UNIVERSITY GRADUATES AND EMPLOYMENT: THE GAP BETWEEN EMPLOYER EXPECTATIONS AND GRADUATE PERFORMANCE

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ABSTRACT

The research involved the quality of undergraduate education related to the curriculum reviews, employer satisfaction of the capabilities of graduates and the key capabilities of graduates are expected. The results indicated the top ten items of capabilities rated by employers as most important. Some specific capabilities of graduates were identified where skills should be improved to match the expectations of employers. The combination between knowledge and professional skills, theory and practice in curriculum was unfolded to be the areas where improvements needed overall.

Keywords: capability, curriculum, knowledge, profession, skills.

TÓM TẮT

Sinh viên tốt nghiệp đại học và vấn đề việc làm: Khoảng cách giữa kì vọng của nhà tuyển dụng lao động và năng lực làm việc của sinh viên đã tốt nghiệp

Trọng tâm của nghiên cứu là chất lượng giáo dục đại học, liên quan đến việc rà soát lại chương trình giảng dạy, sự hài lòng của nhà tuyển dụng về năng lực của sinh viên đã tốt nghiệp, cũng như những năng lực chính mà sinh viên đã tốt nghiệp cần đạt được. Kết quả đã chỉ ra 10 tiêu chí then chốt về năng lực mà sinh viên cần có và được các nhà tuyển dụng đánh giá là quan trọng nhất. Một số kĩ năng và năng lực của sinh viên đã tốt nghiệp cần phải cải thiện để phù hợp với mong đợi của nhà tuyển dụng. Sự kết hợp giữa kiến thức và kĩ năng nghề nghiệp, lí thuyết và thực hành trong chương trình giảng dạy cần có sự thay đổi.

Từ khóa: năng lực, chương trình giảng dạy, kiến thức, nghề nghiệp, kĩ năng.

1. Introduction

In Vietnam, among thousands of graduates every year, only a portion of the graduates are caught in the eyes of employers because most of the new graduates do not have or lack the necessary skills. In fact, businesses, especially foreign companies, focus on work skills, case management, teamwork and generic skills (Le, 2016). Paradoxically,

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although the number of graduates has a high unemployment rate, businesses are still short of employees, because graduates are not trained the specific skills to meet the needs of employers. To improve these issues, in 2007 the Ministry of Education and Training issued 10 criteria to evaluate the quality of higher education (MOET, 2007). However, these criteria are thought to be more significant in educational management than in the quality of education.

It is essential that the quality of higher education in Vietnam be developed the same criteria as regional or international levels. If students gain knowledge as well as good skills, they may meet the demand for labor with high standards, especially in the context of the ASEAN labor market (Le, 2016; MOET, 2007). In countries with advanced education, students learn and practice at the same stage, instead of teaching and learning the theory as in Vietnam. This is attributed to lack of practical skills and other skills from the start of schooling (Barrie, 2006; Bowden et al., 2002).

Thus, the educational sector can be seen to have some responsibilities for employers' satisfaction. Graduates' capabilities are understood as the general skills, knowledge and abilities that graduates need to gain at university (Bowden et al., 2002). The range of the capabilities tends to vary from simple technical skills to complex intellectual abilities and ethical values. These derive from a part of education. However, the existing undergraduate programs are not producing graduates with these capabilities, which graduates need to succeed in their career (Athula & Herath, 2011). Obviously, there is a gap between employability skills attained by graduates and what employers' expectations.

For decades, employers have expressed concerns for lack of graduates trained sufficiently to meet the requirements of businesses. The number of studies in Vietnam and other countries has pointed out the various needs desired by employers. The curriculum is supposed to be out of date, which should be changed whereas employers need graduates with more practical abilities, especially in the areas of problem solving, teamwork and other skills (Andelt et al., 1997; Hoang et al., 2017). Other skills identified by the researchers include the capabilities such as interpersonal ability, generic skills, communication skills, and customer relation skills, using computer software, having a positive work attitude, and high ethical values (Barrie, 2006; Bowden & Marton, 1998). However, it is not easy to look for graduates with such capabilities.

