



Original Article

Transition Frontiers: Career Guidance in Vietnam's Industry 4.0

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Abstract: As students start to reach the end of high school, they face the challenge of making what is likely the biggest decision of their life so far: Go to work or continue studying at university? Unfortunately, students are poorly equipped to make such a life altering choice. Some jobs, especially those connected to the fourth industrial revolution (4IR) require the skills that come with a four-year degree. If they decide to continue on to higher education, they have another big decision to make: Which program of study to follow? Studying in the wrong program could lead to wasted time and money. It could also lower the motivation to study, leading to lower levels of learning, which in turn could lead to fewer professional opportunities in the future. To help solve these problems, many high schools offer career guidance to support students through this major life transition. Is the current guidance adequate? To answer this question, an exploratory qualitative ethnographic study was performed with seven students who are one year away from earning a bachelor degree in the field of financial technology from a large public university in Vietnam. Findings reveal that most students believe that current guidance offerings, while important, are also inadequate leading some students to regret their choice of study program. Solutions to these problems are discussed based on the insights of these respondents.

Keywords: Adolescent, student, career guidance, field of study, Vietnam.

1. Introduction

Graduating high school (HS) students in Vietnam have a major life decision to make. They can either continue on to higher education

(HE) or they can directly enter the workforce. Reports from the People's Army Newspaper [1] indicate that 50% of graduating HS students in Vietnam will proceed to the HE path. For those students who do advance to HE, they have an equally important question: Which program of study should they pursue?

The choice of program is important for many reasons. Not only can that decision affect

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one's career satisfaction, it also strongly impacts their standard of living. In a 2020 study, it was found that the average monthly income for university graduates was about 7.8 million VND [2]. However, that average hides the fact that some jobs pay only 85% of the average (agriculture/veterinary science) while others pay 139% of that average (defense/security). Looking at two specific examples, in this case for a male, can help illustrate another important difference. Choosing the field of humanities results in an average salary about 8.5 million per month with a standard deviation of 5.9 million. On the other hand, choosing to work in education brings in a slightly lower average of 8.1 million but the standard deviation is only 3.3 million. This means, by studying the humanities, one has a 68% chance of earning between 2.6 million and 14.4 million per month. However, choosing education gives a 68% chance of earning between 4.8 million and 11.4 million per month. That is, while education has a slightly lower average, it has a much higher lower-end (4.8 million vs 2.6 million). Therefore, education with its lower average pay is actually the more conservative choice. An important question is, could a HS student figure this out without guidance from a trained professional? Would they even know to ask the question? This paper seeks to answer the following question: How well are HS students being prepared for choosing a career, including which university program they should enter?

1.1. Background

The National High School Graduation Exam (NHSGE), determines whether one can attend a public university in Vietnam, along with which programs they may enter. This is such a stressful event that some students in the past have committed suicide due to overwhelming levels of stress [3]. While there are other options, such as private universities, public universities are less expensive and much more well known [4], especially in the minds of parents. Thus, students are often pressured by their parents to perform well on the NHSGE,

regardless of how much studying is required [3]. Clearly, this may lead to mental health issues which will need to be addressed at some point.

With so much at stake, it is of extreme importance that HS students make the correct choice. Unfortunately, there is ample evidence that they often make the wrong choice. Some sources claim that 44% of university graduates are working in a field which does not match their degree [5]. Others put that number at 57% [6] or even 60% [7]. While there is wide variation between fields [5], one of the fields with the lowest number of non-matches is business management. Of those graduating from HE with that major, 13% are working in a field which is considered unsuitable to their education, and this translates into 9% lower earnings on average [6], though there is great variability, meaning that some individuals suffer much more than this. Interestingly, this penalty was not found to exist for those over 50 years old, implying that it might be an issue of improper skills training [6] which resolves itself with enough time on the job. So, the problem may not be a life-long one, but the impact may be felt for decades.

There is another perspective on this. Research has found that as people get older, they are more likely to work in the wrong field [5]. This may mean that people try to work in a field suitable to their degree only to later realize that they are unsatisfied with it, then move on to something more interesting to them, even if it does not match their degree. How much more satisfied, and more successful, might these people have been had they chosen the correct field of study and stayed in that field throughout their career, constantly improving without having to begin again? This brings the importance of career counseling into greater focus.

Related to this is the wide reporting on firms in Vietnam scorning the lack of high-quality workers available [8-11]. This is not a new phenomenon [12]. How much of this issue is driven by students choosing the wrong career path?

