Limitations on the development of skills in Higher Education in Vietnam

Introduction

Since the economic liberalization in 1986, both the Vietnamese economy and its higher education system have been developed very quickly. Paradoxically, despite the fact that each year thousands of students graduate, many having difficulties finding work, employers still complain that it is hard to find graduates with the required knowledge and skills. Complaints are made about university graduates being weak in planning their future, having impractical professional knowledge and lacking necessary skills required by the contemporary workplace. Skill limitation is considered one of the biggest barriers preventing university graduates from having a smooth transition to the workplace (Tran Ngoc Ca, 2006; Tran Quang Trung & Swierczek, 2009).

This paper discusses part of the findings of a doctoral research project entitled ‘Enhancing graduate employability: from the perspective of students and graduates in Vietnam’. By looking at perceptions of university students and graduates and the expectations of employers regarding students’ skill development for the employment market, this article is concerned with the wider context of the graduate skill development issue in Vietnam. It aims to bring about the overall picture of skill development in higher education (HE) in Vietnam, to examine the main reasons for the limitations for this development and to suggest solutions to enhance necessary skills for Vietnamese graduates before entering the labour market.

Literature review

From the end of twentieth century graduate career and employment patterns have changed significantly. In an increasingly global competitive market, with the development of information technology and the mobilization of workers across boundaries, organizations and enterprises have undergone massive restructuring of downsizing, de-layering and outsourcing (The Association of Graduate Recruiters, 2009). Perspectives on careers have also changed accordingly. When many traditional jobs which were characterized by long-term, stability and security offers and mutual trust have disappeared, the new career patterns are more likely to be characterised by ‘flexible employment contracts, multi employers, lateral job moves and multi career changes’ (Clarke, 2008, p. 8). As a result, linear careers seem to be replaced by more flexible, adaptive career patterns such as protean career (Hall & Mirvis,
boundaryless career (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Cheramie, Sturman, & Walsh, 2007) and portfolio career (Fenwick, 2006), intelligent career (Parker, Khapova, & Arthur, 2009). The changes reflect the new characteristics of the labour market and also the desire of many graduates, who now may prefer independence to employment security (Clarke & Patrickson, 2008).

Career management is no more managed by organisations, instead it has become ‘a process through which an individual makes a contract with him/herself to make sense of experiences, manage career choices and seek personal fulfilment’ (Hind, 2005, p. 269). In other words, each individual has to be in charge of their own career management and job security which is anchored in their own ‘portable skills and employability’ (Mallon, 1998, p. 363).

In the international context, there has been increasing educational attention paid to these portable skills. These skills are given various names such as transferable skills, soft skills, core skills, key skills, generic skills, basic skills, cross-curricular skills, or more recently employability skills1 (Bridges, 1993, p. 45; Hager & Holland, 2006, p. 2). Sometimes they are referred to as ‘competencies’, ‘capacities’, or ‘abilities’ rather than skills. Debate on their definition and how students best acquire them continues in many articles. However, in general, the central aspiration of those who seek to identify these kinds of skills is to find skills which can applied either or both: (i) across different cognitive domains or subject areas; (ii) across a variety of social, and in particular employment, situations. The terms are used rather loosely, often interchangeable, and it would be somewhat arbitrary to draw distinctions in any very hard and very fast way (Bridges, 1993, p. 45).

In other words, these terms are widely used to refer to a range of qualities and capacities that are viewed as increasingly important in contemporary life. The main focus is usually on their role in work and education viewed as a preparation for work (Hager & Holland, 2006).

