

# Teaching and Learning for Employability in Vietnamese Higher Education

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## Abstract

*Employability of the graduates is a topic that has been attracting great interest from the community in recent years. Especially, from the perspective of the employers, professional knowledge is the core requirement but not the deciding factor when it comes to recruiting graduates into a job position. In addition, according to the increasing demands from the market, the number of graduates every year is higher than the demand of the labour market, raising the competitiveness among candidates applying for jobs. In order to meet the constantly changing requirements of the labour market, fostering professional knowledge is not enough. In addition, it is essential for educational institutions and learners to add more necessary skills to increase graduates' employability. In this paper, we strive to analyze aspects of graduates' employability so as to propose solutions to increase the employability of the graduates. We also propose the requirements for improvement at educational institutions to support graduates to meet employer requirements.*

**Keywords:** Higher Education, Ability to Be Recruited, Employability, Graduates

## INTRODUCTION

The constant growth of labour tools, together with the unforeseen change in the labour market, requires an adequate response from human resource training institutions around the world. Improving employability after graduating from university has become a major and controversial concern in the general education system. This is not a new concept for international schools, but for socio-economic context as a whole, requiring every university to have an appropriate plan of action. For universities in developed countries such as the UK, the USA, Australia, and the European countries, the ability to find a job has always been one of the core factors to assess graduates and training programs [1]. Although employability is mentioned a lot in the 1990s, the term is not entirely a new one. The first literature that mentioned the term 'employability' was in the 1950s, which pointed out 'employability' as a key issue that schools need to foster among students to meet market demands [2]. In a highly competitive market economy, under increasing economic pressure, organizations/businesses are forced to restructure the apparatus, as well as change recruitment and remuneration mechanisms. "Lifetime" employment contracts and career guarantees are no longer consistent with the increasingly demanding market, thus requiring to be replaced by limited or indefinite working contracts [3]. Changing occupation or moving from one company to another is no longer a rarity, but a trend that promotes self-exploration and challenge-taking skills. Therefore, in order to meet this trend, educators, training institutions as well as individual learners, need to acknowledge the importance of employability as well as explore measures to improve training efficiency and develop graduates' employability.

According to the General Statistics Office of Viet Nam, in 2020, Viet Nam had more than 1.2 million unemployed laborers aged 15 and above, of which unemployed youth (aged 15-24) still account for nearly one-half of the total unemployed population nationwide (35.4%) [4], of which there are students just graduated from university.

This is more clear in Table 1 (The structure of unemployed labour according to the highest degree of education). The data show that a relative proportion of unemployed labours had professional training - a college degree or higher compared to the total unemployed population (30.8%). In particular, the unemployment rate of those who have graduated from university or higher is very high in the "Vocational / Professional Training" group.

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**Table 1: The structure of unemployed labor according to the highest education level in 2020***Unit: percent*

Education level	Proportion			% Female
	Total	Male	Female	
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>56.1</b>
<b><i>Not trained</i></b>	<b>1,6</b>	<b>1,3</b>	<b>1,9</b>	<b>64,2</b>
<b><i>General education</i></b>				
+ Not graduated from primary school	5.1	5.2	5.0	54.9
+ Graduated from primary school	14.5	16.1	13.3	51.2
+ Graduated from secondary school	19.0	21.4	17.1	50.5
+ Graduated from high school	16.7	18.8	15.1	50.7
<b><i>Vocational/Professional Training</i></b>				
+ Vocational primary	4.6	9.2	1.0	12.4
+ Vocational secondary	7.6	4.9	9.7	71.5
+ Colleges	10.1	7.2	12.3	68.6
+ Graduates and post-graduates	20.7	15.8	24.6	66.5

*Source: Report on labour force survey 2020 [4]*

In Viet Nam, there have been some researches on student's employability. However, the researches mentioned some factors only and implemented in specific area. Pham Huy Cuong just mentioned the social knowledge that students needed to have and researched within the scope of graduates of the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Viet Nam [5]. Lan et al. pointed out the factors affecting employability of Foreign Trade University graduates and gave recommendations related to the training process [6]. Tan et al. discovered and measured qualities that employers require graduates and this research is only implemented in industrial zones of Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam. The research provided 5 employer's requirements to graduates are soft skills, problem solving, professional knowledge, experience and university reputation [7].

In this paper, we strive to analyze aspects of graduates' employability so as to propose solutions to increase employability of the graduates. We also propose the requirements for improvement at educational institutions to support graduates to meet employer requirements.

## METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this paper is to make recommendations to higher education institutions to increase employment opportunities for graduates. This has resulted in a focus on employability initiatives that are embedded within the higher education curriculum.

This study has considered data collected from previous literatures, including studies in developing and developed countries, especially those in Viet Nam, our experience in participating in education accreditation more than 36 Vietnamese higher education providers (HEPs). We synthesize, analyze and compare these data with expert opinions to propose solutions for Vietnamese HEPs to increase employability for graduates.

## Definition of Employability

There are numerous definitions of Employability found in relevant literature. The definition of employability has shifted throughout history and continues to be contested. Employability is a different concept from employment. In other words, there may be a job but still be unemployed. This concept involves stakeholders including the Government, employers, HEPs, students and graduate students. From the 1950s to the 1980s, social interest was primarily for businesses. Social market cared more about how businesses react and cope with market challenges. At that time, the ability to be recruited would be defined from the approach of the human

resource hunters. That means, one would have the potential to be recruited when one was evaluated to be suitable for various jobs or positions in the company. In other words, employability could be considered as flexibility at work. However, since the 1990s, social interest in the industry has changed dramatically. The market no longer evaluates job applicants based on their ability to do a lot of work in a company, but highly appreciates the ability to specialize in a position or the ability to develop applicant's competencies which makes one become expert/dexterous in the field they are working. In this context, employability is primarily the ability of the individual to undertake a specialized job in a specific field, regardless of the inconstant corporate environment [8]. Literature review figures out the fact that, from different perspectives, 'Employability' has myriad definitions:

Employability, from the society's point of view, is being hired

Employability, from the employer's point of view, is conformity with the company performance

Employability, from the individual's point of view, is the ability to find a job which enables the individual to develop his/her own competencies and skills.

To several scholars, employability is a skill [9], but to the others, employability is considered as a process in which graduates are well trained and prepared to work for a long term of time [10]. In addition, employability could be defined as 'a set of skills, knowledge and personal characteristics that enable graduates to be hired and succeed at that job' [11]. Knight and Yorke also categorized employability into 07 seven dimensions:

Find a job

Gain certificate/ license

Acquire basic skills

Have experience at relevant positions

Have experience at volunteer and social activities

Have an ability to make plan, determine career path, and have good interview skills

Have achievements in the chosen career.

Thus, employability concept is closely linked with higher education. Employability also reflect the match and mismatch between higher education and the labor market, which can focus on the individual or social/structural level. Employability concept also can be used to describe the relationship between education and work. It is often used to describe the different types of skills and individual attributes and also in discussions about the structural equilibrium between supply and demand in the labor market and when measuring and describing employability in the labor market or the entire labour force [12].

### **Employability Skills**

Evaluating the employability of graduates is very essential to determine the skills and abilities of learners, and to identify the training quality as well as regular updation of the training organizations. In fact, schools/universities have paid much attention to preparation of knowledge and skills to meet the requirements of the society and the labour market. However, it is alarming that there is a number of graduates who would achieve the expected learning outcomes but would not be assessed as highly employable [13]. Therefore, in order to make the graduates visualize more clearly about 'employability', it is necessary to analyze in detail what businesses are currently desiring and demanding from job applicants. Approaching from the point of view of enterprises, some factors can be recommended that are the foremost concerns of businesses:

### **Critical Thinking**

Analyzing data to identify trends is a core part of critical thinking. This capability has a direct link to handling large volumes of data, detailing data, and analyzing parameters for specific results in a market or market trend.

The key requirements for this ability include logical thinking, explanation of causes, finding correlation, systematic thinking, etc.

### **Creativity**

Employers are always looking for candidates with signs of creativity, such as pioneering thinking, breakthroughs, love for exploring new ideas, systematic thinking and innovation. Ability to take initiatives when working in groups and having new methods to access data are important factors, that help to operate effectively.

### **Problem-Solving Skills**

Some individuals, when asked about their ability to solve problems, often think about skills that require them to identify problems and solve them on their own. However, from an employer's perspective ability to solve problems is seen in a broader and more comprehensive way. The 'Problem' here includes all the common and regular elements and activities. The problem-solving process is to identify a very small issue from many different perspectives, seek proof, manifest and self-judge, whether it is likely to lead to other profound problems or not. This ability requires an individual to have detailed analytical skills, problem assessment, thinking and proposing solutions, initiatives, and group discussions.

