

THE INFLUENCE OF GENDER AND ETHNIC FACTORS ON THE SOFT SKILLS OF STUDENTS OF THE FACULTY OF ECONOMICS AND LAW, TRA VINH UNIVERSITY

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This study has been conducted to identify the soft skill gaps between students and graduates as well as analyze the influence of gender and ethnicity to soft skills in Tra Vinh university. Quantitative data were collected at School of Economics and Law with a sample of 362 students and 300 graduates to measure their soft skills. The results show that both students and graduates are still unconfident about their soft skills in general, leading to an effect on the self-esteem aspects of students. Moreover, people also acknowledge the significance of soft skills, namely critical thinking, problem-solving, self-learning, work-management skills and teamwork as well as communication skills; generally need to be prioritizing equipped with for any kinds of workplaces. Nonetheless, the aforementioned skill gap is significantly remarkable, especially regarding the communication skills. Beside that, there is a significant difference in skills level by gender (male and female) and ethnic group (Kinh, Cham and Khmer). From these analyses, a number of solutions for the work recruitment, schools, graduates have proposed to lessen the skill gap and meet the demand of labour-markets.

Keywords: Soft skill gap; Tra Vinh University; Students; Graduates, Vietnam.

1. Introduction

Globalization and economic integration are ever becoming an indispensable trend of the development process of each country. This trend as well as the influence of the 4.0 technology revolution have created a trend of employment and labor recruitment with a great emphasis on applying knowledge, developing thinking skills, from trained recruitment to can be train. Obviously, social needs have profoundly changed the demand for labor quality in the direction of increasing leading to a human resources competition in each industry. Labor resources competition requires workers not only to have a common knowledge but also to have soft skills, professional practice competence, professional manner and working attitude.

Facing several challenges in terms of training and job creation, the Prime Minister has issued a national qualification framework of Vietnam (Decision No. 1982/QĐ-TTg) providing general provisions on output standards for graduates must have these skills: necessary skills that can solve the complex problems, entrepreneurial leadership skills, create jobs for yourselves and others, critical

thinking skills, assess the quality of work skills, communication skills and foreign language ability level 3/6 according to the framework of foreign language competence of Vietnam. To achieve these standards, a part of universities develops an application-oriented higher education strategy which focuses highly on training students to meet employer needs.

In fact, recruiters not only require higher quality of graduates being proficient in professional knowledge, but also good at soft skills such as being fluent in foreign languages, having communication skills to adapt to a work in high intensity environment, having teamwork skills when working in team, critical thinking skills to share and access to multi-dimensional perspectives, having effective time management skills to save time and many other soft skills. Especially, when the labor market is increasingly competitive, soft skills decide from 70 percent to 85 percent on the success of students after graduation, while hard skills or professional knowledge only contribute fewer from 15 percent to 30 percent remaining (Indeed, there are 93 percent of interviewed recruiters emphasized

that soft skills are becoming increasingly important and necessary in the business sector, especially in the context that the Vietnamese economy has been integrating globally (Truong, Laura & Shaw, 2016).

At the School of Economic and Law of Tra Vinh University (SEL), besides requiring students attend soft skills courses of the university, the faculty's training program has taken the initiative in bringing practical subjects related to the professional practice room such as the accounting practice room, the banking practice room, the import-export practice room, the mock trial model, model of entrepreneurship students club to create an environment for students expose to practical environment exposure, improve their professional skills and soft skills related to professional services.

Moreover, some studies have found soft skills to be related to gender and ethnicity (Nguyen, Nguyen & Pham, 2016; De & Be, 2005). In the context of multicultural learning environment in Tra Vinh university, the understanding of gender and ethnicity relations to soft skills will be added to our knowledge.

2. Literature Review

Soft skills is a sociological term referring to skills that relate to language use, social integration, behavioral attitudes applying to communicate with others. In recent years, the need of developing soft skills has become an essential and mandatory element in personal development process of students. Indeed, soft skills play an indispensable role in any circumstances, situations or environment in life, study and work. Truong, H. T. T., Laura, R. S. & Shaw, K. (2016) make a research on the role of soft skills in economic transactions today showing that the current global business environment requires a very high level of competitiveness forcing workers to take part in the economy must be cautious with skills, especially communication skills. To have successful transactions, the factor of price and product quality is not the most important factor to persuade customers and make successful economic transactions, but it is the skill factor of salesperson (Truong, Laura & Shaw, 2016). The fact also shows that not only communication skills but also in the context of the modern global integration economy requires workers to master a lot of other skills such as teamwork, critical thinking, and problem solving,... (Truong, Laura & Shaw, 2016).