**Higher education in Vietnam and the mission of preparing students for work**

The idea of preparing students for work as the main mission of HE in Vietnam has long been established (Ta Thai Anh & Winter, 2010). Up until recently, the main mission of universities

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1 In Vietnam, soft skills (kỹ năng mềm) is the term most often used to refer to a similar concept.
is still limited to produce an educated labour force for industry (Tran Ngoc Ca, 2006). HE is considered to have the responsibility to provide students with professional knowledge and skills and to help students satisfy the demands of the employment market (Pham Thi Huyen, 2008). The structure of HE, thus, has also been ‘fundamentally designed to meet the needs of the labour market’ (George, 2010, p. 34) with small, mono-disciplinary HE institutions (HEIs), each specialises in training skilled workers to meet the projected labour requirements of each sector (George, 2012).

Nonetheless the system was first built following the old Soviet system, and thus, it was first designed to match with the needs of the central command economy (George, 2010). During the 1980s and early 1990s, some of the highly valued characteristics of workers were often obedience, hard-working, loyal and able to follow orders (Nguyen Van Lich, 2009). The policy maker for both the HE system (HES) and the internal economy in the central economy was the central government. Most important decisions in the HES, such as teaching curriculum, teacher salary or number of students each institution could take each year, were made by the government. The industry’s operation was also not much different: the government distributed products, decided on the price of products and was also the one to pay the salary of workers. Salary was based on seniority, not based on merit or on workers’ performance at work (Nguyen Minh Hien, 2005; Nguyen Van Tai, 2004).

However, things started to change since the implementation of the economic liberalization policy (known as Doi Moi) at the end of 1986, when the Vietnamese government decided to adopt a market based economy. Instead of only state and co-operated sectors in the central economy, the new industry has developed many new sectors, such as the private sector, joint-venture and foreign direct investment enterprises (Nguyen Loc, 2006; Pham Lan Huong & Fry, 2004). HES has also expanded rapidly. Instead of only state HEIs in the past, new private HEIs and foreign universities have gradually been established.

Problems arose. The HES has been struggling to develop to meet the new needs of the economy. Instead of requiring workers to follow order, to listen and obey, the new market economy need creative and initiative people, who can work independently under pressure (Pham Thi Huyen, 2008; Tran Quang Trung & Swierczek, 2009). Vietnamese HEs does not seem to have been able to adapt to the change, especially when the whole system has still been under the firm control of the central government and the central ministry – the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) (Hayden, 2005; SEAMEO, 2007). Up until recently,
MOET has still been the policy maker of the most important decisions in each institution in the system. MOET decides the curriculum framework (which contains a large compulsory content of political oriented), the salary of academic staff in public universities is still based on seniority. The image of an academic in the system is the image of an overworked and underpaid teaching teacher whose main mission is transmitting knowledge rather than conducting research (Fatseas, 2010). The teaching in the HES has still inherited many characteristics of the traditional teaching method which strongly reflects both Confucian culture and the old Soviet top-down approach where the teacher is often considered the primary source of knowledge (Tran Thi Tuyet, 2012).

The gap between HE and industry appeared and has expanded quickly. There are more and more graduates who are unable to find jobs whereas employers still report their difficulties in finding skilled workers with required knowledge and skills. It is claimed that one of the main reasons for the situation is that university students’ soft skills are weak or even missing (Pham Thi Huyen, 2008; Tran Quang Trung & Swierczek, 2009). This contributes to the ill-preparation of university graduates for the workplace, and increases the dissatisfaction among employers when employing recent graduates (Tran Ngoc Ca, 2006; Tran Thi Tuyet, 2010).

