

A LONGITUDINAL STUDY ABOUT THE EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS OF VIETNAMESE STUDENTS

● NGUYEN MINH TUAN

ABSTRACT:

In a high tuition fee environment, International University (IU) and other Vietnamese universities have to compete with each other fiercely to survive and develop. This study was carried out to assess the improvement of the employability of IUs students from 2011 to 2017, especially when IU has established many skills clubs. In this study, the ability of IUs students was compared to the ability of students from other universities and also requirements of the labor market. The study's results show that IUs' efforts have improved the employability of its students. However, IUs' efforts have made limited impacts and it is necessary to develop other approaches to solve the unemployment issue. This study is expected to bring many benefits to universities which have expensive training and education programs.

Keywords: Competency dictionary, employability, longitudinal, skills club.

1. Introduction

Traditionally, Vietnam education was for the elite. Only talented students could be admitted to state-owned universities. The goal of these students was to look for a place in the public administration system or state-owned companies after graduation. Their living was then sufficient and their career advancement came along with smooth transition based on seniority. However, this is no longer true regarding extensive changes in Vietnam's socio-economic system. The percentage of enterprises in the non-state owned sector has been increasing, and foreign invested companies have played a key role in the growing economy. As a result, state-owned companies have been facing stiff competition, and the public administration system had to adapt to the new trend. Life-time employment is no longer guaranteed, life-time learning is a must, and the best way to remain employed is to acquire new skills required in the labor market.

Vietnam education has been desperately changing to meet the domestic and international labor demands of the growing economy. Almost all

universities in Vietnam have set up "advanced" programs to keep up with the change. These programs share common ideas where English is used as the means of teaching with curricula adopted from high ranking universities all over the world, classes are small and well-equipped, access to the most updated materials is granted, and as a consequence tuition fees stay well above the normal. International University (IU) - a member of Vietnam National University of Ho Chi Minh city - has been one of the pioneers in this trend since its establishment in 2003. IU has always been aware that its long-term success relies on how the labor market views its products, namely its graduates, and generic skills have gradually gained a more significant role in getting employed. Since its initial start, IU set up its first skills club with the aim to provide generic skills to students in addition to technical skills which can be acquired during class-hour activities. So as to meet ever increasing demands from the contemporary labor market, the number of skill clubs in IU has rapidly expanded to five in 2011 and end up at a total of 20 until the end of 2016. However, these efforts to

improve the employability for IUs students are still in doubt. In other words, IU is likely to look for the answers to address the following management question.

* "Are these clubs really of help to improve IU students employability skills".

The answer for this question can be more crucial bearing in mind that the number of unemployed people with university education in 2016 stays close 200,000 or equivalent to 18.3%, and getting employed is the decisive factor for parents to justify the investment in choosing these high-tuition fee programs.

2. Literature review

There are many definitions of employability skills. Robinson (2000) defines "Employability skills are those basic skills necessary for getting, keeping, and doing well on a job". Employability skills can be distinguished from occupational or technical skills by their generic nature. They can be applicable throughout various industries, business sizes, and hierarchical levels from the bottom line to the top management. According to Peter and Yorke (2005), employability skills can be understood as "A set of achievements, understandings and personal attributes that make individuals more likely to gain employment and to be successful in their chosen occupations". The terminology "employability skills" in this study represents transferable skills that people must possess to become "employable". The term "employability skills" can also be referred to as "core skills", "key skills", "professional skills", or "career management skills" in various literature. The common attribute for all employability skills is that they can be learned. In other words, employability skills can be acquired and developed progressively.

In addition to knowledge and qualification, employers usually require a set of skills from candidates for a specific position. Those skills are not sufficient but a must for employees to perform at the best of their ability. Nowadays, no matter how good a graduate qualification is, he/she is very likely to compete with his/her equally well-academically qualified counterparts. Applicants can increase their chance of getting employed by showing these skills to their employers. Archer and Davison (2008) confirmed that generic skills and personality are

more important than the degree qualification in getting a job. According to Adecco (2015), companies prefer high levels of generic skills to academic achievements in recruitment and selection. These skills can help employees to get along well with their colleagues and bosses, and provide good, logical solutions to problem-solving.

Many organizations view employability skills as their key to success under the pressure of rapid dramatic changes. However, the sets of employability skills for numerous positions can vary much from author to author, and context to context. (Youth Central) suggests the list of eight skills applicable across all industries, namely communication, teamwork, problem solving, initiative and enterprise, planning and organizing, self-management, learning, and technology. (University of Kent) mentions the following top ten skills: verbal communication, teamwork, commercial awareness, analyzing and investigating, initiative/self-motivation, drive, written communication, planning and organizing, flexibility, and time management. The comprehensive list of employability skills seems to be endless, and this poses a lot of difficulties to evaluate students across different majors and workplace. In order to overcome that obstacle, competency dictionaries come into use.