1.2. Mental Health

Adolescents in Vietnam suffer from mental health issues at rates higher than some other Asian countries. In India, 14% of HS students were found to suffer from depression [13]. In Bangladesh, it was 26% [14]. In Vietnam, the number is 31.7% [15]. For Vietnamese HS students, research found that higher academic stress leads to higher rates of depression [16]. If the well-being of our adolescents is important to us, then we must be mindful of the issues of stress which surround them.

Change has been found to lead to greater stress when the change impacts one's sense of self [17]. Clearly the thought of beginning a pathway which will, to a large extent, determine one's professional life (thus one's sense of self), would qualify as a major change, and one that is likely to lead to extreme stress, as illustrated above.

This brings us back to the topic of career guidance, a process of helping students make the best choice possible. Over 100 years ago, Frank Parsons [18, pp. 5] wrote that choosing a career involved three things:

i) A clear understanding of yourself, your aptitudes, abilities, interests, ambitions, resources, limitations, and their causes; ii) A knowledge of the requirements and conditions of success, advantages and disadvantages, compensation, opportunities, and prospects in different lines of work; and iii) True reasoning on the relations of these two groups of facts.

Simplified, this means, i) Know yourself well; ii) Understand jobs well; and iii) Be able to properly evaluate one in the light of the other.

Career counseling has been described as a "process which enables people to recognise and utilise their resources to make career-related decisions and manage career-related issues" [19, pp. 2]. Another way to phrase that would be that career guidance is about helping individuals to more thoroughly understand themselves. While some have argued that career guidance should move more toward overall decision-making skills [20], others have argued that career guidance should focus on facilitating

individuals' self-exploration [21]. The latter aligns well with, and seems inspired by, Social Cognitive Theory [22]. A major component of Social Cognitive Theory is the sense of agency, which has been discussed in the context of Vietnamese HE [23, 24]. The level of agency which a student feels can have an impact on their perceived levels of stress.

1.3. Career Counseling

While the goal of career counseling is, at its core, about helping students make this very important decision, it is unclear which way is best, especially for Vietnamese students who might differ from those in other countries. That is, existing research literature is known to have a WEIRD bias, where subjects are from economies which are western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic [25]. As Vietnam is still a lower-middle income country, it is reasonable to believe that what works in other countries might need to be adapted to be successful here. For example, Mr. Bui Van Linh of the Ministry of Education and Training [26] mentioned that HS students tend to be very passive and their thinking might not be complex enough to make such a sophisticated decision as this. While the solution might be to give students as much information as possible, others mentioned that many students get overwhelmed with the amount of information which is available to them today [27]. Also mentioned was that, because of being overwhelmed, students may choose a career based on that profession's popularity rather than its suitability for them as an individual.

While the focus so far in this paper has been on the individual, it is important to understand there are far reaching ramifications for students choosing an unsuitable career path. It can lead to unemployment [26, 28] as well as wasted resources when students drop out early [7, 26].

Some analyses of schools in the US and Europe have shown that students at those providing career guidance have improved learning, higher earnings, and produce a better society than students at schools who do not

include such offerings [29, 30], indicating a clear benefit to multiple stakeholders.

Though this research focuses on high schools, the optimal solution is likely to move career guidance, at least some aspects of it, even earlier. A paper in the venerable journal *Science* pointed out that the younger someone is, the more likely they are to incorrectly predict how much they will change in the future [31]. This has particular consequence for career guidance because the underlying issue can be summed up as, remembering (the past) is easy, imaging (the future) is hard. Therefore, getting students to understand that they will continually change throughout their lives, including their values and preferences, will help them in choosing their future career path.

While high schools in Vietnam offer career counseling services, students still report being unable to make this major life decision [32]. The fact that some schools do offer career guidance is helpful here. However, offering career guidance is not enough if the quality of that guidance is inadequate and ineffective [7]. To know if the guidance is sufficient, we must ask those who have not only been through the transition of HS graduation but also have a bit of experience in the next phase of their journey.

As adolescence is a natural time of transition (from childhood to adulthood; from HS to HE; from having little freedom to choose to having to make critical life-altering decisions), we will consider this issue through the lens of Transition Theory.

Transition Theory [33] was originally developed as a way of exploring university students. This paper will use Transition Theory to more deeply explore how high schools can better support the transition of students through HS into either the workforce or HE. After exploring the framework of this theory, the paper focuses in more detail on the characteristics of the pre-transition environment, specifically, the concept of institutional support in the form of providing guidance on career or studying at university.

Transition Theory focuses on three aspects of a transition. The type, the context, and the

impact. The type of transition influences the experience of the person going through the transition. For example, the transition may be expected (less stressful) or unexpected (more stressful). As we are talking about graduation from HS and potentially entering HE, this is an expected event with generally positive connotations of growing up and becoming an adult.

