

Stakeholder Perspectives on Tourism Graduate Employability Skills in Vocational and Higher Education in Vietnam

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Abstract:

The Vietnamese tourism employment sector is lacking professional and generic skills. Tourism training programs are being questioned over their responses to the sector's requirements. Drawing on qualitative and quantitative data from a triad of stakeholders: (1) academics in VET and HE tourism training institutions, (2) human resource managers, and internship mentors in tourism companies, and (3) recent graduates and current final-year students in tourism training courses; this paper addresses educational issues concerning tourism graduate employability skills. The results show contradictions in the participant stakeholder perspectives. Tourism companies are not satisfied with graduate outcomes. However, the HE institutions counter this criticism and argue support for equipping graduates with essential skills through both curricular and extra-curricular activities. Yet the students attribute their skill acquisition mostly to external factors. The findings add empirical insights from a developing country on the current debate concerning stakeholder roles in equipping graduates with employability skills in tourism.

Keywords: Tourism education, employability skills, Vietnam Education

1. Introduction:

In 2005, Vietnam welcomed approximately 3.4 million international visitors and after a decade, this figure escalated to 7.9 million in 2015 (General Statistics Office, 2016). Tourism has become an important service exporter in Vietnam, generating US\$7.3bn to the national economy in 2014. The direct contribution of travel and tourism to GDP in 2014 was US\$ 8.0bn (4.6% of GDP).

The growth brings challenges, one of which is in adequate human resources, particularly tour guides, tour operators and travel agents that are currently available to serve the large volume of international tourists (Hong, 2011; Minh, 2014). Tourism workers are reported to be lacking in professional and generic competencies (Vi, 2010). Vietnamese personnel in general, and human resources in the tourism industry in

particular, are deficient in “soft” skills such as presentation skills, team-work and the ability to work under pressure (Vietnam National Administration of Tourism, 2014). Graduates from tourism programs are considered limited in professionalism and communication skills, particularly when engaging international tourists (Binh, 2014). Ms Pham Hai Yen, manager of a large tourism company in Vietnam, confirms that many tourism graduates lack confidence when applying for a job, and many cannot sell a tour within six months due to their passiveness, lack of persuasion and ignorance about the tours they are selling (as cited in Nga, 2013).

The current deficiencies in the workforce can be traced back to the quality of tourism training, where programs are designed to prepare the workforce for tour and travel services, but do not accommodate the needs of the sector (Vi, 2010). Although there are 284 tourism training institutions in Vietnam, including programs in 62 universities, 80 colleges, 117 vocational schools, 2 training companies and 23 vocational centres (Hieu, 2010; Luong, 2010), about 50% of graduates cannot find jobs in their specialization because they are under-qualified (Binh, 2011; Luan, 2009). A majority of the graduates employed from these institutions need to be retrained to meet the minimum requirements of their employers (Hanh, 2012; Luan, 2009; Nga, 2013; Tran, 2014; Trang, 2011; Vinh, 2010). As such, tourism graduate skills are generally incongruent with the bona fide demands of tourism based employers.

A growing body of literature has investigated graduate employability skills in Vietnamese higher education (HE). Trung and Swierczek (2009) find that skill delivery and graduate competencies are generally below standard, especially interpersonal skills for effective teamwork. They highlight that skills could be better developed through both school activities (group assignments, learning approaches such as case studies, group discussions, software practice and knowledge of course objectives and course content) and part-time experiences. Tran (2013) addresses limitations on the development of skills in higher education, including centrally-controlled curriculum, traditional teaching methods, the prevalence of passiveness among students, and cultural issues that hinder graduates having a smooth transition into the world of work. Tran (2015) reinforces these previous studies in regard to a lack of preparation skills for graduates in higher education, and expands the criticism to the students, the employers and other related stakeholders (i.e. student’s family, government and educational policy makers).

Yet there is limited empirical research examining the employability skills of graduates from tourism training programs, in regard to both vocational training education (VET) and higher education in Vietnam (Khuong, 2015). This paper aims to provide an empirical study of tourism student and graduate employability skills, from the perspectives of the key triad of stakeholders: academics, industry and students; and will attempt to identify some educational factors that are influential in training outcomes. The study offers insights for leaders of tourism training institutions, and tourism lecturers that may be used to lobby for rational changes in strategic planning and practice, in order to align the educational outputs with employer requirements. The focus is upon tour and travel services, and does not extend to include other areas of tourism such as accommodation or food and beverage services.

