‘to focus on employability, preparing students for work’ (Cox & King, 2006, p. 262). The need comes from the requirement and pressure of governments, industries, from higher education agencies, and also from higher education researchers (Mason, et al., 2003, p. 3). Moreover, employability is an issue of direct concern to students in attending university. The prime motivation for the majority of students ‘is not to study a particular subject in depth, but to enhance their employment prospects’ (Cox & King, 2006, p. 263). The shift to including
employability skills in the university agenda does not seem to be questionable. In fact, many universities, especially in developed countries have embedded key skills in their curricula (Fallows & Steven, 2000b). In many countries in the developing world such as Vietnam or South Africa, there has been increasing attention paid to skills development in higher education, which is considered to provide ‘work-readiness’ for graduates (Maharasoa & Hay, 2001; Tran Quang Trung & Swierczek, 2009).

However, the implication for embedding employability into real teaching and learning in higher education is not simple. It faces many critiques from many education researchers and university lecturers.

First, many academics are suspicious of the idea that higher education can or should contribute to student employability, apart from qualifying them with an academic award. Bates puts forward that while not often articulated in print, there are reservations within the academy that enhanced employability links will infringe academic autonomy, undermine critique and result in ‘training’ rather than ‘education’ (1999, p. 116). Then the concern that employability agenda will downgrade education to training, will be anti-intellectualist, and will erode academic freedom is repeated in many contemporary research articles (Billett, 2009; Harvey, 2000; Morley, 2001). For example, Moley wonders ‘Do universities exist simply to meet the needs of modern capitalism and are students being constructed solely as future workers, rather than fully rounded citizens?’ (p. 132). A similar point could also be found in Harvey (2000, p. 3) concerning whether higher education should be about training graduates for jobs rather than improving their minds.

However, these authors later on, find the answer for their own questions:

The ‘New Realities’ facing higher education are about responsiveness – not ‘downgrading’ higher education to training. On the contrary, in a rapidly changing world, graduates need to be lifelong learners. The primary role of higher education is increasingly to transform students by enhancing their knowledge, skills, attitudes and abilities while simultaneously empowering them as lifelong critical, reflective learners. (Harvey, 2000, p. 3)

Moreover, the tension between higher education and training seems to be unreasonable, as while ‘both are seeking to impart “skills”, there is no clear, formal and universally accepted distinction made between skills acquired through education and those acquired through training” (Bennett, 2002, p. 471). Rather, Holland (2006, p. 282) suggests, the links between the various education sectors are horizontal and vertical as the demand for different combinations of knowledge sets, skills and dispositions changes in line with market demand. Holland then illustrates this with an example in an Australian recent survey: there are more university graduates undertaking some form of vocational education than vocational graduates articulating to university study (DEST, 2002). Clearly, in the contemporary world, the shift to employability is not downgrading higher education; rather, it increases the responsiveness of higher education to the changes of society. Since universities are not insulated from changes in the external environment, they cannot be isolated in the community they are expected to serve (Holland, 2006, p. 280). While more open to the project of enhancing employability, researchers have different views on the questions ‘what is employability’ and ‘how to develop it’. The current trend in research and universities is to develop a definite list of generic skills which enhances graduate employability (See Appendix I for an example of this list). There are two converse opinions about this list. Some universities and researchers
are still working hard to build a list of attributes contemporary employers need from university graduates (Cox & King, 2006; Hambur, Rowe, & Le, 2002; Hartshorn & Sear, 2005; Meisinger, 2004; Raybould & Sheedy, 2005). While many other authors are against the idea of asking employers, and then building up what they call a ‘wish-list’ of skills graduates should develop in order to meet employers’ need.

Some of those authors show no enthusiasm over the relationship with ‘employers’. For example, Knight and Yorke put forward the view that ‘employers take everything and give nothing’ (2004, p. 23). Then, ‘some aspects of employment-related capacities can only be developed in the employment context’ (Yorke, 2006, p. 3). Smith & Comyn even blame employers for the problem of employability skills: ‘Employability skills are developed throughout a person’s working life and hence employers need to view the process of employability skills development as a whole-of-workforce issue’ (2003, p. 10).