Competency was first defined as a personal attribute leading to successful performance (McClelland, 1973). However, researchers have continued to refine the term. Parry (1996) defined it as "a cluster of related knowledge, skills and attitudes (KSA) that affects a major part of ones job (a role or a responsibility), that correlated with performance on the job, that can be measured against well-accepted standards, and that can be improved via training and development." Lately, Sampson and Fytros (2008) described competency as the fundamental attribute of the person which underlies the successful performance in a job.

"Competency dictionaries is a term of art that describes a tool or data structure that includes all or most of the general competencies needed to cover all job families and competencies that are core or common to all jobs within an organization." (Wikipedia). There are many dictionaries of competency which are written by various

organizations in different sectors, such as the Behavior Competency Dictionary of Organizational Readiness Office (BCD of ORO) in Canada, the Competency Dictionary of Harvard University, the Behavioral Competency Dictionary of British Council (BCD of BC), and the General Competency Dictionary (GCD) for the Public Sector of the Phillipine Government. Different competency dictionaries can cover different lists of employability skills. Nonetheless, some dictionaries provide the proficiency scale while others do not. The decision to choose which competency dictionary as an instrumentation tool for this study is its ability to quantitatively measure these skills. In other words, whether could we measure these skills using an(a) interval/ratio scale? The pretty obvious answer is competency dictionaries with proficiency scale should be selected. Taking this into account, the BCD of ORO, the BCD of BC, and the GCD are good candidates for this study. However, the BCD of ORO provides proficiency scales of one to five whereas the BRO of BC, and GCD offers one to four only. That means the BCD can help to capture more information than the other two. In addition, each proficiency level is illustrated using behavioural indicators. Each competency scale is cumulative, i.e. all behaviors at lower levels are applicable at higher level. This can help to significantly reduce the subjectivity in scale mapping for respondents.

The employability skills in competency dictionaries can be classified into "generic", "technical", and "job-specific" skills. In this research, we target all business students in IU regardless of their majors or industry sectors. Hence, it is quite inappropriate to cover all skills, but "generic skills", i.e. skills can be applied across a great deal of subject domains. The term "employability skills" and "generic skills" can be used interchangeably from now on in this study.

Over the last few decades performance management has moving from outcomes-based approaches to competency-based ones. The inclination toward competencies makes it easier for employers to take employees behaviors into account while optimizing their performance for the sake of companies strategies and objectives. There are plenty of studies about the role of employability skills in helping students get employed worldwide

(Baker & Henson, 2010; Wilton, 2011; de Guzman & Choi, 2013; Asonitou, 2015), and in Vietnam (Tuan, 2011; Barker, 2014; Truong & Laura, 2015; Nghia, 2017). IU has been trying hard to improve students employability with many newly setup skill clubs so that students can choose the most appropriate club to learn/hone new skills. Nevertheless, there are few studies about whether these clubs can really improve employability levels, and in Vietnam there is absolutely not such any studies. In this case, a longitudinal study about students employability skills taking the number of generic skill clubs into account could shed the light into the management problem by breaking it into following questions.

How well do IUs students meet the requirements in the contemporary labor market?

How good are IUs students in comparison with others in advance programs?

Do these clubs really improve students employability skills? Are IUs students better at generic skills in comparison with those in the past?

3. Methodology

The BCD with the proficiency scale is used in this study as the instrumentation. There are 24 skills in this dictionary. A focus group was conducted among four IU students, four IU graduates, and three employers/manager to scrutinize these skills, and they agreed to drop three skills Developing Others, Impact and Influence, and Visioning and Strategic Direction. However, the English skill was inserted. This is understandable as English is the first language for Canadians, but not for Vietnamese. The proficiency scale of International English Language Testing System (IELTS) was selected for instrumentation.

In the 2011 survey, data were collected from 70 IUs senior business students, 44 IU business graduates who just graduated about one year, and 80 employers/managers in various organizations in Ho Chi Minh city and adjacent provinces. In this 2017 survey, 98, 79, and 209 responses are received from the above groups, respectively. In addition, questionnaires are also distributed to senior business students in other universities, namely Hoa Sen University, University of Finance and Marketing, and University of Technical Education who have also been studying in "advanced" programs in order

to see how well IU students have performed in comparison with their peers. One hundred and eight responses are collected.

In this research, the following comparisons in all generic skills are conducted:

- * IU senior students (2017) vs IU senior students (2011)

- * IU senior students (2017) vs employers (2017)

- * IU senior students (2017) vs students in other universities (2017)

- * Employers (2017) vs employers (2011)

- * IU graduates (2017) vs employers (2017)

- * IU graduates (2017): what they possess vs what they expect to have to excel at their current positions

In this study, independent sample T-tests are used to detect any significant differences between any two groups, except paired sample T-tests are used for the last comparison above.