### **Decision Making Skills**

Making decisions is a common day-to-day activity, requiring employees to delve into a problem, learn about it, evaluate and identify relevant factors, then propose implementation plan. The right decision maker can explain why it is necessary to implement these operational actions and protect their choices by providing concrete evidence and transparency of steps. Individuals, who can make reasonable decisions, are able to review, select, explain, reflect, evaluate and control time effectively.

### **Knowledge of Commercial and Business Activities In The Market**

Knowledge about business and market is extremely necessary and directly related to the way a business operates and its performance. A business-minded person can immediately analyze the capabilities, potentials and problems in the relevant field from different perspectives. This can include business planning, customer relations, cash flow, strategic thinking, SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threat) thinking, advertising and marketing and understanding the vision and mission of the organization.

### **Self-Motivation and Personal Skills**

Planning, controlling time and organizing skills are the key competencies that employers want to see most in graduates. Other essential characteristics include cooperative skills, teamwork skill, detailed scheduling, adherence to goals, timing etc. In particular, good planning and organization means how to get the work done in the right time with the highest efficiency of work. These individual skills are considered a 'plus' for graduates to increase their chances of being employed when initially involved in a productive work environment.

In addition, good oral communication is also a priority for enterprises. Graduates need to demonstrate good persuasive ability, and express motivation and determination to start new challenges, commit to work and ensure the task is completed on time. Businesses desire to employ graduates who are passionate, flexible, responsible and dedicated.

## **THE DIFFERENCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION BETWEEN DEVELOPED COUNTRIES AND VIETNAM**

In this contemporary context, higher education has been playing an important role in the society. In other words, the society is expecting more and more from higher education. Government, businesses, stakeholders desire that education, especially higher education will contribute to the development of human resources skills in a diversified and comprehensive way. The skills and capabilities of human resources are the direct factors that promote growth, both in terms of production efficiency growth and the development of technological processes [14].

Organizing teaching activities is an important factor to increase the employability of graduates, via the structure of the training program and the learning environment. Therefore, teachers need to make efforts to improve their teaching in the direction of:

Improving the activities and the guiding role of lecturers

Converting individual subjects and independent models to integrated and blended ones, and grouping single subjects or models to form skill-oriented subjects

Focusing on developing logical and critical thinking, forming active and positive learning attitude for the learners

Focusing on directing learners to solve practical problems and actual cases simulated in the classroom

In developed countries, higher education focuses on 'education' activities, in which promoting research and developing learners' thinking are the central goals of universities [15]. However, in Vietnam, 'education' is at the general education level, and 'training' is at the higher level - university. The name of the Ministry of Education and Training is therefore also arranged in this order (Education first, and then education) [16]. The main task of higher education is also limited in the scope of training human resources for society. The 2005 Education Law clearly states that "University-level training helps students master professional knowledge and skills to practice fluently, be able to work independently, creatively and solve specialized problems [17]. The Law on Higher Education also emphasizes the role of higher education to provide knowledgeable and skilled human resources "University-level training for students with comprehensive professional knowledge, mastering the principles, natural - social rules, with basic practical skills, to be able to work independently, creatively and solve problems in the trained industries " [18]. Thus, in Vietnam, education in general, and higher education in particular can be considered as a form of investment. Investment in education is investment in development, which is a basic investment in the socio-economic development strategy in general [14]. In particular, from the perspective of learners' families, investing in education is seen as a way to invest in developing future generations, with the desire that after graduation, their children will have many career options with guaranteed income [20]. In fact, Vietnamese universities also show that career orientation/ development is one of the top priorities of educational institutions, attracting great interest from learners and the community. From this perspective, higher education is the basic and first foundation of socio-economic development. However, although the priority goal of higher education is to provide skilled, professional, highly qualified human resources for the society and the labour market for production, the results are not as expected. The gap between schools and businesses, between education and production is growing [21]. So, although the number of graduates every year is many times higher than the demand for labour used by the society, many graduates have difficulty in finding jobs or are even unemployed, or are working contrary to the profession or doing jobs that are not commensurate with the trained majors. Also, the feedback from the enterprises are mainly lack of human resources, and that knowledge and skills of graduates are not in line with the enterprises' desire to recruit [22].