**Methodology**

This study aims to investigate further the issue of skill development in HE context in Vietnam. In fact, there have been several research projects conducted on skill development in HES in Vietnam. One common way of approaching the problem is importing a list of skills from the international literature (See, for example Tran Quang Trung & Swierczek, 2009; Truong Quang Duoc, 2006) and gathering the voices and perspectives (mainly via the form of questionnaires) of research participants regarding the development of these skills in Vietnamese HEIs. The list of such skills as communication skills, problem solving skills or teamwork skills seems to be important for everyone at work and in life, however, as Beckett and Mulcahy (2006, p. 262) claimed, it cannot easily capture elements of knowledge which remains specific and tacit. Or in other words, any list of skills will only make sense in its very specific context and culture. Thus, it seems both simplistic and irrelevant when Vietnamese researchers use a list of skills developed in a very different context (often in the West) and apply it to the situation in Vietnam. What seems to be left aside or is unknown are the specific cultural norms and values as well as the socio-cultural features in Vietnam.
This research is designed to ‘reduce ignorance’ (Gough, 2002), to take into account the hidden features of context and culture in Vietnam, to reveal the issue of skill development in the Vietnamese context. Bearing in mind the aim of investigating the issue within the very specific context of Vietnam, I decided to locate my study within the constructivist paradigm. The constructivists argue that ‘realities are local, specific and constructed; they are socially and experientially based, and depend on the individuals or groups holding them’ (O'Donoghue, 2007, pp. 16-17). Creswell adds that:

Constructivist researchers often address the processes of interaction aiming individuals. They also focus on the specific contexts in which people live and work, in order to understand the historical and cultural settings of the participants (2009, p. 8).

Constructivism therefore promised to be of an appropriate ‘lens’ in my study particularly as I wanted to investigate the problem of graduate employability in the very specific historical and cultural setting in Vietnam.

In order to investigate this issue with its complexity involving socio-cultural factors in Vietnam, as well as what is involved in the skills debate, after carefully considering the relevant literature, the framework developed by Hillage and Pollard (1998) was drawn upon for designing this project. Hillage and Pollard consider skills as one of the employability assets, and that the capability of each individual to successfully deploy skills and present these skills in an accessible way in the market to find jobs and to maintain employment depends on their perception of what the market requires from them and what they have to satisfy that requirement. The ability to realise or actualise employability skills also depends on the context (i.e. personal circumstance and external socio-economic and cultural factors) within which graduates seek work (Hillage and Pollard (1998).

In terms of research participants, in the literature, there seems to be much focus on the voice of employers and academics. However, what seems to be missing is the voice of the young people. After careful consideration, it seemed to me that the current circumstance in HES in Vietnam as well as the relationship between it and the labour market, lacks this perspective. I decided to consult final year university students and recent graduates to be the main research participants.
The reason leading me to choose students and graduates as the main participants came from the gap between higher education and the labour market in Vietnam. When there is virtually no link between the higher education sector and the graduate labour market in the country (Fatseas, 2010; The World Bank, 2008; Trịnh Thi Hoa Mai, 2008), in order to succeed at work and in life, students and graduates become the ones, and the only ones who know and who have to know and understand both sectors. I have become interested in researching the thinking and experiences from the standpoint of Vietnamese tertiary students and graduates, who are living, studying and seeking work in Vietnamese context. I have also become interested in understanding the cultural factors affecting their perspectives, their direction and their decision in job seeking and their choice of work. Moreover, employment after graduation is the topic of their current concern and interest. I was confident that they would offer insight about this topic. This was the very reason I wanted to empower them, to hear their voices and to learn from their perspectives and experiences.

When there is a ‘gap’ between the skills graduates acquire as a result of university education and the skills employers desire (Pham Thi Huyen, 2008), inviting the voice of employers also helps to bring about a clearer picture of the mismatch in the graduate employment market.

**Research questions:**

1. What do university students/graduates perceive about the skill development process in Vietnamese universities?
2. What is the gap between students’ perceptions and employers’ expectations in terms of skills university graduates acquire?

**Research methods and research participants**

This study is an exploratory study conducted via focus group interviews with university students and in-depth interviews with recent graduates and employers. The study employed three focus group interviews of 10 final year university students in each group. Group members were selected randomly from different public universities in Hanoi, (see details in table below):

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<th>Participating universities</th>
<th>Abbreviation of university</th>
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Individual, face to face, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 recent graduates and six employers. There were several justifications for conducting individual interviews with graduates and employers and focus group interviews with university students. The first was the practical one of graduates and employers being too busy with their work to attend group events. The times and places that suited them were important and the research had to fit in with their schedules. With students, however, it was less difficult to set a suitable time for group discussion. The second reason was that graduates were more mature and were anticipated to be more confident talking about their transition process with just a researcher instead of a large group of people. They may be half way through this process, or it may be too recent for them to comfortably discuss what it has involved. So, conducting individual interviews would be more appropriate for these participants.