As found by Huynh (2012), the top five skills highly attained by students consist of motivational and sharing skills, self-learning, planning skills, organizational skills and self-confidence, and communication skills. Conversely, Bowden et al. (2002) states the top important capabilities sought by businesses in employing graduates, including interpersonal skills, communication skills, intelligence and personality. Similarly, some research found that the key criteria used in hiring graduates comprise interpersonal skills, problem solving, technical skills, professional knowledge, attitude, values fit and academic qualifications (Andelt et al., 1997; Bowden & Marton, 1998). Obviously, the attained skills

of graduates may fail to satisfy employers whereas such specific and non-technical skills are attributed to key elements businesses expect (Athula & Herath, 2011). Therefore, university must be sensitive to find out answers for some key questions regarding the training mission and the future strategy as well as the current status of graduates.

With a brief overview above, the objectives of this paper focused on: (1) identifying the key capabilities of the graduates that employers see as most important; (2) reporting the views of employers on their satisfaction of the capabilities of the graduates; and (3) examining the employers' views of the current curriculum.

2.   Methodology

The population of this study was managers from the businesses where the graduates from Nong Lam University – Ho Chi Minh City (NLU) on Gia Lai campus were hired. The survey was conducted in the early 2016, part of a project at NLU on Gia Lai campus regarding employer feedbacks on the graduates' abilities, knowledge and skills that employers are involved in developing the curriculum.

Based on the businesses' address the graduates provided in the big project. An initial phone call was made and an email invitation which sent to employers to explain the purpose of the study. The questionnaires were also sent to employers. A total of 93 employers agreed to participate in the survey. Of these 69 valid responses were received (for a response rate of 74.19%). The response samples were representatives to most of the fields trained by NLU on Gia Lai campus.

The research instrument was adapted from a study of Vescio (2005) and modified to be suitable with this study. The questionnaire was divided into four areas (see Appendix 1). Responses to each question item were graded by the subjects on a five point Likert scale ranging from "completely unimportant" to "extremely important" or "completely dissatisfied" to "extremely satisfied". Respondents were asked to rate the importance of 33 specific items. They were also asked to rate the extent to which the graduates from NLU on Gia Lai campus perform each of these.

SPSS software (version 20.0) was applied for processing and analyzing the collected data. The reliability of questionnaire items was ascertained through the calculation of Cronbach α coefficients. A Cronbach α score greater than $\alpha = 0.71$ is acceptable. The descriptive statistics were used to calculate, including overall mean, standard deviation and rank, and presented in certain tables below.

3.   Results and Discussion

3.1.   *Employer expectation from graduate capabilities*

The capabilities of graduates concerned by most of employers are key criteria for employers to hire the employees. The findings of this study show that of four areas of capabilities, "generic and specific skills and knowledge" is concerned most by businesses.

As shown in Table 1 (Appendix 1), the top ten items of capabilities rated by employers as most important:

1. Being able to communicate effectively (generic skills and knowledge)

2. Being willing to take responsibility for works (personal)

3. Being able to use IT effectively to communicate & perform key work functions (generic skills and knowledge)

4. Being able to develop and contribute positively to team-based projects (interpersonal)

5. An ability to recognize patterns in a complex situation (intellectual)

6. Being able to set and justify priorities (intellectual)

7. Having an ability to make a hard decision (personal)

8. A willingness to listen to different points of view before coming to a decision (interpersonal)

9. Having a high level of current technical expertise relevant to current work requirements (generic skills and knowledge)

10. Understanding how organizations operate (generic skills and knowledge).

Of 10 high important capabilities, four items were ranked in "generic skills and knowledge" (see Table 1). The results suggest that "generic skills and knowledge" is needed in training and learning. It may affirm that businesses require graduates achieving the certain capabilities. This can be explained that the attainment of learning outcomes as well as generic skills and knowledge play a key role in curriculum. As Bowden and Marton (1998) argue that for any university curriculum needs developing around the capabilities that students must be prepared for a future profession based on the needs of businesses. These findings in the current study are consistent with those of Bowden and Marton (1998), Bowden et al. (2002), and Vescio (2005).

However, in this study employers place high value on importance "generic skills and knowledge". Mean of the four items are showed highly by employers as most important (Mean = 4.93; 4.84; 4.69; and 4.57). In contrast, "personal", "interpersonal", and "intellectual abilities" are all fewer with two items for each. This divergence raises some interesting questions for all of us in education and training. This can be stated that the curriculum reviews for specific professions should be made more effectively to meet the requirements of businesses.