## **WHAT VIETNAMESE HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS NEED TO DO TO INCREASE THEIR GRADUATES' EMPLOYABILITY**

The difference between higher education in developed countries and that in Vietnam as analyzed above partly reflects the 'lower rapid' of higher education institutions in comparison to the growth rate of the labor market in general. It also figures out the loose link between Vietnamese education and the production environment. Therefore, higher education institutions in Vietnam need to change and improve further in the direction of supporting learners to increase their employability by focusing on:

### **Work Experience**

Many new graduates are finding it difficult to obtain graduate-level work and impossible to break into the sectors they were aiming at. In order to address this, higher education institutions are examining the methods they use to enhance student employability and deploying various measures to grow and strengthen this activity, with an increasing focus on providing work experience. Businesses tend to recruit individuals who have

experience in relevant positions, especially those who show what they have learnt from their previous work experience. Therefore, the most important factor for higher education institutions to increase the competitiveness for graduates is to develop training programs with regular and deep participation of enterprises, so that learners have real opportunities to take part in production activities [23].

### **Entrepreneurship**

Despite the fact that start-up activities are not currently in the compulsory program, it is necessary to recognize the benefits that start-up activities contribute to the stakeholders. Bringing a startup into higher education will really have a positive impact since the training program could motivate the learners to be involved in business procedures and turn what they have learnt into reality. Learners who participate in start-up models, in groups or by themselves, are motivated to explore and actively solve problems arising in the implementation process, while getting familiar with business models and production environment. However, schools also need to consider carefully while introducing policies and strategies for start-up into schools, because small, spontaneous models can bring immediate benefits, but in the long run can be considered to be 'impatient' or rush towards marginal value [24].

Enterprise education produce graduates with the mind-set and skills to come up with original ideas in response to identified needs and shortfalls, and the ability to act on them. Enterprise skills include taking the initiative, intuitive decision making, making things happen, networking, identifying opportunities, creative problem solving, innovating, strategic thinking, and personal effectiveness. Enterprise education can enhance careers education and student employability by enabling participants to be more opportunity-focused, self-aware and attuned to the business environment [25].

### **Career Orientation**

As per the standard in European countries, graduate employability can be 'measured' by the percentage of students who are able to get a job 6 months after graduation [26]. Accordingly, the school's contribution to the employability of students is the career orientation services that the school performs for students during the training process at the school. However, career orientation does not seem to have been promoted and has not been integrated into the training program right from the beginning of the program design and development, leading to the fact that the results are somehow not as efficient as expected by learners and businesses [22]. Career orientation as one of the components of education is necessary to take the role optimally in order to provide a good understanding to students about careers and the world of work. Furthermore, career orientation is necessary to always accompany and direct students to have awareness and good planning dealing with the planning career options that they will select [27], [28].

### **Personal Profile Completion**

This is a critical and decisive step towards the career path of graduates. Profile is the only document for employers to have an overview of the knowledge, experience, skills and qualifications of applicants. The application profile, as desired by the employer, is necessary to focus on the success / results / achievements that the students acquired during the learning process as well as the previous actual jobs, including evidence. In particular, the profiles that clarify and specify the applicant's expectations and desire for further career growth will create strong impression on the recruiters. One of the regular issues of this preparation phase is that many faculty members stay too focused on specialized or professional content and assume that graduates need to do more important things than to prepare profile materials, and resumes need to focus on industrial knowledge rather than demonstrate students' employability [23].

All these abovementioned aspects are not new to higher education institutions; however, the efficiency is not high from the enterprise's perspective. There are many reasons for this lack of success, but basically these activities are not systematically organized yet, not linked to the training program right from the beginning of the course design and development. A large part of student support activities comes from individual teachers in single activities which have not been formalized and unified. The training program, in order to meet the demand of effectively serving the production activities, requires active participation and close links with actual production models. As a result, the schools can support learners with the best conditions to help them master

the theory, apply professional knowledge, and cultivate the personal knowledge and skills in order to flexibly enter the labour market.

## CONCLUSION

Improving the employability of graduates is a great concern and also a controversial matter in domestic and international education. For developed countries, the goal of higher education focuses on research and developing the learners' thinking and ability. So, many opinions are contradictory. and they disagree with the activities to foster skills or increase the graduates' employability. However, the goal of higher education in Vietnam is to provide high quality human resources for the labour market, meeting the requirement of socio-economic development. Therefore, increasing employability is an urgent requirement for all higher education institutions, raising the competitiveness for graduates. There are many ways to improve the training programs and teaching activities. However, depending on educational orientation and goals, schools need to consider appropriate implementation plans. The fundamental recommendation is that universities need to determine changes toward the trends of the market to acquire comprehensive and systematic strategies that bring positive effects and are recognized by the employers.

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