Other authors, although not emphasising critiques of ‘employers’, criticise the list of generic skills for employability. For York and Harvey, it seems impossible to build up a list of generic skills which will satisfy all employers, because there are differences in emphasis according to employment sectors. In other words,

‘The industrial sector tended to emphasize proactivity, self-drivenness, and the capacity to cope with pressure, whereas the health and social services sector tended to highlight self-awareness, empathy, concern for people, helpfulness, and approachability. Personal qualities therefore seem to weigh heavily in construing employability’ (2005, p. 50).

Winch, on the other hand, sees the list of generic skills as nebulous, and presents problems related to the names of each skill, namely, critical thinking, problem solving, and creativity.

There are four areas of difficulty in characterising them as generic skills: (i) Conceptual – What are they and can they coherently be defined? (ii) Contextual – If they can be said to exist at all, how context dependent are they? (iii) Practicality – Can they be developed as part of graduate education? (iv) Transferability – Given positive answers to the first three questions, are they transferable? (Winch, 2006, p. 69)

Hinchliffe shares the point of view of Winch, and criticises further the long list of skills by asking ‘ How many employers themselves possess such a dazzling array of attributes?’ and ‘ Can we realistically expect young men and women in their early twenties to already possess all those skills and attributes which takes years for any normal intelligent person to develop?’ (2006, p. 91). He then concludes that most current notions of graduate employability place unrealistic demands on graduates (p. 100).

Beckett and Mulcahy give out another warning for the formal representations of skills, that they cannot easily capture elements of knowledge which remain specific and tacit. Obviously not all knowledge is verbalised, so, in developing profiles of skills, important knowledge such as intuitive or tacit knowledge is left out (2006, p. 244).

All of the above arguments seem reasonable. However, I am personally not strongly against the list of attributes for employability, as Harvey’s (2005, p. 16) comment that describing employer’s wish-list is for higher education to consider how far it could respond while maintaining its essential mission. Knight and Yorke (2004, p24) state that ‘there is a lack of agreement about what “key skills” are’. Given that the lists of
skills are built in different contexts, with different employers, in different places and times, their claim seems understandable. As for many researchers in the area, these lists are just reference lists. Then, even though they are different in words, they share many similarities in understanding across the world (Harvey, 2005). However, Yorke (2006, p.10) seems unrealistic when he spells out that there is a discrepancy between what employers would ideally like and what higher education can reasonably supply. Conversely, Harvey’s findings sound very interesting:

The requirements of employers sometimes seem to be at odds with those of academia. Closer analysis of what employers are looking for reveals congruity between the abilities developed in higher education and those desired by employers (2005, p. 23)

Harvey also mentions that although there are differences in emphasis both within and between employing organizations, at root, employers want interactive and personal attributes. The core interactive attributes are communication, teamwork and interpersonal skills. Personal attributes are attitudes and abilities including intellect, knowledge, willingness and ability to learn and continue learning. All of these attributes are necessary for higher education students to develop to become effective learners (Harvey, 2000, p. 8). Or, in other words, there is no tension between the achievements that employers want and those valued by the lecturers in higher education (Knight & Yorke, 2004, p. 34). Academics’ fear, suggested by Knight and Yorke (2004, p. 34), may be legitimate where employability is understood as the intrusion of ‘skills’ into the curriculum. However, the higher-employment interface should not be seen as an ‘add-on’ to academic study. Rather, employability should be considered ‘a subset of, and fundamentally contingent on, transformative lifelong learning’ (Harvey, 2000, p. 4).

Nonetheless, 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’ (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, p. 33), 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. It is not surprising when Beckett and Mulcahy claim ‘Lists of generic skills make no sense unless they show they are grounded in practical judgements and that the reasons practitioners can give for their judgements are articulated among their peers’ (2006, p. 262).