The skills are chosen to build a scale in the list of several needed skills based on two following factors: theoretical background and actual situation. The theoretical background shows that many studies suggest the skills that needed for an employee in the economy include communication skills; teamwork skill; life-long learning and self-study skills; problem-solving skills and critical thinking skills (Adnan et al., 2014; Brungardt, 2009; Debnath et al., 2012;

Kirby et al., 2010; Ngang et al., 2015) are important skills that an individual needs to have when entering the market labour. In addition, there is an interview question following: "In your opinion, which of the 5 following skills groups should be priority given in developing the skills you think are important for both the learning and working environment for your job?" it is designed to collect information about learners and employers needs (graduates' opinions are considered to represent the employers needs because only employees know what skills they need to improve to meet the needs of their employers, and when asking about their needs we will get information about the needs of businesses).

3. Methodology

From effort to examine the literature review of previous studies by Roszyk-Kowalska (2016), Varela and Mead (2018), Tseng et al. (2018), Ornellas (2018), Ngang et al. (2011), Kirby et al. (2010), Ginting (2016), Debnath et al. (2012), Dall'Amico and Verona (2014), Adnan et al. (2014), Brungardt (2009) in the construction of the scale, measure the quality of soft skills more objectively. The theories, research methods, and findings of above studies suggest the authors in the questionnaire to evaluate interviewees about how they think, thought, feel and act in each skill to synthesize and evaluate whether the interviewees get the skills really or not. Based on this, the authors apply a 05 point scale with option 1 for very disagreeable levels and raising to 05 means completely agree, which also means that the choices in low levels such as level 01 and level 02 show that the respondents do not fully grasp the skills that are asked through the scale and the options at level 04 and level 05 are from completely agree means that they get the skills that are asked on the scale. Hence, using these 05 point scale to convert to a low to high skill score where 1 means a low score skill and 05 means the highest score skill.

Since 2012s, Tra Vinh University has applied subjects related to skill into the compulsory curriculum with two types of classes: (i) Soft skills class 1 - Accessibility skill and job interviews skill classes for second year students and (ii) Soft skills class 02- Elective skills classes for final year students. A survey of 662 subjects including 362 students and 300 graduates who have been and studied at SEL (Table 4.1) showed that there are 82.6 percent of respondents answered that they took part in skill classes at the University while there are 42.0 percent have attended soft skills class 1 and 10.2 percent have participated in soft skills class 02 and especially there are 47.8 percent of respondents have completed soft skills certificate (Figure 3.1). Therefore, most students starting the second year are very interested in perfecting and developing their personal skills.

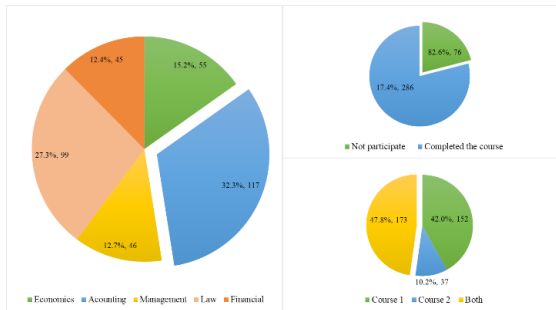


Figure 3.1: Actual situation of soft skills training in scale in research sample at SEL

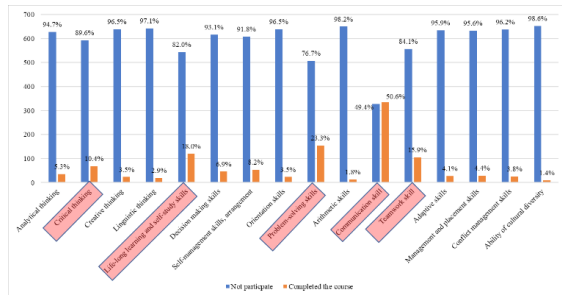


Figure 3.2: Confidence of mastering soft skills in both survey groups

Source: Survey results

4. The results of research

4.1. Soft skill gap between students and graduates at the School of Economics and Law, Tra Vinh University

Using Cronbach’s alpha reliability analysis (Table 4.1) to evaluate and analyze the general reliability for each type of skill shows that the collected data have reached an appropriate level of reliability (all factors > 0.8) according to Nunnally and Bernstein. The average skill score is aggregated by calculating the average score of each observed variable in the scale for each skill. The average of soft skills scores (Table 4.2) of students and graduates in almost skills is greater than 04 points,

but not greater than the 4.5 points, which means qualitative and competent skills in the average survey of subjects are quite good, not really high because all the points are approximately level 4 not at level 05.