4. Findings

Table 1 shows that IU senior students in 2017 are better than the cohort in 2011 at five (5) generic skills. English is the most improved skill with the gap of 0.55. However, the majority of skills (17) show no improvement.

IU senior students in 2017 are better than other universities students in Decision Making and English. With the objective of becoming a leading university in Vietnam to provide highly competent labor sources, it seems that IU needs to equip its students with more skills at higher proficiency scale to stay ahead in competition, especially in the context that the Vietnamese English proficiency level has been on the rise. In addition, IU senior students in 2017s English proficiency in general has surpassed the employers demand. This has made the gap between IU senior students and other universities students become less meaningful in the recruitment and selection process. Furthermore, IU graduates in 2017 think they are not good enough at all skills needed except English to excel at their current positions. In other words, getting employed is just one initial start, but being a mediocre employee hinders/stops him/her from career advancement or even get fired.

IU senior students in 2017 fall short at five (5) skills by comparison with present employers requirements. Nonetheless, IU graduates in 2017 fall short at 13 skills. This can be interpreted as IU senior students tend to highly evaluate themselves

but they change their mind when facing practical problems at work.

Finally, the requirements of employers have been increasing. This study finds the gap between "2017" and "2011" in 13 skills. It is quite interesting that all five skills which are improved by IU senior students (2017) by comparison with the cohort (2011) are also required at higher levels by employers (2017) in comparison with employers (2011). This can be interpreted as IU students have been aware with the labor market trend, and trying to keep up with the change.

5. Conclusions and implications

Nowadays, IU in particular and Vietnam universities in general should be aware of the hiring preference of employers in competency and steer effort toward improving their students employability skills. The various newly setup skills clubs can partly help IU students get employed, but this is not sufficient. Clubs activities cannot totally replace real life problem work-out, and this kind of research should be conducted regularly to help universities know how well they serve the skilled labor market. In addition, the mapping between the activities offered by clubs for skill improvement and the comprehensive list of skills in the competency dictionaries has not yet been done. Therefore, the following questions remain unanswered.

- * How is the overlap between clubs activities to improve skills?

- * Whether do the clubs activities cover all skills needed for graduates to successfully enter the labor market?

For the time being, dictionaries of competence have not known by many Vietnamese students, especially who just enter tertiary education. The majority of them are not aware of neither the list of possible generic skills nor the proficiency scale for each skill. The consequence is that.

- They do not know whether a skill is needed in their future career

- If they know a skill is needed, they do really know whether they are sufficiently proficient, or they should put more effort to improve

- They cannot set up a comprehensive list of skills needed with required proficiency levels to improve.

- They cannot set priority for each skill. Hence, they try to improve their skills by accident or by convenient.

Another striking point should be noted is that the comparisons of IU senior students (2017) and IU graduates (2017) with employers (2017) have many things in common. In the self-assessment of IU senior students (2017), four in five skills which should be improved are repeated in the self-assessment of IU graduates (2017). This could be understood as the assessments consistence thanks to the proficiency scales in the dictionary of competency. However, students tend to be more generous when evaluating themselves. In other words, if they find themselves in the middle of two consecutive scales, they are inclined to "round up". Table 1 illustrates this well when IU senior students (2017) thinks they fall short at only five skills but when facing reality IU graduates fall short at 13 skills in their self-assessment. In other words, when facing reality IU graduates could round down their proficiency levels. The self-confidence in academic or simulation situations could be replaced by uncertainty or doubt while trying to work-out practical problems.

IU graduates (2011) exceed employers requirement (2011) at communication and English skills (Tuan, 2011). In this study, IU graduates (2017) are only better at English.

This results are repeated in the study in 2017 It indicates the good practice of communication and English in IU. However, not only the shortages in three skills of Change Leadership, Networking, and Organizational & Environmental Awareness of IU graduates (2011) in comparison with

employers requirement (2011) but also the shortages in other ten skills are detected. This implies that the effort of IU to improve generic skills for its students cannot keep up with the increasing demand in the labor market, and the gaps seem getting bigger and bigger.

One prevailing strength of IU students is their English. Table 1 shows that IU senior students (2017) are ways ahead of IU senior students (2011), better than their peers in other universities, and exceed the employers requirements. This also indicates that the English context in IU is well nurtured, and IU students are among the best in the labor market. Besides, the need to master English skills is not a strong drive at the moment with the exception of going to study or work overseas.