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, p. 13). 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, p. 251). It is hard to see, to feel, or even to explain what exactly employability is, especially in the context of teaching and learning in higher education. Smith and Comyn’s argument raises the important issue that ‘the worth of employability skills can only be fully appreciated in the workplace where the consequences of such skills can be seen’ (2003, p. 11). However, it does not seem reasonable when they see employability is a whole-of-workforce issue, and employers are the ones who have responsibility to develop it (p. 10). Holland’s explanation, instead, is quite reasonable:
Since so many jobs are now requiring the kinds of capacities that previously were not so important for most workers, it is not surprising that participation in all forms of post-compulsory education has increased. At university level longer degree structures which combine different disciplines are more in vogue, a significant number of graduates subsequently undertake some form of vocational training, and there is an increasing tendency for graduates to obtain jobs which are outside of their initial field of study. These shifts in emphasis and the blurring of previously rigid distinctions between ‘learning’ and ‘working’ have profound implications for educational providers as much as for employers (2006, p. 274).

Holland calls for a closer link between higher education and employers, and suggests that employers should take a role in university-wide initiatives (p. 296). Indeed, this link is viewed as more and more important by both universities and employers. There is more and more evidence for the cooperation between them: sandwich programs, work placements, co–operative programs, practicum placements, and internships. In short, the form of work-based learning becomes so familiar in many universities worldwide.

Holland’s argument becomes more persuasive when he points out that ‘the tacit type of knowledge – “knowing how” – cannot be learnt in advance, no matter the extent or effectiveness of the experiential learning included in undergraduate degree programs’ (p. 297). Employers could not expect university graduates to have all skills and knowledge of a good worker. It takes time and effort for graduates to ‘translate’ and ‘transform’ the knowledge and skills they learnt in universities to those they want at work. Moreover, the complexity of generic capacities are actually developed through the real engagement ‘in practice’ in workplaces.

Holland’s argument brings up another important factor affecting employability of newly graduates: transitions. Transitions are normally hard, especially when the transition is from a lower stage to a higher one. It is often preceded by a drop in performance (Van Geert, 1994). For new graduates, the transition from universities to the world of work is the process through which they learn the new tacit knowledge of workplace. This tacit knowledge ‘is needed to successfully adapt to, select, or shape real-world environment’ (Sternberg, et al., 2000, p. 104). Or in other words, they need specific knowledge. One example showing the significance of specific knowledge is in Sternberg at al’s analysis of problem solving, in which familiarity with the setting is important because (i) problem definition has to be contexted, and (ii) the strategies chosen to address it is also contextualised (p. 59).

Another factor which also contributes to employability of new graduates is how they translate their achievement in the universities into a language that resonates with employers (Knight & Yorke, 2004, p. 15). How they understand their study, what they think about their degrees, what they understand about the needs of employers, and then how they could translate all these into a language that appeals to employers. The good point of Knight & Yorke’s argument is that they point out ‘without good translation and the fluent presentation that goes with it, transitions are less likely to happen’ (p. 16).

Nevertheless, good translations may help them gain the initial employment, but do not guarantee their maintaining employment. In order to ‘get over’ the transition from universities to work, they also need to be transformed academically (p. 16) to become expert-like in a subject area. Moreover, they should also be transformed by recognising that academic achievements are not the only ones that matter. Others,
for example: teamwork, self-management, confidence in enacting a graduate identity, are legitimate and necessary (p. 16).

Our argument here is what university should do to help its students overcome the difficulties they will face in the transition from university to work. The point is universities not only need to help students understand the changes of the labour market, but the university curriculum also needs to be designed to support students’ translation and transformation, or in other words, to help students in developing employability during their learning process. Students need not only to be aware, but they also need real practice, as transformation takes time and focus. York & Harvey’s argument clearly mentions this:

Employability is a slow-crop. The development of understanding, of skilful practice, of metacognition, and of the self in characterized by “slow learning” and requires repetition of broadly similar, yet progressive, learning experiences if it is to be fully successful (2005, p. 53)

In answer to this call, many universities collate economic and job-market information, make it available in a variety of ways, help students in preparing for job interviews, encourage students to take holiday work opportunities, run job clubs and support students search for part-time and casual work, and run workshops on a range of areas. Many universities try to work in a number of ways with employers, and carry out liaison with staff (including helping prepare and run career-development modules or embedding employability in the curriculum and supporting work experience) (Chapple & Tolley, 2000; Fallows & Steven, 2000a; Hakel & McCreery, 2000; Harding, 2000; Harvey, 2005). There is obviously a signal of change in higher education to capture the requirements of the labour market.