3.2. *Performance of graduates' abilities*

Personal abilities of an individual are formed based on education (Hoang et al., 2017; Le, 2016). Therefore, the graduate assessment through their performance in the workplace reveals their learning outcomes. The findings in this study indicate that graduates are

highly appraised in category "personal abilities" by employers. Overall mean scored 4.14 and 3.71 respectively in items 6 and 7 (see Table 2). However, when compared with importance of capabilities (see Table 1) that employers require, this may be inadequate to what employers expect. This may be a gap in curriculum.

As shown in Table 2, mean of this category was between 4.14 and 2.72. These can be explained that employers are concerned with graduates' individual development and with building a foundation of personal abilities for their careers during schooling (see more Huynh, 2012; Le, 2016). Another explanation is that students may be intensely focused on obtaining knowledge of their own profession rather than concentrated on developing personal skills and capabilities to encounter their future jobs and also for their entire working lives (also see Hoang et al., 2017; Vescio, 2005). The results are reflective of a problem of the contents in curriculum and learning attitudes of students. This finding indicates that university needs to establish orientation programs for students in order to enhance their awareness about their future profession, forming and developing their personal abilities as "internal" skills.

Table 2. Performing the personal abilities of graduates

Item	Graduate Capability	Mean	Std.D	Rank
1	Being willing to face and learn from errors and listen openly to feedback	3.33	0.70	5
2	Understanding personal strengths & limitations	2.72	0.51	8
3	Being able to remain calm under pressure or when things go wrong	3.42	1.06	3
4	Having the ability to defer judgment and not to jump in too quickly to resolve a problem	3.41	0.79	4
5	Wanting to produce as good a job as possible	3.03	0.38	7
6	Being willing to take responsibility for works	4.14	0.83	1
7	Having an ability to make a hard decision	3.71	0.89	2
8	Being flexible and adaptable	3.10	0.39	6

Interpersonal abilities play an important role not only in life but in the workplace as well. It is a part of decision for success in one's career required by employers (Vescio, 2005). As shown in Table 3, mean is around 3.01 to 3.80. This indicates that graduates' interpersonal abilities are inadequate. This may be attributed to work experience as a key element. Additionally, the interactions and teamwork skills may be absent from the curriculum. This finding highlights that university should recognize this shortage because these capabilities are attributed to contribute one's success in specific professions.

Table 3. Performing the interpersonal abilities of graduates

Item	Graduate Capability	Mean	Std.D	Rank
1	The ability to empathize with and work productively with people from a wide range of backgrounds	3.62	0.67	2
2	A willingness to listen to different points of view before coming to a decision	3.80	0.93	1
3	Being able to develop and use networks of colleagues to help solve key workplace problems	3.49	0.80	4
4	Being able to work with senior staff without being intimidated	3.01	0.85	7
5	Being able to give constructive feedback to work colleagues and others without engaging in personal blame	3.52	0.63	3
6	Being able to motivate others to achieve great things	3.42	0.76	5
7	Being able to develop and contribute positively to team-based projects	3.33	0.70	6

Comparing the importance of this category with graduate performance, however, employers rated it lower than they desire (also see Table 1). This can be interpreted that graduates are less concerned than employers think, or are attracted by the main course without paying attention to these. It may also reflect a shortage of necessary skills in training programs. These findings reinforce the view that most employers are concerned primarily with interpersonal abilities as immediate performance in their workplace (see more Andelt et al., 1997; Athula & Herath, 2011). Thus, the serious consideration of redesigning curriculum and providing supplements in the training courses should be made.

Graduates are required to have good "intellectual abilities" while working in businesses. Education and training are known as a process to produce intellectual development (Le, 2016). The results of this study suggest that there is a limitation of graduates' intellectual abilities. Mean is around 2.99 to 3.78 (see Table 4). This indicates that the graduates currently working in the businesses have the low level of intellectual abilities.