Table 4.1: Cronbach's alpha coefficient of skill points for each skill type

Skills	Working	Students	All	Number of factors
critical thinking skills	0.862	0.883	0.876	7
problem solving skills	0.899	0.894	0.897	7
life-long learning and self-study skills	0.885	0.901	0.895	7
time and job management skills	0.885	0.892	0.890	7
communication skills	0.917	0.928	0.926	10
teamwork skills	0.942	0.952	0.949	19
Numbers	300	362	662	

Source: Survey results

Moreover, testing the difference of average skill points (Table 4.2, Figure 4.1) in two groups of students and working people shows in all skills, there is a significant difference between these two groups in terms of average skill at statistical significance of 05 percent (Satterthwaite, 1946). The average skill score of the student group is lower than that of the graduates group, especially in which the skill gap in communication skills is the largest by nearly 0.2 points, the next is problem solving skills (0.143 point); critical thinking skills (0.1137 points); time and job management skills (0.1129 points); life-long learning and self-study skills (0.111 points) and finally the lowest gap is teamwork skills (0.1108). However, when testing the average difference between the two groups of

Table 4.2: Skill score gap between students and graduates for each skill type

Skills	Working	students	All	Gap	Ttest*
critical thinking skills	4.129	3.991	4.054	0.137	Pr(T > t) = 0.0022
problem solving skills	4.177	4.034	4.099	0.143	Pr(T > t) = 0.0018
life-long learning and self-study skills	4.129	4.015	4.067	0.114	Pr(T > t) = 0.0172
time and job management skills	4.183	4.054	4.113	0.129	Pr(T > t) = 0.0066
communication skills	4.275	4.076	4.166	0.199	Pr(T > t) = 0.0000
teamwork skills	4.283	4.175	4.224	0.108	Pr(T > t) = 0.0040
Numbers	300	362	662		

* diff = mean(working) – mean(Students); H₀: diff = 0

Source: Survey results

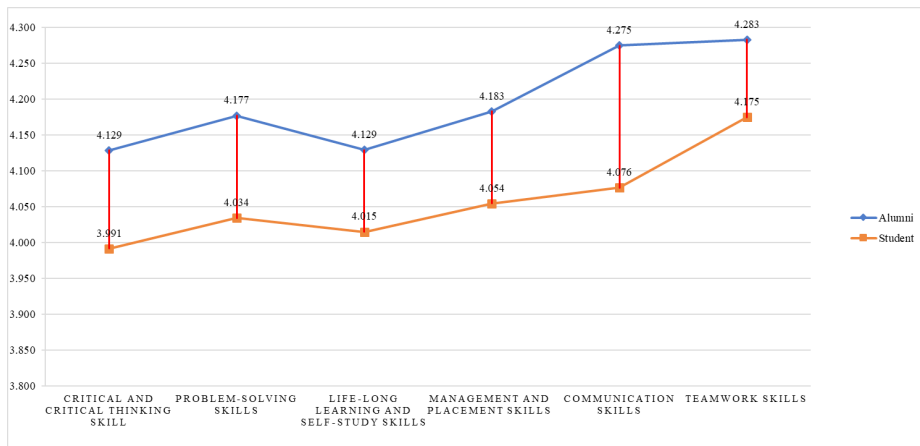


Figure 4.1: Average skill score gap between two groups of students and working graduates
Source: Survey results

final year students and the remaining students from year 01, year 02, year 03, there is no significant difference between the two groups.

Meanwhile, another study of Nghia, T. L. H. (2016) studied the skill gap of graduates and senior students in Vietnam from the perspective of employer for a sample of 257 graduated students from university and 525 undergraduate senior students gave a different result. The survey required graduates to make an assessment of the importance of a portfolio including 35 workplace skills. Meanwhile, senior students are required to rate their level of these 35 skills by using descriptive statistics, T-test tests and one-way anova analysis. The results revealed that the skill gap between these two groups of subjects was almost no difference. Both final year students and students from 02 to 03 year graduates are seriously lacking skills to effectively carry out their job duties.