**Vietnamese higher education system and the employability issue**

In Vietnam, the background context for the development employability in higher education contains both similarities and differences with the international context.

First, the similarities could be found in the movement of market mechanism in Vietnam. After the reform known as *Doi moi* in 1987, Vietnamese enterprises have undergone ‘down-sizing’ and ‘de-layering’ - similar to elsewhere in the world. In the early 1990s, the state and public enterprises were dissolved massively and nearly 60,000 people were taken off the production lines (Vu Bich Thuy & Freire, 2004, p. 21). The remaining staff were sent to upgrade their knowledge and skills to be more capable in the new working environment. The down-sizing and restructuring of the public sector, together with the impressive increase of private and FDI (Foreign direct investment) enterprises change the conjuncture of the labour market. During the most successful period of growth in Vietnam (1995 - 1998) the number of employment positions created by private enterprises increased by 14 percent. While in the public sector the number only increased 1.3 percent (p. 21). While the working attitude in the public sector changes slowly¹, employers in non-public sectors seem to require employees differently. When opening up the most popular website for job seekers in Vietnam², the requirement of such skills as communication skills, management skills, problem-solving skills, decision making and teamwork become the common requirements of most jobs for university graduates. Obviously, what

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¹ Working attitude in Vietnamese public sector still has many characteristics of the central planned economy, when most employees just carry out their work following the command of their manager. A good employee needs to be obedient, devoted, whole-hearted and hard-working (Pham Thi Huyen, 2008)

² [http://www.vietnamworks.com](http://www.vietnamworks.com)
employers in Vietnam require from their employees share many similarities with that of other countries’ employers.

However, the development of the Vietnamese higher education could not catch up with the development of its economy. The existing situation in the education system in general, and in the higher education system in particular broadens the gap between higher education and the contemporary labour market. The teaching method which gives authority to the teacher, and places the duty of the student as ‘listening and repeating’ (Nguyen Hoai Phuong, 2002, p. 42) once appeared appropriate to the working manner before Doi moi in Vietnam. But, since renovation, Vietnam is trying to integrate as much as possible into the world economy, this teaching method is no longer appropriate. More recently, every stakeholder of the education system has started realising the importance of what in Vietnam is often called ‘soft-skills’ – that is skills necessary for work and life. The Vietnamese government and MOET have issued stipulations and instructions defining clearly that ‘career oriented and jobs consultation for students’ is one of the major tasks of each university (translation mine) (Vietnam Minister of Education and Training, 2009, p. 9; Vietnamese Minister of Education and Training, 2008, p. 1). One of the major requirements is that universities have to take responsibility to ‘equip’ students with necessary skills before graduation (2008, p.1). However, with the existing situation of managing, teaching and learning in the Vietnamese higher education system, these stipulations and instructions are less likely to be taken into action, and to be implemented successfully.

There are two distinguishing features between Vietnamese literature and international literature in the area. First, in Vietnam, the central task of higher education is to provide high quality human resource for the modernization and industrialization of the country. Universities are traditionally separated from research institutions, and thus, building up research capacity for students is not a traditional job of universities. ‘The traditional mandate of universities in Vietnam is to produce human resources rather than to engage in research’ (Tran Ngoc Ca, 2006, p. 5). There is not a clear distinction between ‘education’ and ‘training’ in the Vietnamese higher education system. So, there is no complaint either among academic staff, or in any research paper in Vietnam that criticises the ‘skill agenda’ as ‘downgrading’ education to training. However, teaching method - the second distinguishing feature makes it hard for the Vietnamese higher education to apply the ‘skill agenda’ into real practice. In the West, the teaching is to guide students to get knowledge by themselves, to teach students how to learn, to search for information, to promote thinking, and the teaching and learning in class is normally an active interaction between the both parties (Nguyen Hoai Phuong, 2002, p. 41). This teaching method needs, and also helps students develop such interaction attributes as communication, teamwork, and interpersonal; and personal attributes such as knowledge, willingness, ability to learn and continue learning. These attributes are also the major attributes contemporary employers need (Harvey, 2000, p. 8).