2. Employability skills:

The central aim of a training program should largely be to make students work-ready, by equipping them for employment with both generic and specific competencies, that will develop sustainable employment after graduation (Fleming, Martin, Hughes & Zinn, 2009; Orrell, 2004). These competencies encompass skills, understanding and personal attributes that give graduates greater opportunity to obtain employment, thrive in their selected occupations, and gain new employment when required (Morgan 2004; Raybould & Wilkins, 2005; Yorke, 2006). However, there is considerable debate in the current research as to which competencies and skills are best required by employers to maximize employment opportunities.

Employability skills, sometimes called soft skills or generic skills, are abilities, and personal attributes, that graduates can use within the wide range of working environments in which they operate throughout their lives (Felisitas, Molline, & Clotildah, 2011). These skills are considered to have the most influence on success in the workplace, and can be more likely to guarantee employment than a strong knowledge base, and professional (hard) skills (Bell, Crebert, Patrick, Bates, & Cragolini, 2003; Fleming et al., 2009; Franz, 2008). The literature has pointed out that while hard skills are seriously emphasized within universities, soft skills do not receive sufficient emphasis to prepare graduates for their professional life (Fleming et al., 2009). From the perspective of the employer, companies tend to place soft skills high on their agenda in the recruitment phase due to the fact that required hard skills can be easily trained during employment, while it is often too time consuming to train graduates in immediately needed soft skills (Nettleton, 2007).

Many researchers have generated lists of components of these skills and attributes. Spencer and Spencer (1993) list twenty-four key generic competencies for new graduates entering the world of employment, maintaining that demonstration of the core competencies illustrates an individual's occupational or professional competence. Of these (Fleming et al., 2009, p.194) there are five most commonly listed competencies from the employer perspective: (i) ability and willingness to learn; (ii) initiative; (iii) personal planning and organizational skills; (iv) relationship building; and (v) teamwork and cooperation. According to Yorke and Harvey (2005), employers expect students to be able to take the initiative, think for themselves by asking questions, be adaptable and flexible and have a willingness to learn. Rees, Forbes, and Kubler (2007) point out that in the disciplines of business and management, hospitality, leisure and sport, the transferable skills most highly valued by employers are effective communication, ability to work on one's own initiative or collaboratively, and responsibility for one's own development, such as an "ability and desire to learn for oneself and improve one's self-awareness and performance" (Kubler, 2007, p. 4).

Drawing on established definitions and empirical work, Jackson (2010) underlines how 'ethics and responsibility', 'written communication' and 'team working' are also deemed important competences by employers. Felisitas et al. (2011, p. 15) point out that there are numerous competencies that encompass seven overarching areas: professional knowledge competency, operational skills, communication skills, information and communications technology (ICT) skills, and human resource, management and business acumen related skills (accounting, finance, sales and marketing). Acquiring these skills will ultimately result in graduates having the necessary competencies to perform their roles effectively (Felisitas et al., 2001).

From a survey conducted by Wang (2008) with tourism practitioners in Australia, five generic skills including oral communication, relationship management skills, work ethics, customer service skills and team working skills are ranked the highest in the list of skills and attributes. Surprisingly, academic skills and attributes such as research skills, relevant work experience, legal understanding and academic grades are not placed highly by employers in Wang's study.

As different as the ideas are among researchers, it would seem that the four most common generic skills agreed by employers are initiative, willingness to learn, team-work and communication skills. Pedagogically, generic skills should be integrated and contextualized into a curriculum (Bath, Smith, Stein, & Swann, 2004) and embedded not only in any one module, but throughout the curriculum at all levels (Hager & Holland, 2006; Hind, Moss, & McKellan, 2007).

3. Methodology:

A case study approach was chosen here to be the main research method because it is the most widely employed method throughout the field of education (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007; Grady, 1998; Merriam, 1998), and is suitable to the aims and nature of this research. The multiple case study approach was selected

here to gain a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted aspects, and distinctive nature of different types of institutions which are involved in providing tourism training programs across different regions in Vietnam. It is based on “the logic of replication” in which the researcher replicates the procedures for each case (Creswell, 2007, p. 74).

There were a total of six case studies representing different types of tourism training institutions in Vietnam. Of these, three government vocational colleges (Institutions A, B and C) under the management of the Ministry of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA). One was a government university (Institution D), and two were private universities (Institutions E and F) under the management of the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET). These were carefully selected by the researchers to represent a diversity of education forms managed by different authorized ministries and operating in different ways.

Interviews, as described by Guba and Lincoln (1981), are “the very backbone of field and naturalistic research and evaluation” (as cited in Clarke & Dawson, 1999, p. 71). This technique can help the researcher learn “how people construct the realities how they view, define, and experience the world” (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998, p. 110). The academic groups to be interviewed included the six faculty leaders and fifteen tourism lecturers who were chosen randomly from the staff lists. The aim of interviewing these leaders and academics was to gain an insight into the inclusion of employability skills within the tourism curricula. The second groups of interviewees were the thirteen human resource managers and five internship supervisors in tourism companies. These companies are the largest organisations in Vietnam that regularly employ graduates. The supervisors were randomly chosen from within the relevant company. The purpose of interviewing these participants was to cross-check their evaluation of the interns and graduate skills with the interview data collected from the academics.

