

Building a Close Connection between Higher Education and Industry for a Better Education Outcome for Vietnam

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Abstract: Vietnamese higher education has received massive criticism as its graduates do not seem to satisfy employers' needs. It is suggested that the outdated professional knowledge provided by universities and the poor soft skills university students develop during the time at the university are the direct reasons for the unsatisfaction among employers. This paper, however, aims to challenge this common criticism. It summarises the research outcomes of a doctoral thesis on the topic of "enhancing graduate employability in Vietnam" and suggests that shifting the responsibility for graduate unemployment onto the higher education system in Vietnam is convenient but simplistic. Bridging the gap between the higher education system and the employment market will require the goodwill and efforts from a range of stakeholders. First and foremost, there is a need to develop a close cooperation and connection between the higher education system and industry. This is essential for the building of a practical curriculum to develop students' enterprise skills desired by employers. It requires the effort of not only the educational system, but also of the employer in enhancing graduate employability in Vietnam.

Keywords: Higher education, industry, unemployment, responsibility, human resource management.

1. Introduction

Under the impact of globalization and with the adoption of an open door policy, the Vietnamese economy has developed quite impressively since 1987 and has been driven mainly by the market mechanism. The Vietnamese higher education system (HES) has also developed quickly to meet the manpower needs of the industry. The number of students enrolling in and graduating from the system has increased significantly. Although the number of university graduates has increased, it is suggested that that number is not enough to

meet the needs of an increasingly developed economy [1]. In spite of that claim, many graduates have still been struggling to enter the labour market, many end up unemployed or underemployed, while employers still complain about their difficulties in finding graduates with the required knowledge and skills. University graduates do not seem to satisfy the industry, both in terms of quality and "quantity". Complaints are consistently made about university graduates being underprepared, having impractical and underdeveloped professional knowledge and lacking necessary skills required by the contemporary workplace [1- 4]. This same research also suggests that it is the university who needs to take responsibility for the under- preparedness of

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their students, and who needs to change to address the new needs of the contemporary labour market.

Nonetheless closely investigating the current situation of the training in universities and the human resource management of Vietnamese enterprises, this article wants to address a broader picture and take into account related issues and suggests that enhancing graduate employability needs more than the hand of the HES. In the case of the Vietnamese market, a practical collaboration between higher education institutions and enterprises seem to be a way to develop sustainable high skilled labour resource for the local market.

2. Is the HES able to change and can it take the sole responsibility for the under-preparedness of recent graduates?

Unlike universities in most developed countries who traditionally have two major functions: “to prepare the elite to govern the nation” and “to provide an institutional basis for research into all forms of knowledge” [5], the main mission of Vietnamese higher education has been to prepare students for work and to supply skilled workforce for the development of the country [6, 7]. In Vietnam, traditionally there is a view that training and development are not the employers’ responsibility but is instead, the responsibility of the government and the educational system [8]. Thus, employers often choose to “stay away” from the training process in universities, and blame the weak capability of recent graduates on higher education. Nonetheless, Vietnamese higher education that is under tight control in a centralized educational system is still struggling to find ways to improve the training quality and to address the new needs of the contemporary market.

Moreover, the traditional mission of universities in Vietnam was to prepare workers for a command economy, where workers were required to follow orders, to listen and obey, rather than develop creativity and take initiative

[9]. Thus, the teaching at higher education has been strongly reflected both Confucian culture and the old Soviet system top-down approach where the teacher is considered the primary source of knowledge. The main duty of students from primary school to university has been receiving knowledge from the teacher and then re-learning it for the exam.

However, after the implementation of the open door policy, with the massive development of both private and Foreign direct investment (FDI) sectors which offer much higher wages, the traditional “products” of the Vietnamese HES, the passive learners and workers, do not appear to be suitable for work in these sectors. As Vietnam has integrated more and more into the global market with its becoming a member of Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1995 and the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2007, the internal economy has also needed to change to response to the international competitive market. Instead of requiring loyalty, hard-work and obedience as in the centrally planned economy, employers now require graduates to understand a foreign language, especially English, to have good communication skills, teamwork and personal skills and obtain such characteristics as taking initiative and being proactive [2, 7, 10].