Conversely, in Vietnam, teaching remains mainly about transmitting knowledge. Learning remains mainly rote learning. Testing remains mainly rechecking teacher input knowledge. These do not develop students’ creativity and initiative. Other necessary skills also do not have opportunity to develop.

Associate Professor Dr. Nguyen Loc, vice-director general of the Vietnam Institute for Educational Sciences (the institute is considered as a think-tank for the Ministry of Education and Training of Vietnam in the areas of strategies and curriculum development (Nguyen Loc, 2009)) reveals that ‘Vietnam has recognised the significant role of skills development through a long and painful process’, and that ‘at present, the national education system, together with research institutions, is making great efforts to respond to the increasing needs of skills development in the country
However, skills development is still an obscure area in Vietnamese universities, and the reasons are clearly identified by Tran Quang Trung & Swierczek:

First, universities still focus primarily on explicit knowledge and have not yet realized the importance of skills development to their students. Second, the curriculum design is still deprived of market-orientation. Third, the lack of concern for employers needs has resulted in low-level commitment to skills development in Vietnamese universities. Developing skills in universities is not only shortcoming, but also mismatching employer needs. While employers prioritize learning, communication, information processing, problem solving, and interpersonal skills, lecturers lay their focus on decision-making, learning, and information processing skills to solve problems. (2009, p. 580)

If the relation between higher education and enterprises in the West is described as ‘a gap to be bridged’, that relation in Vietnam will be a larger gap, as universities and employers in Vietnam are ‘standing’ too far from each other. In many countries, the gap is starting to be bridged in many ways: conducting research on employers’ perception of graduates’ skills, embedding skill-agenda into the curriculum, work-based learning programs, providing career service system in each university. In Vietnam, this type of work is freshly new. The linkage between university and firms ‘still face many hurdle’ (Tran Ngoc Ca, 2006, p. 14). There is virtually no link, thus no mutual understanding between universities and employers. Employers are still complaining about the skills shortages of graduates. Universities have no response, and leave the opportunity to make much money for skill development centres which are appearing like mushrooms after rain in Vietnam now³. Before or after graduation, many students rush for courses in these skill development centres, and pay by their pocket money. They keep the hope that after taking some courses they can obtain the target skills, write them in their resume’ and satisfy employers’ needs. No one tells them that skills need time and real practice to develop.

Nonetheless, there is some research investigating the relations between higher education and employers (Tran Quang Trung & Swierczek, 2009; Truong Quang Duoc, 2006). Employers, university lecturers, and graduates have been surveyed on the skills these stakeholders consider important in the contemporary world of work. However, all of this research is quantitative, and the lists of skills they use in their questionnaire are constructed on the basic of integration of previous research studies. None of the ‘previous research studies’ mentioned has been conducted in Vietnam. Although there are some similarities between employers in Vietnam and elsewhere in terms of requirement, no one can assure that there are no significant differences. Especially when the Vietnamese culture and Vietnamese working environment both have so many distinctive features, the results of research, thus, appear less persuasive. Hence, there is a need for qualitative research which takes into consideration the significant features of Vietnamese culture in general, and the culture at work and in university in Vietnam in particular.

Reference


Appendix I: Employability skills in Latrobe University website
A set of eight employability skills has been defined in Australia after research by the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Business Council of Australia. (DEST, 2002).

1. Communication

Communication skills are essential to life and employment. Interacting effectively with others is one key to successfully achieving both personal and organisational goals.

An effective communicator must be able to:

- Listen and understand
- Speak clearly and directly
- Write to the needs of the audience
- Use numeracy effectively
- Establish and use networks
- Persuade effectively
- Negotiate positively
- Empathise
- Be assertive
- Share information
- Read independently

They may also:

- Speak and write in languages other than English.

The mix and priority of these components will vary from job to job. (DEST, 2002)

2. Teamwork

The best solutions to complex problems often come when individuals with differing expertise work constructively together.

To work effectively in a team you must be able to:

- Work with people of different ages, gender, race, religion or political persuasion
- Know how to define a role in the team
- Apply teamwork skills to a range of situations, e.g. future planning, crisis problem solving
- Identify the strengths of team members
- Coach, mentor and give feedback

(DEST, 2002)

3. Problem Solving

In a rapidly changing world new challenges occur frequently. Individuals who can take a positive approach and develop solutions are highly valued in the workforce and the community.