A quantitative questionnaire survey was also used. Questionnaires are commonly used in quantitative research because they have many advantages. They can “help collect a large quantity of data in a relatively short period of time” and “when multiple choice items are used, it is easy to classify answers and calculate their frequencies” (Thomas, 2003, p. 69). They are also more practical when the sample size is large. Questions about generic skills were designed for the participants to choose the most appropriate skills from a list of twenty-four skills, based on the skill set of Spencer and Spencer (1993). This particular research example was chosen because it has the most thorough skill set range.

The list of generic skills was given to further 10 HR managers who agreed to elaborate on their evaluation via the survey, 14 randomly selected recent graduates and the 266 current final year students majoring in Tour Guiding and Travel Management programs in the six institutions, who had just completed their internship with the selected tourism training providers. The questionnaire was written in Vietnamese in order to ensure understanding by the participants. Finally, the researcher also conducted informal interviews with the 14 randomly chosen recent graduates for elaboration on their answers to the questionnaire survey. The whole process of data collection was ethically approved from the six training institutions and the tourism companies.

Only a small number of excerpts from the interviews are presented here, due to the scope of the paper, and to illustrate the key arguments. The key aspects and the relevant quotes were identified through a thorough process of manual coding. The audio recordings of the interview data were listened to several times for themes and sub-themes. All the quotes employed as illustrations were translated into English by the researcher. To protect the confidentiality of the participants (as initially agreed prior to data collection) names and institutions are kept anonymous through the use of pseudonyms.

4. Academic perspectives towards the institutional initiative in student employability skill enhancement:

The importance of student generic skills was taken into consideration in most of the institutions, according to the academics. The lecturers in Colleges A and B criticised their institutions for not organizing clubs or events to enhance student generic skills, and they mentioned a shortage of staff, finance and also a lack of motivation on the part of the students. Du (Institution A), for example, expressed his disappointment when recalling a game show organized in 2012:

We had a game show to enhance the students' general knowledge organized together with singing and dancing performances to celebrate Teacher's day. But you know the students were less interested in the game show than the performances. After watching the performances, just a small number of students stayed for the game. The indifference of the students really discouraged us.

However, these lecturers stated that they were aware of building student employability attributes through practical tours. Hung (Institution B) advised that the lecturers often recommended that the students work in companies at peak seasons to help them gain more confidence. In addition to theoretical lessons, in their classrooms, they had to work in groups to organise fairs, sell things, and design a tour. On practical tours, the students could visit ethnic minorities, join donation campaigns, give blood, or go on camping trips.

"Through such activities, the students' communication skills can be improved", the lecturer asserted.

Classroom activities such as role-play, group work, presentations, and problem solving were also listed as enablers for the improvement of graduate skills by the lecturers. Nevertheless, noise, large class sizes and limited space minimised the effectiveness of those activities, and this was experienced by most government institutions.

Extra-curricular activities such as competitions, clubs, fairs, and camping were provided in Institutions C, D, E and F. Institution C organized short courses to train students in life skills, but attendance fees applied so *"it is an obstacle to make it successful as the students mainly come from low-income families"* (Ngan, Institution C). Institution D invited speakers to deliver speeches and organise activities to inspire the students to learn and practice life skills, but these activities also involved admission cost. In the non-public institutions E, clubs were included with activities for a variety of activities, including those to enhance social skills and academic skills as well as foreign languages. Examples included the English club and the Green Backpack club, which offered voluntary jobs to enhance teamwork, public speaking skills, organizational skills and team game organizing skills. Commendably, these clubs were mainly planned, organized and conducted by the students themselves.

A highlight was Institution F, which according to the Dean incorporated *"life skills into the training curriculum such as communication skills, study skills, intercultural communication, and negotiation skills"*. The first and second year students could register to enroll in a General Education subject for about 45 periods. This was an elective subject that provided the students with general knowledge and skills such as Communication Skills, Study Skills, Research Methods, and Effective Use of Vietnamese. In particular, applying a training model from the U.S. credit system, the Skills and General Education discipline aimed to provide students with:

- *General and fundamental knowledge such as environmental awareness, and artistic appreciation.*

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- *Core competencies to develop oneself, and one's career (e.g. the ability to pursue lifelong learning, critical and independent thinking).*
- *Essential work and life skills (e.g. communication skills, intercultural communication).*

The students also undertook a compulsory subject called Negotiation and Discussion which was intended to provide them with the necessary business skills for their future career. The students could acquire these skills through role-plays in simulated working environments and through their real daily encounters. Additionally, there was an integration of generic skills in each major subject. The students could improve their speaking skills through presentations, writing skills through report writing, or problem solving in the classroom.