The HES has been struggling under the pressure to develop a system that meets the new needs of the economy. However, universities have to face many challenges in the transitional period: they lack teaching staff [11], lack funding and resources [12], they even lack the right to decide their own matters such as developing their own curriculum framework or designate their own rector¹ [13, 14]. In addition, the inherited infrastructure of most universities is out-dated and the teaching methods in the system have remained quite traditional -

¹ Vietnamese HES is still under centralized governance, where the central ministry (the Ministry of Education and Training) decides the most decisive matters such as curriculum framework or governance matters in every institution.

transmitting knowledge from the teacher to the student. These all require time, support, funding and effort to change to address the new labour needs of the economy. Adding to these difficulties and challenges are the loose relationship between the HES and the labour market. The weak research capability of universities and the weak research-industry linkages have placed more hurdles for universities in enhancing graduate capability for employment [15]. Although Vietnamese higher education has started to be aware of the new needs of the labour market, it does not seem to be able to change to address these needs in the short term.

Moreover, both the employment market and Vietnamese higher education are in the transitional phases of the economy, from the centrally planned to the market driven economy. In that transitional period, the poor communication and the lack of understanding between the two create more frustration for recent graduates, who come out from the HES and seek the way to enter the employment market [4, 15]. These young people who receive virtually no formal training and no information about the employment market during their university time [16], are wobbling around to find ways to enter the labour force. Standing in front of one of the most important transitions in life, students (without the guidance from universities) become bombarded with rumours coming from different directions in the Vietnamese collectivist culture where communication is often “indirect, implicit, internalised, or more dependent on physical and psychosocial contexts” [17]. Stories of corruption, of luck, of the poor employability assets they possess together with the desire to keep face for the whole family, to earn money right after graduation and to find work and stay in the big cities add much more nervousness for recent graduates when struggling to find their ways entering employment [18]. The underemployment and unemployment of recent graduates does not seem to be the result of only the poor quality of training in higher education.

3. Human resource issues in Vietnamese enterprises

Human resource management practices seem to be a critical issue in Vietnam where employers are often considered to lack management skills and the knowledge to conduct their business properly [8]. Not all SME owners and employers have relevant higher education qualifications, and their managerial expertise is mainly based on practical knowledge acquired over time [15, 19].

When the majority of Vietnamese companies are small and medium-sized, where the owners often keep a close eye on cost-cutting policies, the funding of human resource management activities is often very limited. In Vietnam, local organisations are often weak in developing company-specific skills and knowledge, and are likely to outsource their training [8]. Formal qualifications are considered important for job seekers entering these sectors. By contrast, in international enterprises, there is evidence of more modern human resource management practices. Compared to local enterprises, international enterprises are more active in finding applicants for open positions, developing their human resource assets more by in-house facilities than by outsourcing, appraising people more on an individual basis, and rewarding them more generously with respect to their level of performance [8, p. 40].

Compared to the FDI enterprises, the working conditions as well as the wages offered by local enterprises tend to be significant, making them less attractive to the most suitable candidates in the market. Even when this is the case, the blame easily returns to the HES: “although enterprises have too many applications from university graduates for each vacant position, it is still not easy for them to find the one suitable” [19, p.31].

Clearly, there are many challenges for Vietnam during this intense transitional period, where the economy is rapidly changing. As a result of the limited funding for, and limited

understanding of contemporary human resource practices, together with the widespread assumption that training for work is still considered the responsibility of the government and the educational system, it seems unlikely that Vietnamese local enterprises will attain the desired workforce quickly. In stark contrast, international enterprises generally use transparent employment processes including developing and supporting their staff with in-house training, attractive salaries, and reward systems to acknowledge the performance of their employees. It is these organisations that the most skilful and productive workers, understandably, want to join. These are also the reasons why international organisations often attract and reach more qualified candidates in the labour market. This creates a fear among local organisations that they will lose their well-trained and highly qualified employees for a better paid job in FDI enterprises [20]. The “brain drain” from local to more global organisations is happening extensively and rapidly within the local Vietnamese employment market. The urgent call for change by local companies does not yet appear to have been heeded. It is suggested that they should invest more in their human resource management policies and practices, and cooperate with the higher education sector [8, 19, 21]. However, this is more easily said than done as great cultural change is required within the workplace.

