

WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING AS A MEANS TO ENHANCE EMPLOYABILITY OF VIETNAMESE UNIVERSITY GRADUATES

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ABSTRACT

Employability is an emerging issue, especially when there are a lot of complaints about disparity between what fresh graduates own and what employers need. The purpose of this paper is to provide the general literature of graduates employability in the world as well as in Vietnam. From that, the author points out the employability research gap in the literature, especially in Vietnam. Finally, plausible reasons are given to argue why work-integrated learning approach should be applied in Vietnam to improve graduate employability. The paper plays a role as the call for work-integrated learning studies to improve graduate employability in Vietnamese context.

1. INTRODUCTION

Employability is an issue drawing attention from recruiters, higher education institutions, and employees because all of them are interested in improving graduate employability (Holmes, 2016; Jackson & Wilton, 2017). Moreover, understanding graduate employability is vital because there are different contexts for the issue and different perspectives to look at employability from companies, graduates and universities (Guilbert et al., 2016; Selvadurai, Choy & Maros, 2012). However, weak employability has been pointed out by many scholars (Benson, Morgan, & Filippaios, 2014). The main reason is the loose connection and cooperation between educators and employers. There have been many investigations showing that the employment situation is becoming quite harsh and more serious (Ito, 2013) and even after graduates are recruited, it is unlikely that they can satisfy the demands and needs of their employers (Tran, 2015). Vietnam is no exception because of a weak transition from education to work (Cameron, Dhakal, & Burgess, 2017). The paper is aimed at proposing work-integrated learning (WIL) as a solution to improve Vietnamese graduates' employability. First of all, various definitions of employability are provided to point out a broader and more complex view of employability. After that, a literature review of employability is given so that a gap in employability research, especially in Vietnam is given. Lastly, Vietnamese context of employability is given with the proposed solution to improve graduate employability in Vietnam. From that, WIL is given as a new and valuable approach to improve graduate employability in Vietnam.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. The conceptualization of employability

Definitions of employability are various. Hillage & Pollard (1998) defines employability as knowledge, skills, attributes with the way they are used and presented in the context. According to Sanders & De Grip (2004), employability is seen as the ability and willingness to linger and to stay proactive in labor markets. This provides a reference to employees' willingness and capacity to predict changes in their tasks as well as in their working environment and take the initiative to react to these changes. Yorke (2006: p. 8) defines employability as "a set of achievements - skills, understandings and personal attributes - that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations". Similarly, Pool & Sewell (2007) indicates employability as a set of skills, knowledge, understanding and personal attributes. This definition considers personal attributes one of the most vital elements contributing to employability. According to a shorter definition proposed by Hogan, Chamorro-Premuzic & Kaiser (2013), employability is the ability to achieve and maintain employment. From these definitions, it is obvious that employability is generated by sets of skills and attributes. However, from a wider viewpoint, Holmes (2013) states that graduate employability consists of human capital, social capital, and individual behaviors. This view proposes that employability can be created by a combination of possession (or human capital), position (or social capital) and process (career self-management). Following this trend, employability has become more and more

complicated and closely linked with the context in which it is investigated such as time frame or economic situation (Williams, Dodd, Steele & Randall, 2015).

2.2. Two approaches of employability research and the research gap in employability research

In the literature, there are two approaches for investigating employability. The first approach is to focus on skills or sets of skills such as core skills, essential skills, generic skills, enterprise skills, key skills, functional skills, skills for life or group of skills. Besides, one of the biggest concerns of scholars is to develop employability skills (Yorke, 2006; Holmes, 2016). Pool & Sewell (2007) present five components of employability which are career, experience, degree, generic skills and emotional intelligence. In contrast, Bridgstock (2009) argues that employability involves not just the ownership of the generic skills attributes. So, he highlights the importance of self-management and career building skills to lifelong career management and enhances employability. A group of authors, Finch, Hamilton, Baldwin & Zehner (2013) consider soft-skills, academic reputation, functional skills, and problem-solving skills as factors affecting graduate employability. Following this trend, Singh Dubey & Tiwari (2020) divide employability skills in IT sector into 6 groups: personal skill, leadership skill, interpersonal skill, organizational skill, team skill and enterprising skill. Similarly, Suri & Yadav (2020) also confirm that in IT industry, personal and interpersonal skills, technical skills and organizational knowledge are factors influencing employability. In marketing education, Daellenbach (2018) proposes four categories of skills including thinking and learning skills, personal soft skills, marketing knowledge and technical skills. In different sectors, employability is being investigated from different groups of skills.