A good problem solver may have to:
• Apply problem-solving strategies across a range of areas
• Develop creative, innovative solutions
• Develop practical solutions
• Show independence and initiative in identifying problems and solving them
• Solve problems in teams
• Apply a range of strategies to problem solving
• Use mathematics including budgeting and financial management to solve problems
• Test assumptions relevant to the specific situation
• Resolve customer concerns in relation to complex project issues

The mix and priority of these components will vary from job to job.
(DEST, 2002)

4. Initiative and Enterprise

Displaying initiative requires you to develop the interest and motivation to try something new. Enterprise skills involve seeing opportunities not obvious to others. Together these skills are prerequisites for change.

Different terms can be used to describe enterprise skills. An entrepreneur can see an opportunity that adds value to a business and a social entrepreneur will see an opportunity that adds value to the community.

To develop your initiative and enterprise skills you need to:

• Identify opportunities not obvious to others
• Translate ideas into action
• Adapt to new situations
• Develop a strategic, creative, long-term vision
• Be creative
• Generate a range of options
• Initiate innovative solutions

The mix and priority of these components will vary from job to job.
(DEST, 2002)

The Initiative and Enterprise Toolkit explains these skills further and provides tips on looking for opportunities to strengthen these employability skills.

5. Planning and Organising

These skills are important because they allow us to manage our time and priorities more effectively in both the long and short term. They also allow us to meet deadlines with a minimum of stress.

You must be able to:

• Manage time and priorities – set timelines, coordinate tasks for yourself and with others
• Be resourceful
• Take initiative and make decisions
• Adapt resources to cope with contingencies
• Establish clear project goals and deliverables
• Allocate people and other resources to tasks
• Plan the use of resources including time management
• Participate in continuous improvement and planning processes
• Develop a vision and a proactive plan to accompany it
• Predict – weigh up risk, evaluate alternatives and apply evaluation criteria
• Collect, analyse and organise information
• Understand basic business systems and their relationships

(dest, 2002)

The Planning and Organising Toolkit has tips on thinking about your experiences and extracting examples that can be communicated to employers when applying for jobs.

6. Self Management

The modern world requires individuals to take more responsibility for their personal development. You need to monitor employment trends, look for signs of emerging opportunities and develop a self-management plan. This approach will increase your chance of having the knowledge and skills to take advantage of the next employment opportunity. A personal development plan can be used to help you achieve both work and non-work goals.

Self-management contributes to satisfaction and personal growth. To achieve these outcomes you must:

• Have a personal vision and goals
• Evaluate and monitor your own performance
• Have knowledge of and confidence in your own ideas and vision
• Articulate your own ideas and vision
• Take responsibility
(dest, 2002)

The Self Management Toolkit will guide you through the process of preparing a personal development plan.

7. Learning

As information quickly becomes obsolete it is important to constantly update your knowledge. Thus continual learning is important as it contributes to ongoing improvement and outcomes.

To effectively manage your learning you must:

• Manage your own learning
• Have enthusiasm for ongoing learning
• Be open to new ideas and techniques
• Be prepared to invest time and effort in learning new skills
• Acknowledge the need to learn in order to accommodate change
• Be willing to learn in any setting – on and off the job
• Contribute to the learning community at the workplace
• Use a range of mediums to learn – mentoring, peer support, networking, information technology, courses
• Applying learning to ‘technical’ issues (e.g. learning about products) and ‘people’ issues (e.g. interpersonal and cultural aspects of work)
(dest, 2002)
8. Technology

The use of technology is growing and in order to participate effectively in society you will need to use technology to complete tasks.

You must:

- Have a range of basic IT skills
- Apply IT as a management tool
- Use IT to organise data
- Be willing to learn new IT skills
- Have the occupational health and safety knowledge to apply technology.

(DEST, 2002)

Be aware of the impact of technology on your field and ensure your skills are up-to-date.

Retrieved 1\textsuperscript{st} of June, 2010 from http://www.latrobe.edu.au/careers/students/employable/employability-skills.html