Student participants were younger, and they have not yet begun this transition to work, so it was expected that they would be open in group discussions as the subject matter was less personal and immediate.

The research had asked for the help of the Youth Unions in different universities in Hanoi to invite research participants. The information about the research and requirements for

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<td>Academy of Finance</td>
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<td>Banking Academy</td>
<td>BA</td>
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<td>Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam</td>
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<td>Economic University – Vietnam National University, Hanoi</td>
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<td>Foreign Trade University</td>
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<td>Hanoi Law University</td>
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<td>Hanoi Pedagogy University</td>
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<td>Hanoi University of Science and Technology</td>
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<td>National Economic University</td>
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<td>The University of Communications and Transportation</td>
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<td>The University of Engineering and Technology, Vietnam National University, Hanoi</td>
<td>UET</td>
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<td>The University of Language and International Studies, Vietnam National University, Hanoi (VNU)</td>
<td>ULIS</td>
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participants was given to final year university students and alumni in these universities. All participants involved in the study were volunteers and could withdraw any time during the research process. The researcher based on her professional network to invite employer participants. This research has also gained approval from the Human Ethics Committee of La Trobe University, Australia.

A thematic approach to analysis: Thematic analysis (Creswell, 2007) was employed for the analysing of interview data in this study. In order to ease the inductive analysis (Patton, 2002), Nvivo 9 with its strong data analysis functions were used for data storing, organising and coding. The initial sorting stage helped me to identify the emerging key points. However, these key points linked with their quotations seemed to be huge to manage. In order to make the task manageable, I had to look back at the framework of Hillage and Pollard (1998) and the research questions to identify the common themes and corresponding sub-themes in the interview data. The themes and sub-themes system made the task of sorting the data manageable. Key issues also emerged from the analysing process. Important factors regarding skill development that were reported by students, graduates and employers were also highlighted.

Study results

Students and graduates’ perception of soft skills
Participating students and graduates all seemed to share a similar view that soft skills are very necessary and important in job searching, maintaining and satisfaction. Some of the soft skills that most students and graduates considered important in the labour market were team work, communication skills, independent working skills, presentation skills, social understanding and decision making skills. According to the students and graduates, these skills were considered important because employers were looking for them. They suggested that enterprises needed high quality people who could do the job and who had both good knowledge and skills in dealing with job requirements. Students and graduates also stated that soft skills were becoming more and more important in employment market. They could not seize many good job opportunities because they lacked soft skills. Some of them even considered soft skills more important than professional knowledge:
Employers all understand that our knowledge is poor, after employing us, they will have to train us from the beginning, but they always want to know what skills we have, what we are good at and what we still need to develop (graduate – sale manager).

Thus, many of them indicated that soft skills were important both at the point of interviewing for the job and in job maintenance and satisfaction. At the point of seeking a job and interviewing for the job, communication skills and sensitivity in communication seemed to be the most important for them as these would help them ‘express ourselves’, ‘understand what employers look for’ and ‘respond properly’. Soft skills also helped them find the job they wanted more easily. All graduates indicated that soft skills were truly essential in carrying tasks at work and in helping them build confidence in the workplace.

These comments of the students and graduates show the similarity of the portable skills, qualities and capacities that are viewed as increasingly important in employment market (Hager and Holland 2006) in Vietnam and elsewhere in market driven economy. Such skills as teamwork, communication and decision skills were also considered by Vietnamese students and graduates as important to help them enter the job market and maintain their success at work.