When compared the graduate performance with what employers require, the results of Table 1 and Table 4 reveal the differences between performance and importance employers expect. This can be explained that graduates may not apply well what they have studied at university. On the other hand, it can be supposed that the university's curriculum is not well-designed. Obviously, the weakness of the capabilities may come from both of sides, learners and teachers (also see Andelt et al., 1997; Bowden et al., 2002). This may be a good starting point for university to reconsider the current curriculum. Also, the curriculum should be added the necessary capabilities for specific professions. To engage

in ongoing skills and professional development, it must be focused on the required capabilities by providing students with both experience and practice during the training course. Based on the findings, the necessity of enhancing and upgrading the current curriculum is potential if university wants to improve this situation.

Table 4. Performing the intellectual abilities of graduates

Item	Graduate Capability	Mean	Std.D	Rank
1	Being able to identify from a mass of details the core issue in any situation	2.99	0.40	8
2	The ability to use previous experience to figure out what is going on	3.02	0.53	5
3	Being able to diagnose what is really causing a problem and then to test this out in action	3.01	0.61	6
4	An ability to trace out and assess the consequences of alternative courses of action and, from this, pick the one most suitable	3.09	0.68	4
5	Being able to set and justify priorities	3.33	0.76	3
6	An ability to recognize patterns in a complex situation	3.39	0.86	2
7	Being an independent thinker	3.00	0.66	7
8	Being creative and enterprising	3.78	1.08	1

As reported in the early sections, there are substantial differences in what employers expect graduates and what they evaluate. Employers require graduates with well-performed skills and abilities in their job rather than achieving a degree. They also desire graduates' ability to learn generic skills and professional knowledge (Barrie, 2006; Bowden et al., 2002). As indicated in Table 5, graduate performance fails to satisfy the requirements of businesses (Mean around 2.99 to 4.14). When compared these results with Table 1, graduates' knowledge and generic skills appear to be less satisfied than employers' desire. Obviously, this disparity in rating importance and performance suggests that graduates need to become more aware of what is realistic for them in their profession (see more Barrie, 2006; Bowden et al., 2002). The findings are evident that university should assist in this by providing more opportunities to students to attain the capabilities during their training course.

Table 5. Performing the generic and specific skills & knowledge of graduates

Item	Graduate Capability	Mean	Std.D	Rank
1	Having a high level of current technical expertise relevant to current work requirements	3.80	0.70	3
2	Understanding the role of risk management	3.12	0.53	9
3	Understanding how organizations operate	3.41	0.75	5
4	Being able to use IT effectively to communicate & perform key work functions	4.14	0.84	1
5	Being able to manage ongoing professional learning and development	2.99	0.50	10
6	An ability to chair and participate constructively in meetings	3.38	0.64	7
7	Being able to communicate effectively	3.94	1.00	2
8	Knowing how to manage projects/works into successful implementation	3.23	0.65	8
9	An ability to help others learn in the workplace	3.39	0.69	6
10	Being able to organize work and manage time effectively	3.51	0.85	4

Overall, the greatest difference between performance and importance on the items of "generic skills and knowledge" reveals a big gap in training and practising that graduates need having while studying at university. This is also the gap for both leaders of university and lecturers in designing the curriculum and teaching methods.

3.3. Levels of satisfaction from curriculum

Curriculum plays an important part in undergraduate education. It can produce the products of education. However, to train skilled students for businesses, university is required to have a good curriculum, which includes a lot of relevant knowledge of professions and skills, meet the requirement of businesses (Barrie, 2006; Bowden & Marton, 1998; Le, 2016).

In this section employers reveal their needs and the possible shortfall in curriculum when they rated it. As presented in Table 6, there are two items ranked too lower than three others. Importantly, the fifth item was rated the lowest (Mean=2.33). This may be explained that the combination between knowledge and professional skills in curriculum as required by employers fails to satisfy. Further, the performance of graduates rated lowly by employers (see Tables 2 to 5) are evident that curriculum should be reviewed. Analysis of the data on curriculum rated by employers reveal a difference existed in curriculum compared to graduates' performance. Obviously, it is important to acknowledge that to get an overall picture of curriculum as required by employers, it needs to be considered carefully. One question is raised how graduates perform what they have studied, particularly the generic skills and professional skills in curriculum.