The second approach is to investigate employability based on a broader view with broader concepts rather than a focus on skills or groups of skills. With this broader view, things are seen in terms of graduate capital as factors affecting employability is common such as human capital, social capital, cultural capital, identity capital, and psychological capital. One of the most obvious is graduate employability of Clarke (2017) or Tomlinson (2007). Similarly, Wei, Kai & Guifang (2020) find out mediating role of psychological capital between decision-making biases and perceived employability. Beside graduate capital, labor market, gender is also put priorities on so that its significance is not ignored. In Clarke (2017), labor market factors such as supply factors and demand factors have effects on both perceived employability and employability of graduates. Similar conclusion about the importance of external labor market is also given in the research of Vargas, Sánchez-Queija, Rothwell & Parra (2018) and Rothwell, Jewell & Hardie (2009). Jackson & Tomlinson (2020) investigates into perceived employability with the antecedent of labor market conditions with the conclusion that students with more positive perceptions of current market are more employable. The focus on graduates' attribute and their methods to develop and maintain their career from individual perspective for long term career is explored in quite many articles (Vanhercke, De Cuyper, Peeters & De Witte, 2014; Harvey, 2001; Fugate & Ashforth, 2003).

However, the problem is there is a dearth of combination between the role of educators and graduates in improving employability. Clarke (2017, p.2) states that "within the higher education literature there is a heavy emphasis on human capital development as a key foundation of employability but very little emphasis on individual attributes, the impact of perceived employability or labor market factors". Thirunavukarasu, Chandrasekaran, Subhash Betageri & Long (2020) points out the gap in the collaboration between academia and industry though the participation of students are pro-active. Moreover, there have been recent calls for more critical approaches so that employability can be fully understood with broader conception of the term beyond the skills-based approach (Burke, Scurry, Blenkinsopp & Graley, 2017; Clarke, 2017; Holmes, 2017). The purpose of these calls is for the complexity of graduate employability to be captured and improved.

2.3. Employability in Vietnamese context

There are seven Asian Pacific countries facing challenges in attracting and retaining employees having desired qualifications, skills and capabilities (Prikshat et al., 2016). Moreover, Vietnam is among them with a weak transition from education to work (Cameron et al., 2017). Moreover, Vietnamese Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are claimed to be weak at training industry-ready workforces, leading to an oversupply of poorly trained graduates (Phan & Wongsurawat, 2016). However, it is obvious that employers tend to require a variety of skills and abilities because they require more than just job-specific skills (Stevens & Norman, 2016). Beside loose cooperation, outdated and theory-based curricula, students' disengagement as well as ineffective pedagogical practices have been also cited as the main reasons for employability skills gaps in Vietnamese Graduates (Tran, 2013 & 2015).

Besides, Vietnam has been facing numerous drawbacks beside upsides with its participation in AEC (ASEAN Economic Community). Although Vietnam has made its commitments in improving labor quality by 2020, graduates have stayed weak at coping with rapid technological and industrial changes. Therefore, improving graduate employability in all sectors has come to the spotlight. Along with these urgent problems, there are calls for cooperation between HEIs and companies in improving graduate employability because of no close connections. More importantly, in terms of research, there are calls for HRM approach reflecting Vietnam's contextual values (Nguyen, Teo & Ho, 2018).

In Vietnam, one of the big names doing research on employability is Tran Le Huu Nghia. He had a series of articles looking into this issue and related issues such as graduates and final year students' skill gaps, external stakeholders' roles in enhancing graduates' employability, building graduates' soft skills (Tran, 2018a & 2018b). Another big name is Tran Thi Tuyet with several articles investigating the issue of enhancing graduates' employability. The main contents of these studies are weak collaboration between enterprises and universities in enhancing employability, loose relationships between higher education and enhancing graduate employability or responsibility of enhancing employability (Tran, 2013 & 2015).

3. METHODS AND RESULTS

Regarding Vietnamese graduates' skill gaps, Tran (2018b) confirms that these gaps are caused by university-related factors such as impractical curricula. However, few scholars in Vietnam have done research related to WIL as a solution to improve graduates' employability. WIL is sure to bring several benefits such as sharing the role between educators and students in improving employability, strengthen the collaboration between enterprises and universities. All of these contribute to providing workplaces with employable graduates.

It is worth considering WIL approach in Vietnamese context. "WIL has no precise definition, but is an umbrella term for pedagogical methods and strategies to integrate theoretical knowledge in the workplace based on a specially designed curriculum" (Berndtsson, Dahlborg & Pennbrant, 2020, p.2). WIL is mainly related to education programs in which a work placement is included as a strategy to focus on knowledge exchange and development in workplace (Kramer & Usher, 2012; Billett & Choy, 2014; Billett, Cain & Le, 2018). WIL has been proved to improve students' employability outcomes in various ways such as building students' confidence in professional working environment as well as developing skills such as teamwork, professional judgment and communication, problems solving, etc. (Billett, 2012; Martin, Rees & Edwards, 2011; Jackson, 2013; Jackson, 2015).