However, some graduates, especially the ones who work in the Government sector did indicate the differences between the soft skills they think they should develop and the ones they often read from books or hear from rumors. For example, a graduate who worked for the government post office joked:

In my company, we just need to follow our boss, don’t argue with him. Because if you do, the next day you can stay at home and drink tea [it means you’ll get sack the next day].

One student also suggested the distinctive features of soft skills needed in Vietnam:

I personally think that different societies are different, Vietnamese society is ‘messy’, Vietnamese culture is also different, we do need some other kinds of skills and sensitivity.

The above comments were a very good example illustrating Beckett and Mulcahy’s (2006) point of view that skills are context and culture dependent. In the case of the Vietnamese workplace, the evidence of the central command economy could still be found in the government sector. Students and graduates had initially recognized the differences between
skills required at work in Vietnam and elsewhere. However, they were not able to name exactly what the differences were.

**Skill development at university in Vietnam**

When talking about skill development during university, most participants had a similar view to Stephen, Doughty, Gray, Hopcroft, and Silvera (2006) that university curriculum, in general, does not support soft skill development for students, that there is a lack of focus on skills both in the curriculum and the teaching, learning and assessment at university. Thus, most of them were not satisfied with the skills they had developed. They suggested that their skills were generally weak and could not meet the demands of future work. One student of HUL wondered:

> I am quite confident with the knowledge I have, I can analyse problems, can read the situation, but how can I make people listen to me, how can I persuade them? I find it very difficult.

Another student who had a part time job as a tourist guide and interpreter claimed that her communication skills and her social knowledge was very bad. These created many difficulties when she had to deal with tasks at work.

Interestingly, most students and graduates blamed their lack of proper soft skills on their universities. They either said that ‘soft skill teaching is one of the shortages of every university. Apart from knowledge, we cannot learn anything about soft skills’ or ‘we cannot get any instruction about soft skills, universities do not have any instruction, teachers do not teach either’. Some of them stated naively ‘we do not have a soft skills subject in our universities’, or ‘our universities should teach us soft skills, but they don’t’. Some others suggested that there were not enough activities provided by their universities to develop skills. Some also complained about the lack of guidance from the university:

> My university does not have activities to help students develop skills. We have to be in charge of the career orientation for ourselves. The case that teachers get involved in career orientation for students is very rare (Accountant graduate).

They even considered soft skills as being similar to knowledge where university teachers should teach them in class, thus they heavily criticized their universities ‘my university doesn’t equip me with any skill at all!’ and considered ‘that’s a shortcoming of Vietnamese universities’. They also blamed it for the situation in Vietnamese universities, where students
normally focus on only the marks in their exams. Coming to the class just to ‘get the necessary knowledge from the teacher’ to prepare for the exam, thus, many of them did not seem to see the link between being actively involved in class activities and the development of soft skills.

Sometimes teachers do give us group work or ask us questions in class. However, we are often reluctant to join in or to answer. We don’t often devote much for these activities because there’s no mark for them (student from NEU).

Students and graduates’ perceptions reflect a contrasting picture where they all seemed to understand the importance of soft skills in career development and they could also name important skills, however, they did not seem to be active in finding ways to enhance their skills. Instead, they placed high expectations on their universities to help them or even to equip them with those skills. They did not seem to understand that they should be the ones who had to be ‘in charge of their own career management’ (Mallon, 98, p. 363), or in other words, they need to make sense of experiences, manage their career choices and seek personal fulfillment for themselves (Hind, 2005, p. 269). They also confused skills with knowledge and expected that skills should be explicitly taught in the curriculum. They did not seem to capture the idea that they could develop skills by being actively involving in activities across different domains or subject areas (Bridges, 1993). The over focus on exam results and academic achievements in Vietnam (Kelly, 2000) may be one of the main reasons creating students’ misunderstanding that only good marks are the indicator of a good and successful student, and being active or passive in class activities or extra-curricular activities did not really matter. This feature of Confucian heritage culture in Vietnam (Tran Thi Tuyet, 2012) did seem to hinder students’ effort to recognize and to make the full use of university activities to enhance their skills.