4. A broad picture of graduate employability in the literature

In the international context, there is much research investigating into the gap between higher education and the employment market. It is widely suggested that recent graduates generally lack the skills the contemporary market requires. Such interactive attributes as communication skills, teamwork and interpersonal skills together with personal attributes and abilities such as intellect, knowledge, willingness and ability to learn and

continue learning are highly valued by employers [22-24]. Some researchers are still working hard to build a list of attributes contemporary employers need from university graduates [See, for example 25, 26, 27, 28]. In Vietnam, several such a list have also been built [See, for example 10, 29]. Nonetheless, a recent study conducted by Tran Thi Tuyet [30] reveals that employers in Vietnam may require some types of different skills when they emphasise on the ability of recruits to understand and to work well in a collectivist culture. The findings of Tran Thi Tuyet’s study also support a popular claim that skills are not context and culture free [31-33], and that “the worth of employability skills can only be fully appreciated in the workplace where the consequences of such skills can be seen” [34, p.11]. In Tran Thi Tuyet’s [30] study, Vietnamese employers often want to find new employees who have some enterprise skills, who has been involved in some types of similar work, or in other words, they look for some type of work experience.

5. Connecting enterprises and graduate employability

The Vietnamese government has also recognised the mismatch between higher education training and the employment market. It has been stipulated in numerous documents, policies, plans and resolutions the aim to increase the training quality in universities and to reinforce the central mission of higher education which is to provide high skilled workforce for the development of the country. Nonetheless, many of these resolutions and plans have been criticised as impractical as they were issued without careful research into the background context, culture, as well as teaching and learning infrastructure, condition, traditions and habits in Vietnam. These together with unclear implementing steps in most cases have led unsurprisingly to an unsuccessful result [35, 36]. The current situation of the HES in Vietnam and the gap between education and the

real needs of the society in terms of university graduates in particular, call for the collaboration between the universities and employers to close the gap and to increase the employability among recent graduates.

It is suggested that not only universities, but also employers need to make greater efforts to bridge the divide between higher education and the labour market. Employers often place high requirements on recent graduates and complain about the poor knowledge and skills graduates possessed. However, employer requirements and complaints about the required skills of recent graduates are not entirely reasonable. As skills need to be developed in real practice, recent graduates need time and guidance to transform what they possess from study and apply it to work. Gradually, work related skills should develop [34]. Employers should also take some responsibility for helping students and graduates make the transition from university to work. The demanding requirements of employers on recent graduates when recruiting them often create a pressure for graduates who often measure their capability according to the job requirements in the market. When they do not have good professional knowledge, when they do not have many chances to develop necessary skills, when their English is still not perfect and when they do not have any work experience, they do not feel confident to enter the employment market. This often creates a desire to learn more, to collect enough certificates to prove that they are qualified. However, students' and graduates' learning of "what" rather than learning of "how" often disappoint employers.

Clearly, employers should take greater responsibility for enhancing graduate employability for university students because they benefit from it. Universities cannot "bring the market" into their curriculum and shorten the learning curve in the transition from university to employment for their students if employers do not cooperate and participate.

Literature suggests different ways to enhance graduate employability; nonetheless the majority of which require the input and

collaboration of universities and enterprises. This come from the call to develop a market oriented curriculum, to create various types of extra activities, and to bring more practical lessons to help students familiar with the world of work. Different names have been used to call this collaboration: university-enterprise collaboration, university-industry interaction, university-business cooperation or business-university collaboration. Numerous studies discuss the benefits of this collaboration and support the practical initiatives such as problem based learning, work based learning, placements, internships, enterprise learning... [37]. Work integrated learning (WIL) is the term most popular used to refer to the cooperation between university and industry aiming at enhancing graduate employability.