In-depth interviews with business owners in Tra Vinh about their assessment of student’s soft skills competencies and requirements for skills when recruiting workers showed that although they appreciated current programs and training methods of Tra Vinh University, especially the new pilot models at the faculty of SEL, their perception of the soft skills competence of all students is generally quite low. They argue that most of the newly graduated students lack serious skills competencies and that the gap between these workers and their employees is quite large. They said that they prefer to recruit students with good competence in soft skills than those with high academic scores but weak basic communication skills. Even some companies require recruitment that workers must have from 02 to 03 years of work experience. Clearly, businesses appreciate the soft skills competencies of experienced workers and they are quite concerned with the soft skills of recent graduates.

From the above analysis, it can be seen that although there have been many efforts to develop soft skills for students over the years, compared with the increasing requirements of businesses, the level of response is still not satisfied with a significant gap. This reality implies that it is necessary to develop a long-term training strategy for developing soft skills among students not only in the SEL but also the entire of Tra Vinh University. The analysis and recommendations from this research contribute to the basis for developing new strategies, models and solutions that help not only the SEL and but also all other faculties of Tra Vinh University to improve the quality of soft skills for students in the future. Moreover, many other analyzes of Nghia (2018), World Bank (2013) show that differences in demographic characteristics such as gender, age, marital status and socio-cultural issues can affect the development of students’ skill. Indeed, the World Bank (2013) argues that there are strong links between gender and human soft skills. While Nghia (2018) found that social and cultural issues can affect the development of students’ skill.

4.2 The influence of gender and ethnicity on soft skill gap at Faculty of Economics and Law in Tra Vinh university

At SEL, the difference in skill levels between different demographic groups is quite significant (Figure 4.2; 4.3). Almost all the skills measured in this study indicate that there is a significant difference in skills between men and women (Figure 4.2), the results show that *men always prevail over women in women all skills, including student or graduates groups*. And especially, among working graduates groups, the gap is even bigger. The biggest gap can be clearly seen in the skills related to manage, organize information, work and time (similar to the information skills in Nghia’s study in 2018) and critical thinking skills (similar to thinking skills in Nghia’s research (2018)).



Figure 4.2: Difference of skill averages by gender

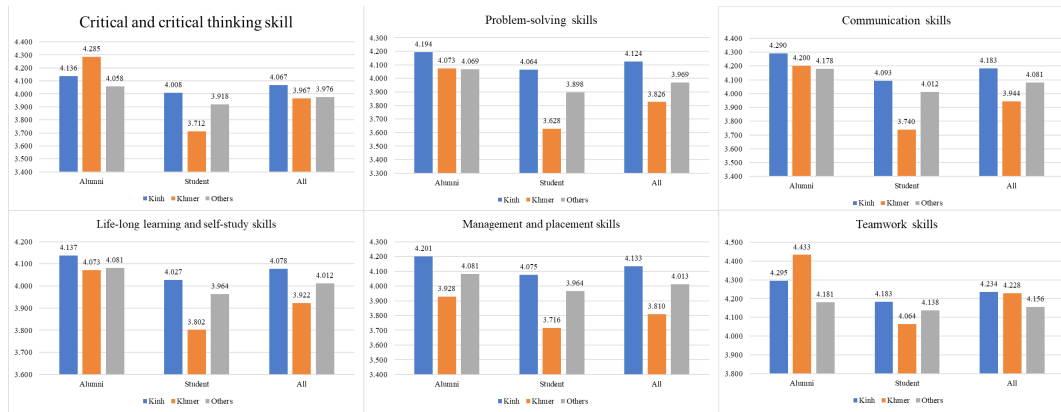


Figure 4.3: Average difference of skills by ethnicity

Source: Survey results

Clearly such disparities in skill levels can largely be attributed to the gender role in Vietnamese Confucian culture in which women, wives and mothers are expected to fulfill the housework, competing with their job roles (Nguyen et al., 2016). And most of the graduates who work in this survey have less than ten years of work experience, which is equivalent to 23 to 32 years of age, an ideal time for women to get married and have children in Vietnamese society. Therefore, they may have chosen to invest in building a happy family rather than a career promotion.