Nonetheless, it was worth discussing the development of soft skills in different disciplines as there was evidence of differences in skill development among them. Though the participating students and universities were selected randomly, the details discussion in group interviews revealed some interesting findings. Among all participating students, students from ‘foreign related’ universities\(^2\) seemed to be more positive about the soft skill development in their universities. A ULIS student suggested:

\(^2\) ‘foreign related’ universities refer to the universities using foreign languages as a medium of instruction, i.e. ULIS, FTU and DV.
In my faculty, the teacher often creates different activities for us to develop presentation skills and teamwork skills. We can work together in small groups, we can present our work in front of the class. We feel much more confident after all.

The participating students from these universities were quite proud of having many chances to join different events and movements to develop soft skills. They all seemed to be quite active in group interaction. A positive environment for skill development in these universities was explained by a large number of teaching staff in these universities training overseas + open door of Vietnam

However, they also recognized that not all students were actively involved in those activities as they did not see the link between involving in these activities and skill development. Moreover, students from these universities also had to experience ‘switching their learning style’, as in some subjects they had many opportunities to develop their teamwork and communication skills, in some others, the teaching method remained quite traditional with the teacher talking most of the time and students taking notes most of the time.

Nonetheless, the study environment of the ‘foreign related’ universities made students from other universities feel ‘jealous’. Students from ‘financial and business related’ universities such as AF, BA, EU and NEU suggested that soft skills were very important for them to find jobs and be successful in their occupation. However, they all suggested that the skill development environment in their universities was not good. A student from AF suggested that the environment for soft skills development in her university is ‘very limited’, whereas a student from NEU felt regret that:

Our university equips us with lots of professional knowledge, but our soft skills are very poorly developed. The teaching method in our university makes us become lazier. We feel jealous of students from FTU because their teachers’ requirements are tougher and they have a better environment to develop their soft skills. In our university, teachers come to class, deliver the lesson, that’s it, they are not demanding and give us high marks easily.

Nonetheless, soft skills development in ‘financial and business related’ universities was considered better than in HUST, UCT and UET, the ‘science and technical related’ universities (Stephen at al, 206). Students from ‘science and technical’ universities complained that their soft skills were even poorer than students from ‘financial and business related’ universities.
Though they did have project work which required them to work in teams, they still suggested that they had a very ‘dry’ environment for soft skills development. There were too few extracurricular activities for them to get involved in. Thus their soft skills were worse compared to students studying in other disciplines. Students’ claims seem to support the argument of Stephen et al. (2006) when they suggest that students in this disciplines often work with number, computers or machines. The typical study in these universities does not require many interactions to negotiate the task. Thus their soft skills are also hard to develop (Stephen, et al., 2006).

Most students and graduates recognized that getting involved in the Youth Union or the Student Association\(^3\) activities was a good way to develop their soft skills. However, some of them ‘are not interested’ in these activities, some others ‘do not think they are important’, some even thought ‘it’s a waste of time because the activities are so boring’, some indicated that they wanted to get involved, but ‘don’t know how’ or ‘don’t find interesting activities’. The common comment is that activities of the Youth Union and Students Association were both ‘too much’ and ‘not enough’. What was considered too much was the singing and performance related activities. However, there were too few activities related to other interests.

However, graduates also indicated that the lack of skill development in university curriculum or the lack of/ or not interested in extracurricular activities were only parts of the problem which resulted in the poor soft skills and the lack of confidence at the point of graduation. The situation was also rooted in Vietnamese culture, Vietnamese traditional thinking and Vietnamese people’s traditional perception of education. One graduate suggested:

> Our traditional way of thinking is to emphasize theory, and look down on practice. Parents, from the time we were at school, often do not like us to attend extracurricular activities.

Another added:

> Not only are extracurricular activities looked down upon, the chances for young people to raise their own voice are also limited.