Investigating the similar context in Asia, Misni, Mahmood & Jamil (2020) pointed out the effects of curriculum design on the employability competency of Malaysian graduates. The authors propose the following model:

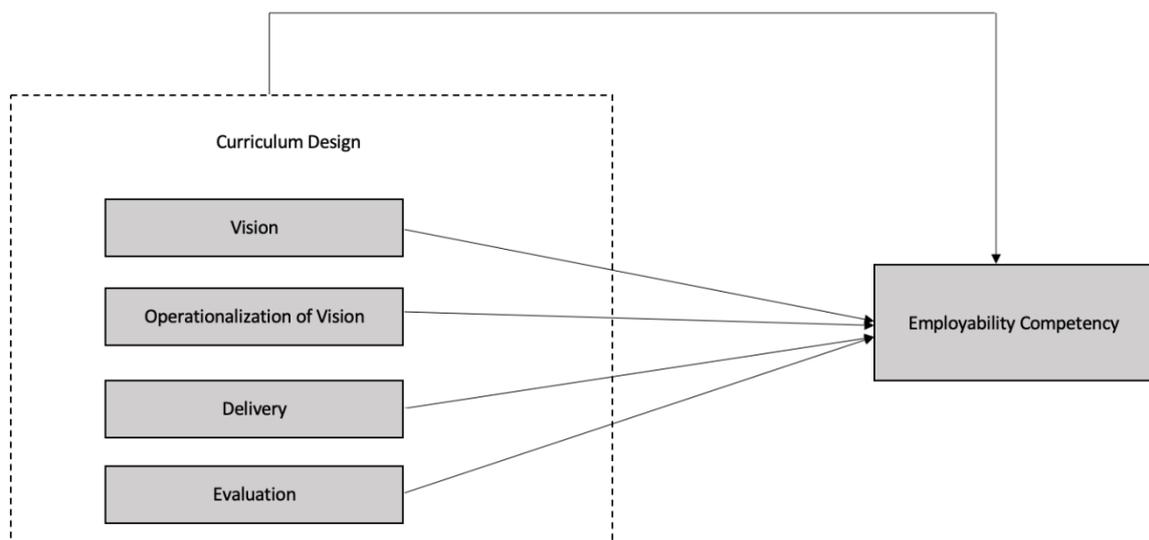


Figure 1. The effects of curriculum design on employability competency
(Misni, Mahmood & Jamil, 2020)

According to this model, curriculum design plays an important role in enhancing graduates' employability competency. Moreover, in order to develop graduate employability skills and attributes, educators can enhance the quality of curriculum through WIL, which has been confirmed by Rowe & Zegwaard (2017).

Therefore, WIL is regarded as a critical tool in education to enhance students' employability and it is more and more integrated into higher education curricula (McRae & Johnston, 2016; Kennedy, Billett, Gherardi & Grealish, 2015; Martin & Rees, 2019). Spanjaard, Hall & Stegemann (2018) proposes a range of alternative experimental learning activities to equip marketing students with real world experience so that they can be work-ready after graduating. More specifically, Misni, Mahmood & Jamil (2020) focuses on the role of curriculum design on employability competency of graduates, especially the effects of curriculum vision, curriculum vision operationalization and curriculum delivery. Within Australian context, WIL is described as inspiring, engaging, and beneficial as well as "developed adaptability, resilience, reflection, and merged with workplace skills with theoretical knowledge". (Ferns, Dawson & Howitt, 2019, p.107). WIL has been improved to bring benefits to enhance employability in many different sectors such as food sector in Devine & Lawlis (2016), nursing sector in Berndtsson, Dahlborg & Pennbrant (2020), in marketing such as in Lu, Scholz & Nguyen (2018) and Chad (2020), and in different majors of tertiary students in Khampirat, Pop & Bandaranaike (2019). It is obvious that all of these studies have been carried out in other countries such as Australia, Sweden, New Zealand or Thailand rather than in Vietnam, though there are more and more claims about drawbacks and impracticalities in tertiary curricula, resulting in weak graduate employability and loose connection between universities and companies (Tran, 2013 & 2015; Phan & Wongsurawat, 2016). With limited amount of WIL research as well as serious concerns about Vietnamese graduate employability, the author proposes that WIL is worth more investigation in the research of improving graduate employability in Vietnamese context.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Weak employability of graduates and loose collaboration between companies and universities are not only prominent in developed countries but also in developing ones like Vietnam. There has also been a call for looking into Vietnamese context to understand its HRM values. Within Vietnamese context, there are some researchers who pointed out the problems because of weak employability, weak transition and high unemployment rates. However, regarding two approaches towards employability from the literature, a lack of collaboration between the role of graduates and educators is also shown. From that, WIL is proven to be the suitable approach to deal with the problem in Vietnamese context for some reasons. Firstly, there are many sound papers pointing the benefits of WIL in improving graduate employability. Secondly, university-related factors including curricula are blamed for as one of the reasons leading to ill-prepared graduates. Thirdly, most of the WIL studies have been carried out in countries other than Vietnam. For these, the author calls for WIL approach to enhance employability in Vietnamese context.

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