For some, WIL refers to all initiatives and practices that connect theory to practice. Cooper, Orrell and Bowden [38, p. Viii], for example, defines WIL as "the process of bringing together formal learning and productive work, or theory and practice". Some other authors bring more specific definitions of WIL. Ferns, Campbell and Zegwaard [39, p. 2], for example, consider WIL experiences as "authentically engaged with practices and experiences of the workplace". Similarly, WIL is used to refer to, according to the Council in Higher Education [40], an experience where students are exposed to authentic and relevant context at workplace where they can apply theory to practice. With these definitions, WIL refers to the experiential parts of the learning process where students are exposed to the real context of work to learn and to reflect on their learning. Most often this type of WIL marks the initiative from universities, aiming at bringing practices from the world of work into their curriculum. There is another type of WIL that is not covered by the above definition, that is the employer engagement in the university practices. While work placements and internships, work-based learning or service learning recognize the role of the university in sending their students from academic context to the real context of work, employer engagement,

on the other hand, emphasizes the move of the employer from the context of work to an academic setting at university. These two ways movements are sometimes blurry and overlapping, however, employer engagement does mark the effort of the employers when they have to shift their role from their familiar context of work to the formal academic context at university. Such initiatives as employer involvement in curriculum design, course design, development and implementation, employer getting involved in the director board, in delivery of guest lectures... do create practical practices within university setting and help to increase the responsiveness of university.

There is strong history of sharing good practices in the leading countries in graduate employability activities such as UK, US, Canada, Australia and other European countries. Initiatives are numerous and vary, and have been developed in specific disciplinary, social and institutional contexts. In Vietnam, the term "WIL" is still rather new; nonetheless, evidences of its presence start can be found in the system. There is growing number of evidences for the collaboration between universities and enterprises. Apart from sending students to enterprises for visits (kiến tập) or internships (thực tập) (compulsory part of the traditional HE curriculum in Vietnam), some universities also invite employers to deliver guest lectures, to join seminars or to share employment experience with students. The work fairs with the presence of employers in different universities to employ students and graduates are also organized more frequently. Employers start receiving surveys from universities asking them to evaluate the curriculum or the quality of universities' students or graduates who work for them.

Nonetheless, the impact of these WIL initiatives in Vietnam is still considered modest, and it seems to be hard to develop a strong and sustainable UEC for enhancing graduate employability. Interestingly, universities often complain that the active involvement of employers in the collaborations with universities is rare. Apart from approaching

universities for recruitment of graduates, for scholarships sponsoring, sometimes for sponsoring students extra curriculum activities and advertising their company images or products, not many enterprises actively approach universities to discuss about the collaboration in teaching or training (either for their staff or for university students) or for research collaboration [41]. However, when it comes to the employers' view, there seems to be another picture drawn about the collaboration between universities and enterprises. There is, although limited, but growing number of employers, who understand the importance of their input from the early stage of skill development and are open for collaboration with universities for human resource training. These employers also raise their voices complaining about their difficulties in communication with universities and in understanding universities' goal when students are sent to their organizations for internships or placements [42].

The development of collaboration between universities and enterprises to enhance graduate employability in Vietnam seems to be at an early stage. Efforts have been brought in, nonetheless, the lack of mutual understanding, the scarcity of resources and the lack of sufficient communication all seem to interfere and hinder the UEC effort to better prepare students for the employment market.

There is a need to provide support for successfully implement the UEC in Vietnam. Research on obstacles in setting up UEC should be invested in order to better approach the problems; and cases of successful collaborations between universities and enterprises should be developed and expanded in the system. It is necessary for both universities and enterprises to see their roles and their benefits in the collaboration, then actively find a way/ways to develop collaboration that works in the specific context/circumstance of their organizations. Moreover, in the early stage of UEC development, the role of the government/MOET should be decisive. In a

centralised educational system, if the government agrees to provide incentives both for enterprises (i.e. tax reduction and other enterprise benefits) and for universities (i.e., human resource and funding), the collaboration will provide clear initial and on-going benefits for all related stakeholders. When universities and enterprises communicate well with each other, when WIL initiatives are authentic, students will gain benefits from receiving more practical lessons and thus, prepare better for the demanding requirements of employers when joining the labour market after graduation.

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