One graduate, who was a university lecturer, explained in more details:

\(^3\) Each university in Vietnam normally has two departments in charge of creating students extracurricular activities and movements, namely Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union (which is often called Youth Union) and Vietnamese Student Association (which often called Student Association).
Vietnamese education does not encourage children to think critically. Adults do not like children to question; they want their children to be obedient. Since we were little, we were educated that way. It is hard to change. Even in university, we know for sure that something is wrong, but we don’t dare to speak up.

Obviously cultural features of looking down on extra-curricular activities, of the desire to educate obedient children and students seemed to negatively affect the skill development in university. The evidence of Confucianism still seemed to be very strong in Vietnam. It not only hindered students’ efforts to recognize and to make the full use of university activities to enhance their skill, it also prevented students’ parents, who often have very important role and voice in student’s study (Tran Thi Tuyet, 2012), from recognizing the change required in the society and in industry. They eventually became obstacles preventing students from standing on their own feet, to decide their own matters and to ‘be in charge of their own career management’ (Mallon, 1998, p.363).

Because of the lack of a supportive environment for skill development in universities, and because skills were considered essential in obtaining job, many students and graduates thought that they should attend skill classes\(^4\). One graduate gave students advice:

> You should attend soft skill classes, to learn more about soft skills, especially communication skills. This is very important for provincial students, who do not know how to communicate, who are often afraid of being clumsy, of not satisfying other people or afraid that others won’t agree with you. When you attend those classes, you will think more openly, you will become more confident and you will find jobs easier.

**Employers’ perspective**

Though sharing the same opinion that soft skills were important in the contemporary workplace, all participating employers did not seem to satisfy with recent graduates’ skills. In general, employers agreed with students that university curriculum in Vietnam was outdated and did not support students to acquire necessary skills contemporary market required. However, they did not generally see that the responsibility for skill development was only on the shoulder of universities, but that was mainly the responsibility of students.

In general, employers did not have positive comments on students’ soft skills. One employer complained that ‘the life skills of all students are weak’. Employers tended to use soft skills

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\(^4\) Provided by some soft skills centres specialising in teaching soft skill courses such as: communication skills, presentation skills, team work and negotiation skills.
and life skills interchangeably. One employer emphasized the importance of life skills in the workplace in Vietnam:

In Vietnam life skills are important because we live and work in a community culture and where everything has not been professionally organized. Family culture is a significant feature in the Vietnamese workplace. Thus life skills are important. I didn’t mean any specific skills, but you need to make sense of the Vietnamese way at work, and adapt to it quickly in order to gain success.

Another employer, on the other hand, criticized those students who confused skills with the techniques they learnt from soft skill centres:

Students nowadays go to different soft skills courses to study, but then, in practice, they apply what they learn as a technique. Many of them have a communication skill certificate but they speak very ‘hollow’, without feeling.

In general employers’ comments were congruent with the view in the literature that skills are context and culture dependant (Beckett & Mulcahy, 2006). In Vietnam, life skills in a collectivist culture seemed to be important for anyone who wants to be success at work and in life. Thus, though the techniques to develop soft skills could be learnt, without real practice in real interactive situations in a collectivist culture, students could barely satisfy employers’ requirements.

Discussion
It became obvious that not only in the eyes of participating employers, but students and graduates also perceived that soft skills of university students were weak and far from expectations, and that they were not ‘work ready’ after graduation. This finding supports popular arguments on the ill-preparation of Vietnamese students for employment in the literature (Tran Ngoc Ca, 2006; Tran Quang Trung & Swierczek, 2009; Truong Quang Duoc, 2006). However, the tendency of students and graduates to blame their weakness on the university with their detailed explanations for the blame revealed a complexity of the situation, in which:

- University curriculum and traditional teaching method have not been positively supportive of the soft skill development of students. The traditional teaching method of transmitting knowledge from teachers to students, the exam oriented learning style, the assessment based on the exam designed for repeating the knowledge provided in
class all hinder the efforts to assist students in developing their necessary soft skills to manage the actual communicative interactions at work and in life outside university.