Similarly, another fact shows that Tra Vinh is a province having a large proportion of Khmer and Cham people. Therefore, when studying demographic characteristics in this locality, ethnicity is one of the important factors that cannot be ignored. Partly because of the diversity of ethnic groups in the entire province population, partly because of the unique cultural identity of the Khmer and Cham people, has long formed a distinct culture for Tra Vinh. This particular culture is the infrastructure to create the personality, habits and human nature here. In fact, the statistics (Figure 4.3) show significant differences between ethnic groups in terms of average skill score. Almost all skill groups of

the Kinh and the Cham show that their average skill points are quite high, but the skill level of the Kinh is still higher than the Cham people a bit, especially in problem solving skills, information management skills, time and work. Similarly, when comparing the skill level between Kinh and Khmer people, the difference in skill is quite significant. However, in some skill groups such as communication, problem solving, time management, Kinh people show that they have better skill level, while in some other skill groups such as thinking skills and teamwork skills, the Khmer show they are more dominant especially in the working graduates group. While in the student group, almost all of the Kinh skills show a dominant position over the Khmer students. De & Be (2005) pointed out that the community of Khmer people and the connection of ethnic communities through pagodas and traditional festivals are strongly expressed. Khmer people live honestly, naively, humbly, and highly national awareness. From here we can see, it is clear that students of ethnic minorities in both Cham and Khmer people for their young age, moreover, the personality is formed due to the encirclement of the community so communication skills and their teamwork are not as high as that of Kinh students. However, because of

the activeness of the Kinh people, they have lower community, so the teamwork skills of the Kinh are at a basic level, and lower than for the Khmer. While Khmer graduates work in businesses, they have become outstanding individuals, promoting their community, which evidenced by their good teamwork skills.

5. Conclusion

Through an overall assessment of the status of training, development and quality of soft skills for SEL students as well as the gap between the quality of skills that students have compared to the skills requirements that businesses require, a few key results are drawn as follows:

(1) The skill gap between students and graduates is very significant, especially the gap in communication skills is very large.

(2) There is a significant difference in skills level by gender (male and female) and ethnic group (Kinh, Cham and Khmer). As a result, men always have a higher level of soft skills than that of women. The Kinh people have soft skill level in almost all types of skill than that of Cham and Khmer ethnic groups, but this difference is not significant. Particularly in teamwork skills, the Khmer showed a better skill level than the Kinh showed.

From the above analysis, it can be seen that we have to admit that soft skills is one of the criteria for recruiting workers that is higher than the overall level of graduates.

6. Recommendations of key solutions to train and develop soft skills for SEL in the future

From the above reality, some main solutions are proposed to shorten the gap of students' soft skills level requirements are as follows:

(1) Definition of soft skills: this solution is one of the "small pushes, causing great effects". Obviously, although students are aware of the importance of soft skills and they are always willing to attend, moreover, they make an effort to study whether it is a compulsory or elective skill subject. But the choice of how to learn skills and how to develop soft skills after leaving school is almost impossible to shape. Obviously they always rely solely on the curriculum of the training program. The reason is that before they learn, they do not have a comprehensive overview of the soft skills they need to equip, about the output requirements and methods of self-assessment skills for themselves when finished studying. To do this, some important steps should be taken:

- Conduct the catalogs to list the priority soft skills that are of interest to businesses.

- Develop a set of skill criteria that need to be achieved through achieving, fair, excellent, and professional levels.

- Before joining any skill class, students will be provided with a list of skills including definitions and skills, quality criteria to be met and ways to learn the skills.

- Develop a simple set of guidelines for learners to learn basic self-assessment or test their skills after completing a skill course in the university.

(2) Change the training way: In fact, the method of training contributes 60 percent to the success of the training program. Changes in organizational methods should aim to create conditions for learners to acquire and grasp skills quickly. Moreover, the organization of training also needs to organize a skills evaluation board for learners in the direction of evaluation based on experiments of real environmental assumptions. Assessing skills through a real hypothetical situation, giving learners experience situations will help the brain retain longer the processing skills that they have applied in the situation rather than using a paper test, nothing is more than that theory returned to the trainer. A few suggestions on how organizations should be changed in the future can be referred to as:

- The number of each skill class should only be from 09-12 people, which is enough to form the groups of 03 people. And with a sufficient number of groups in such a class, the interaction between groups will not be diluted during the practice period. Moreover, the number of such students is just enough for the coach to observe, capture and understand the comprehension characteristics of each student. Thereby it will improve the effectiveness of teaching and learning skills for learners.

- Each skill class should have one main coach and a teaching assistant. The combination of the duo will give them enough time to give practice instructions to a sufficient number of students in the class. In addition, the tutor will play a role in helping the coach notes the students' changes to see the effectiveness of the method they applied in the skill class.

- Researching solutions for building skill classes into appropriate time frames for learners, however, it needs to be balanced with the budget and practical organization at the department.