The context includes whether the student wants or does not want this transition. If the student does not feel a sense of agency in the decision-making process, they will feel lower motivation and more stress [34]. If the student wanted to study one field but they were pressured by their parents to study another, this may lead to internal conflict between the drive to please one's parents and the drive to ensure a happy life.

The impact is about how the transition changes one's daily life. Does the transitioner have more freedom (less stress) or less freedom (more stress)? Although, if students are suddenly given much more freedom without proper training on how to handle that freedom, they may make poor choices; for example coming to class just to take attendance and then sneaking out to spend time with their friends rather than learning.

Instrumental to Transition Theory is the way students can cope with the challenge of the transition. The theory includes the four S's of coping: Situation, support, self, and strategies [33]. These factors will be used as a structure for understanding the responses from the participants.

2. Methods

2.1. Context

In this ethnographic study, we will explore the perspective of those experiencing the transition: The students. How effective or useful do they feel existing career guidance programs have been?

2.2. Participants

Convenience and purposive sampling were chosen for this exploratory study. Seven

students of one of the authors were chosen due to their strong academic performance as well as their subject of study being the use of technology in business, which strongly aligns with the fourth industrial revolution (4IR). The participants were all at the end of their third year of study at a large public university in Vietnam, meaning they expected to graduate one year later. While seven students would not be enough to draw strong generalizations from, it is adequate to get some initial perspective into the topic of career guidance. All of these are traditional students, aged between 19 and 22. Four of the seven were female.

2.3. Procedure

Participants were asked to compose a written response to a series of questions on the topic of career guidance during high school from their perspective, including what they saw and heard from other students around them. The questions were, i) What were your perceptions of career guidance in high school, both for you and for those around you? ii) What could be the benefits of providing improved career guidance to high school students? iii) What are the problems associated with providing career guidance poorly? iv) What solutions would you propose to improve the way career guidance is offered in Vietnam?

2.4. Data Analysis

The responses were received and then coded for thematic analysis. Codes were inductively generated from the responses as there was no literature on this exact topic within the context of Vietnam. Codes were reviewed and then categorized based on the categories of each theme.

3. Findings and Discussion

All but one of the respondents mentioned that career guidance is important for choosing a future career path. All but two of the seven said that the current career guidance offerings were inadequate. This is important because none of the students were asked either of these

questions. That is, this is what came to their mind when thinking about career guidance in Vietnam today. Respondent A wrote, *"I have seen that career guidance sessions held at high schools in many places are not effective and have almost no impact on students"*. This is in line with what has been reported in the news [7].

Students were not satisfied with the information provided at guidance events. Respondent G wrote, *"They would only provide information about related courses, tuition fees, and admission procedures"*. In order to make career guidance more effective for students, the information provided should include the information needed to make the student's decision. Knowing what courses are included in a study program is only helpful if students know what knowledge is necessary to perform well in that job. However, that information is not usually provided. Respondent A wrote, *"it is necessary to provide complete information about that industry or field such as what this industry is, what it does, what the potential is, what requirements this industry has,... It's all about giving students an overview of the fields. This is not difficult"*. Therefore, providing students with information such as the requirements of the field, the actual job duties, and the potential of a career in that field would be much more useful than what is currently being provided.

Four of the seven respondents mentioned the problem with high school students having young, simplistic, or very passive thinking when it comes to choosing a major. Respondent E wrote *"Students are too young to self-awarely choose their majors"*. This is supported by comments from Mr. Bui Van Linh of the Ministry of Education and Training [26]. Though others claim this is now changing as parents and students are starting to be more active in their choices of higher education institutions [27]. However, this second point says nothing about the students' level of self-awareness.

Dr. Ma Ngoc The said that many students get overwhelmed with the amount of information which is available to them today

[27]. This is something commented on by one of our respondents. It was also mentioned by four of the respondents that students, being unclear on which path is suitable for them, may choose a job based on its current popularity. Five of the seven students reported this was an issue. Respondent C wrote, *“They saw news about trending jobs with promising future, they listened to other people’s opinions without their own”*.

Five said that studying in the wrong program is a waste of time and resources. These resources are not just for the student but also for their entire family [7, 32]. This sentiment was echoed in the final sentence of an article on this topic, which was *“That is truly,... a great waste for a country”* [26]. Respondent C wrote, *“The biggest consequences would definitely be a waste of time, health, and money when picking the wrong career”*.

One student also brought up the issue that studying in the wrong major at university leads to students dropping out. This has been repeated in the news multiple times [7, 26]. Research shows that students who quit university prior to receiving their degree have a 10% lower chance of getting a professional job in some countries [35]. If a student starts in HE, it is generally best if they complete their degree program.