Table 6. *Assessing the curriculum framework*

Item	Curriculum framework	Mean	Std.D
1	The training curriculum and contents are designed matching the work requirements of the agency	3.93	0.81
2	Professional knowledge designed is useful for the agency's work	3.84	0.82
3	The curriculum is practical	3.04	0.63
4	The ratio of the distribution between theory and practice in the curriculum	2.78	0.95
5	The curriculum has a good combination of basic knowledge, expertise and professional skills	2.33	0.97

Based on these findings, it can be affirmed that employers expect non-technical skills, professional skills and knowledge as important indicators to employment, on which university should focus. It is also stated that the pedagogical environment and curriculum are key areas that need further fine tuning so as to narrow the gap between the needs of businesses and that delivered by higher education.

4.   Conclusion and Recommendation

The results of this study show a gap between what employers see as most important in terms of the skills and knowledge and the performance of graduates. Some of the key areas of capabilities requiring graduates identified in the survey reflect as the needs of adjustment in the curriculum. These findings are related to improving the quality and standard of undergraduate education, and meeting the needs of businesses. The research findings can be used in curriculum reviews to ensure that training course design and teaching methods enable students to attain the professional knowledge and "internal and external" skills rated by employers as most important.

This study is based on the general views of employers who have hired the graduates from NLU on Gia Lai campus as representatives, so it will definitely have a limited database in some ways. Although this study has temporarily come to an end, the works relevant to the quality of undergraduate education in Vietnam are not finished. Upon the limitation of this study, it is recommended that further study be done to be able to identify more areas of capabilities of graduates. Further research should be done to determine what barriers or needs existing businesses require.

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APENDIX 1

***Table 1.** Levels of importance of graduate capabilities*

Areas	Item	Graduate Capability	Mean	Std.D	Rank
	1	Being willing to face and learn from errors and listen openly to feedback	3.86	0.88	25
	2	Understanding personal strengths & limitations	3.77	1.06	27
The personal abilities	3	Being able to remain calm under pressure or when things go wrong	4.36	0.80	16
	4	Having the ability to defer judgment and not to jump in too quickly to resolve a problem	4.35	0.72	19
	5	Wanting to produce as good a job as possible	3.25	0.60	31
	6	Being willing to take responsibility for works	4.90	0.39	**2**
	7	Having an ability to make a hard decision	4.71	0.57	**7**

	8	Being flexible and adaptable	3.01	0.76	32
The Interpersonal Abilities	1	The ability to empathize with and work productively with people from a wide range of backgrounds	3.88	0.79	24
	2	A willingness to listen to different points of view before coming to a decision	4.70	0.58	**8**
	3	Being able to develop and use networks of colleagues to help solve key workplace problems	4.49	0.69	12
	4	Being able to work with senior staff without being intimidated	2.43	0.87	33
	5	Being able to give constructive feedback to work colleagues and others without engaging in personal blame	3.97	0.77	23
	6	Being able to motivate others to achieve great things	4.17	0.75	20
	7	Being able to develop and contribute positively to team-based projects	4.80	0.44	**4**
The intellectual abilities	1	Being able to identify from a mass of details the core issue in any situation	3.33	0.70	30
	2	The ability to use previous experience to figure out what is going on	4.09	0.78	21
	3	Being able to diagnose what is really causing a problem and then to test this out in action	4.01	0.76	22
	4	An ability to trace out and assess the consequences of alternative courses of action and, from this, pick the one most suitable	4.43	0.72	15
	5	Being able to set and justify priorities	4.78	0.51	**6**
	6	An ability to recognize patterns in a complex situation	4.79	0.53	**5**
	7	Being an independent thinker	3.55	1.04	29
	8	Being creative and enterprising	4.46	0.85	13
Generic and specific skills & knowledge	1	Having a high level of current technical expertise relevant to current work requirements	4.69	0.63	**9**
	2	Understanding the role of risk management	4.46	0.81	14
	3	Understanding how organizations operate	4.57	0.78	**10**
	4	Being able to use IT effectively to communicate & perform key work functions	4.84	0.50	**3**
	5	Being able to manage ongoing professional learning and development	3.59	1.00	28
	6	An ability to chair and participate constructively in meetings	4.36	0.73	17
	7	Being able to communicate effectively	4.93	0.31	**1**
	8	Knowing how to manage projects/works into successful implementation	4.36	0.75	18
	9	An ability to help others learn in the workplace	3.78	0.70	26
	10	Being able to organize work and manage time effectively	4.57	0.74	11