- Finally, a fairly easy policy to implement is that instead of designing a second-year skills curriculum, the skills that will be changed are design that is designed for first-year students and upgrading skills through each school year according to difficulty level and practice level of the skill.

(3) Integrating and strengthening soft skills right in the main professional training programs: Indeed, this solution has been implemented by the SEL carried out in the business training course for the Start-up Club, banking and accounting, import-export operations, through giving students experience of business models, so students can be

confident with their skills right before graduation not only in academic expertise but also in skills.

(4) Develop soft skills based on support programs:

- Soft skills can also be developed indirectly through support programs such as extracurricular activities such as the Green Summer Program, meetings with speakers, seminar participation, working as group projects at the University. Activities like these are non-academic in nature, but indirectly assist students in developing their characteristics and personalities. These programs allow students to explore their interests that can be nurtured by enrolling them in extracurricular and extra-curricular activities relate to their interests.

- Develop soft skills based on campus life. A large number of university students stay in residential colleges. University leaders can use this opportunity to plan activities that will involve all students living in the university housing. In particular, Tra Vinh University is a place of exchanging and integrating of many different cultures. Students will have the opportunity to experience activities such as debate, plays competitions, sports festivals including tally matches, charity markets and singing competitions in English, Cham, and Khmer languages, among many activities can be performed. In addition to increase social interaction among students, leadership, team spirit and entrepreneurship can be nurtured through these activities. These informal activities should be carefully planned and carried

out continuously throughout the semester and to improve teamwork they should include all races and genders.

- Developing soft skills based on formal and informal activities at department. Faculties can also play an important role in strengthening students' soft skills for formal activities such as organizing workshops, seminars and conferences. Although these activities will most likely benefit students who are already active, less active activities may be required for supporting. In a more informal approach, the Faculty can organize some weekend activities for social activities such as visiting shelters, inter-faction games and something likes that. Although the Faculty does not act as the head of universities, informal activities at the Faculty level can be relevant to all students regardless of whether they are university-based or not.

- Practical training/professional training. Almost departments, students receive practical training/practice at the end of the final school year. Students are identified as lacking in soft skills may be encouraged to undertake an informal professional training course by the end of the second year of study. However, this is an addition to the formal training / coaching at the end of the course. In addition to gaining practical experience, students will realize the importance of possessing a certain level of soft skills when they have a massively early preview of what is their expectation.

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ẢNH HƯỞNG CỦA YẾU TỐ GIỚI VÀ YẾU TỐ DÂN TỘC ĐỐI VỚI KỸ NĂNG MỀM CỦA SINH VIÊN KHOA KINH TẾ VÀ LUẬT, TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC TRÀ VINH

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Tóm tắt

Nghiên cứu này được thực hiện nhằm đánh giá khoảng cách kỹ năng mềm giữa sinh viên và cựu sinh viên, và phân tích ảnh hưởng của yếu tố giới tính và yếu tố dân tộc đến khoảng cách kỹ năng mềm của sinh viên Khoa Kinh tế và Luật Trường Đại học Trà Vinh. Dữ liệu nghiên cứu được thu thập từ 362 sinh viên và 300 cựu học sinh. Kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy cả sinh viên và cựu sinh viên vẫn không tự tin về kỹ năng mềm của họ, dẫn đến ảnh hưởng đến việc tự khẳng định giá trị bản thân của họ. Hơn nữa, mọi người cũng thừa nhận tầm quan trọng của các kỹ năng mềm, cụ thể là tư duy phản biện, giải quyết vấn đề, tự học, kỹ năng quản lý công việc và làm việc nhóm cũng như kỹ năng giao tiếp; thường cần được ưu tiên trang bị cho bất kỳ môi trường làm việc nào. Tuy nhiên, khoảng cách các kỹ năng nói trên là đáng chú ý, đặc biệt là về các kỹ năng giao tiếp. Bên cạnh đó, kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy sự khác biệt về kỹ năng theo yếu tố giới (nam và nữ), và yếu tố dân tộc (Kinh, Cham, Khmer). Từ những phân tích này, một số giải pháp tuyển dụng lao động, từ sinh viên tốt nghiệp để giảm bớt khoảng cách kỹ năng và đáp ứng nhu cầu của thị trường lao động.

Từ khóa

Khoảng cách kỹ năng mềm; Trường Đại học Trà Vinh; Sinh viên; Cựu sinh viên; Việt Nam.