Statistics from the Ministry of Labor, War Invalids, and Social Affairs has been cited as saying that 60% of university graduates are working in “the wrong field” [7]. This has been echoed in articles in academic journals [6], though the number was put at 57%. Other reports indicate that this number can vary widely by field [5]. Given that research in Vietnam indicates that those who work in a field which does not match their education earn significantly less money [6], if this mis-match can be avoided, it would seem better for the individual and also society. Respondent B wrote, *“people following jobs that are popular at that moment, only to realize that these jobs don’t really fit them,... after they have graduated”*.

In line with what was mentioned in the background section, students understand that

the final years of HS are so focused on completing the NHSGE that they do not have time for anything else. This is one reason why career guidance is so important. Students are overwhelmed and have little time to waste on ineffective guidance sessions. Perhaps the reason why students have simplistic thinking is that they do not have the time to gather the information necessary for more complex thinking. This can lead to confusion when the information is not easily available (given the student’s time constraints). Respondent A wrote *“career guidance is to reduce the feeling of confusion and disorientation of this age group, giving them more motivation, confidence and mental reassurance”*.

One student mentioned the issue of a lack of career guidance in HS leading to private companies rising up to supply what schools are not providing. Respondent C wrote, *“private career guidance services with counselors is a thing that exists but only in a very small scale and acts as a business that exploits money from people who are in need of help”*. The underlying issue here was that while schools are seen by students as wanting what is best for the student, private companies are focused on their own profits. Therefore, it is possible that the advice they give to students will not be what is best for the students but rather what increases profits for the firm.

Another related issue is who should provide advice for students. While students reported that they believe schools should have a dedicated guidance counselor, rather than a teacher who offers guidance as an additional task, respondents reported that they would like to get information from multiple sources such as experts (including HR professionals), HE teachers, HE students who study that field, and people who currently work in that field. By getting information from multiple perspectives, students will have a better chance of combining all of the content to make a more informed decision.

For many students it seems an assumption that they will attend university if they have that opportunity. However, there has been an

important change going on both globally and specifically in Vietnam whereby more companies no longer require a bachelor degree even for a management position [36]. Therefore, when guiding HS students what to do after they graduate, perhaps some students would be better off foregoing university and rather developing their professional skills in another way, for example, on-the-job. The idea that the only way forward is university should be reconsidered.

Students made it clear that they are concerned with more than simply earning money. They want a happy life. Respondent C wrote, “As Confucius once said: “Choose a job you love, and you will never have to work a day in your life”, this is a lesson that I think Vietnamese students should learn”.

4. Conclusions

As mentioned above, a key aspect of Transition Theory is the four S's (situation, support, self, and strategies) of addressing the issues faced during this major life transition. We can categorize the students' comments into the four categories as follows:

The situation that students are facing is one of intense stress. They have the concurrent stress of the NHSGE and making their career choice. If they choose a path that they are unhappy with, they will either work in a field they do not enjoy or they will work in a field different from their studies which implies a significantly lower income. Students understand the critical nature of the situation, though perhaps not in all of its complexity.

The support they currently receive is seen by them as both ineffective and inadequate. What is being offered is too little, too infrequent, and too limited in scope. They want to know what jobs are really like and what is required to be successful in those jobs. However, what they receive is marketing both by universities and by private companies who may not have the students' best interest at heart.

Looking at the self, students are seen, by others and themselves, as simply too young,

without the complex thinking skills necessary to make a decision which may shape their entire professional lives. However, improved support can help reduce their confusion allowing them to make better decisions. Still, the culture, especially the culture of their parents' generation, leads to some teens simply following their parents' recommendations which may not match the interests of the student. This comes back to the fact that students are not yet self-aware. Respondent E wrote, “To choose a suitable major, one must first understand their strengths and weaknesses, as well as their personality”.

Finally, if we look at strategies, we can see that some students follow the strategy of choosing their field of study based on what is popular at the time. As discussed above, this can lead to negative results both for the individual as well as society as a whole. Students need more research strategies but they also need the time to implement those strategies. However, time is in short supply due to the pressure of the NHSGE. This can lead to students dropping out of HE once they realize they chose the wrong path.

Given the importance of career choice, the career guidance which is provided to students should be done more seriously and more professionally. This would bring benefits not only to the individual but to firms and society as a whole. By listening to students, we can make significant improvements.

As this is a pilot study, the first to explore career guidance in Vietnam, it will be important to follow up with more in-depth studies. It would be interesting to explore how students' perceptions and preferences related to career guidance change over time. A longitudinal study following students from high school through university and into the workforce could bring more clarity to this complex issue. Likewise, using experiments to explore the various guidance options, and their long-term effectiveness, could also be enlightening. Using experiments along with longitudinal studies could show the long-term effects of different career guidance options.

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