- However, university is only one part of the educational system of the country, and it could be considered as the final step in the system, it is hard for HE educators to change student learning styles which have been firmly developed since their first day at school. Too many important tests and exams which determine important success or failure in student study lives (Kelly, 2000), lead their way to focus on the knowledge for exams and neglect other aims. Soft skills, thus, are often ‘out of students’ mind’ during 12 years of schooling, and are often ‘looked down’ on in the whole educational system.

- There is also evidence of efforts to change, to include or to develop soft skills in teaching and curriculum design of some individual university teachers and HE institutions. Team work assignments and interactive lessons are examples of this effort. However, positive results were hardly found because (1) there had not been a systemic change, the effort of individual teachers would not be recognised, (2) There was evidence of teaching style renovation, but not much change found in exam design, (3) many students could not see the relationship between being actively involved in study activities and the development of soft skills.

- Students’ and graduates’ perception of soft skills is somewhat problematic, especially when they considered skills as knowledge to acquire singly and separately. Hager and Holland (2006) have given a warning on this confusion. They suggest that the list of skills imposing into HE worldwide could create the misunderstanding that these skills are discrete or atomic to be acquire and transferred singly. In practice, these skills and attributes ‘overlap and interweave like the threads in a carpet’ (p. 34). Moreover, it is suggested that these skills will only be developed and fully appreciated in the context where the consequence of such skills can be seen (Smith & Comyn, 2003), i.e. in the workplace or in the real communication interactions. Thus, the students’ expectation of being taught soft skills explicitly in the university does reflects their confusion in skill development.

- Students’ ways of responding to the situation also revealed a prevalence of passiveness among them. During their study, in order to get high marks, they focused on learning to get the highest marks possible. Before graduation, when hearing that soft skills were important to find jobs, they struggled to find ways to learn soft skills,
and started blaming the university for their weakness. They complained that the university did not teach them soft skills or did not give any guidance to tell them about the importance of these skills during their studies. They did not seem to understand that skills are accumulated and developed through class activities and university interactions outside class. The Vietnamese university context has, to some extent, created some activities inside class and in extra-curricular activities for students. However, if students do not actively seize these limited opportunities to develop skills, they will easily fall behind in meeting the demand of employers.

- The influences of Confucianism in Vietnamese culture also contribute to the limitations on the development of soft skills of university students. The focus on exam results, the neglect of attending extra-curricular activities, the culture of obedience, the prevalence of passiveness among students are to name some of the influences the Confucian heritage culture has on Vietnamese university student learning. However, under the impact of globalization and especially when the internal economy develops quickly and diversely, the demand for independent, active, dynamic and flexible employees has increased. There were still cases when students were not independent in their thinking and actions. The transition to work was harder for these students. The success and smoother transition only comes to those who could plan their future, who could enrich their knowledge and skills via in-class and extra-curricular activities, and who could decide their own matters in study and life.

- Nonetheless, the absence of guidance and information relating to the employment market in universities contributed to the ill-preparation of university students facing the transition to the workplace. In a collectivist culture like Vietnam, without official information from university, students seemed to be surrounded by too many stories and rumors about the new environment at work. One of those stories was the story regarding ‘soft skills’ requirement of employers. This led students to the soft skill centres to learn, then to apply the techniques (techniques, not skills) from these centres in real situations when applying and interviewing for jobs. However, they seemed to disappoint employers because skills are different from techniques.

In short, improving soft skill development of university students requires the effort of all related stakeholders. First and foremost, it requires a shift in world view and in the thinking of parents, universities and also of individual students. More importantly, there is a call for the change in the education philosophy of the whole education system. The education system
needs to help students to recognize that study is to explore and to develop personal capabilities, by not only to taking part in exams, and that good marks are not the main factor creating success for any student.

References