The final observation is that IU graduates are inclined to think that they need to improve all generic skills to excel at their current jobs in both studies in 2011 and 2017. This once again confirms that the IUs effort to improve generic skills through many skill clubs are not sufficient.

At present, IU focuses much on knowledge education with its requirement of all business students to do a research as the basis for their thesis fulfilment. Nevertheless, generic skills have not been considered top priority. Thus current study shows that it is absolutely crucial for IU in particular and other "advanced" programs in general to conduct this kind of research regularly, and take their results more seriously into action. It is a must for these programs to survive and grow ■

REFERENCES:

1. Adecco (2015), "Generation Z vs. Millennials", available at: <http://pages.adeccousa.com/rs/107-IXF-539/images/generation-z-vs-millennials.pdf>
2. Archer, W. and Davison, J. (2008), "Graduate employability", *The Council for Industry and Higher Education*.
3. Asonitou, S. (2015), "Employability skills in higher education and the case of Greece", *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 175, pp.283-290.
4. Baker, G. and Henson, D. (2010), "Promoting employability skills development in a research-intensive university", *Education+ Training*, Vol. 52 No.1, pp.62-75.
5. Barker, B. (2014), "Employability skills: Maintaining relevance in marketing education", *The Marketing Review*, Vol.14 No.1, pp 29-48.
6. de Guzman, A.B. and Choi, K.O. (2013), "The relations of employability skills to career adaptability among technical school students", *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, Vol. 82 No.3, pp.199-207.

7. McClelland, D.C. (1973), "Testing for competence rather than for intelligence", *American psychologist*, Vol. 28 No. 1, p. 1.
8. Parry, S. (1996), "The quest for competencies", *Training*, Vol. 33 No.7, pp. 44-56
9. Peter, K. and Yorke, M (2005), "Employability: judging and communicating achievements", available at: <https://www.qualityresearchinternational.com/eseectools/eseectpubs/knightyorkachievement.pdf>
10. Robinson, J. P. (2000), "What are employability skills", *The Workplace*, Vol. 1 No. 3, pp. 1-3.
11. Sampson, D. and Fytros, D (2008), "Competence models in technology-enhanced competence-based learning", *Handbook on information technologies for education and training*, pp.155-177.
12. Truong, H.T. and Laura, R.S. (2015), "Essential soft skills for successful business graduates in Vietnam", *Sociology*, Vol. 5 No. 10, pp 759-763.
13. Tuan, N. M. (2011), "Vietnamese students employability skills" *International Education Studies*, Vol. 4 No. 4, p 175.
14. University of Kent, available at: <https://www.kent.ac.uk/careers/sk/top-ten-skills.htm> (accessed 31 August 2017)
15. Wikipedia, available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Competency_dictionary
16. Wilton, N. (2011), "Do employability skills really matter in the UK graduate labour market? The case of business and management graduates", *Work, employment and society*, Vol. 25 No.1, pp.85-100.
17. Youth Central, available at: <http://www.youthcentral.vic.gov.au/jobs-careers/planning-your-career/employability-skills>

Received: 13/2/2019

Revised: 23/2/2019

Accepted for Publication: 5/3/2019

Authors informations:

Dr. NGUYEN MINH TUAN

School of Business - International University

Vietnam National University of Ho Chi Minh City

NGHIÊN CỨU THEO THỜI GIAN VỀ KỸ NĂNG TUYỂN DỤNG CỦA SINH VIÊN VIỆT NAM

● TS. NGUYỄN MINH TUẤN

Khoa Quản trị Kinh doanh - Trường Đại học Quốc tế,
Đại học Quốc gia Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh

TÓM TẮT:

Trong môi trường học phí cao, Đại học Quốc tế (IU) và các trường đại học Việt Nam khác chịu sự cạnh tranh rất khốc liệt để tồn tại và phát triển. Nghiên cứu này nhằm điều tra xem các kỹ năng tuyển dụng của sinh viên IU đã được cải thiện như thế nào từ năm 2011 đến năm 2017, đặc biệt trong bối cảnh IU đã thành lập rất nhiều câu lạc bộ kỹ năng. Nghiên cứu này cũng so sánh sinh viên IU với các trường đại học khác và yêu cầu của thị trường lao động. Kết quả cho thấy những nỗ lực của IU đã cải thiện các kỹ năng tuyển dụng của sinh viên. Tuy nhiên, tác động của chúng khá hạn chế và cần có nhiều cách tiếp cận mới hơn để giải quyết vấn đề thất nghiệp. Nghiên cứu này có thể đem lại nhiều lợi ích cho các trường đại học cung cấp chương trình đào tạo với học phí cao.

Từ khóa: Từ điển năng lực, khả năng tuyển dụng, theo thời gian, câu lạc bộ kỹ năng.