5. Employer perspectives towards graduates and intern employability skills:

The quality of interns and graduates was the focus of the most detailed comments from the participants. Their remarks seemed to be more negative than positive. Many of the managers expressed their disappointment when they could not recruit quality candidates for their companies. Phu commented, “*About forty per cent of the graduates cannot meet the recruitment criteria of my company*”. Similarly, Minh had to seek staff from other companies for the same reason. Dong had spent almost three months looking for suitable workers for his company, but his efforts seemed in vain.

Below were the views of the interviewees about the interns and recent graduate's specialized knowledge and skills. Generally speaking, the interns and graduates were thought to lack the necessary real world knowledge that the company needs. According to Kha, when asked about any matters relating to any specialized knowledge that should be taught at school, many interns gave answers which were hesitant and confusing. Phi added,

When the interns in the position of a salesperson were provided with information about the marketplaces, sources of customers, types of tours, destinations, routes, which seasons for local customers, which for international customers etc., they listened with surprise. Therefore, they often contacted potential customers at the wrong time. For example, the first quarter of the year is holiday time for government officers, the second quarter for schools or hospital officers, the third quarter for individual customers and the fourth quarter for people working in the building or agriculture sectors. All of this information the interns seem not to be taught at their colleges or universities.

Thu gave a clear example regarding the quality of interns majoring in tour guiding as follows:

I have approved a lot of interns into my company, and my conclusion is that they learn very little of the basic steps in a real tour. The knowledge they learn is not enough for them to operate or even lead a simple tour. In their internship, I myself urge and encourage my experienced tour guide staff to help them with every single step as well as to give them a chance to practice. They have to learn everything from small tips to administrative skills. For example, what they need to prepare for a tour such as water, tissues, medicine, etc.; what time they need to be present at the travel agency which is at least forty five minutes earlier than the departure time; how to arrange essential tour guide' belongings from sticking the company's logo on the bus, or preparing the flag of the company, to welcoming and receiving guests. In addition, they must know how to organise tourists on the right bus according to the prepared lists in the case of a large tour, in order of priority such as the

elderly, pregnant women, children. All of those steps they have not been taught in their training institutions.

As an experienced manager and lecturer, Khang's opinion of the tourism students' quality was, "*The four-year degree students have basic knowledge but they are rather rigid and impracticable. The three-year [degree] students are inflexible in their application*".

They suggested:

The students need to work after school to learn more practical knowledge, and gain more experience. In this province, there are many opportunities for the students to work part time, and many chances to be in contact with all types of tourists, particularly international tourists.

In addition to specialized knowledge, the interview data demonstrated that the generic skills of the interns and graduates also needed to be improved. Many of the soft skills were mentioned as important skills that the interns lacked. First, almost all of the participants found the students were devoid of communication skills. The interns were not only weak at dealing with customers, but they were also poor at working with their mentors or colleagues. Their communication skills were reflected into their writing skills as well. According to Lan, one graduate of hers could not write emails to customers properly during their first working days. Kha complained that she had to correct many mistakes in expression, when they created brochures or quotes. Second, recent graduates were weak at problem solving. Minh gave a typical example,

I still remember a tour with a group of Malaysian tourists. They specially ordered varied menus without beef. But when the restaurant sent menus to a newly recruited tour guide, he did not check. When the tourists complained, he did not know how to solve the problem tactfully to satisfy them. These tourists complained to me and insisted on being compensated.

Similarly, Sinh admitted that he seldom allowed interns or recently graduated staff to answer clients' questions about tour prices, or any confidential issues for fear of losing customers due to the lack of problem solving skills of his staff. Third, their teamwork skills were also problematic. When working in teams, the interns normally passed the majority of duties to the team leader and the division of tasks among team members lacked equity. When it came to skills in using computers and the internet, the interns were thought to be fast at searching for information, but weak at processing information. According to Chu, when asked to design tours, many interns normally searched for information, then cut and pasted it without modifying the details to match the company circumstances, or to meet the demands of the tourists.

The interview data were confirmed by the survey data shown in Table 1. In general, the table shows that the managers were not satisfied with intern generic skills, as the total mean score of 2.75 is about average. The survey data indicate that the intern skills related to dealing with others including Teamwork and Cooperation (mean = 2.6), Relationship Building (mean = 2.3), Customer Service Orientation (mean = 2.2), Developing Others (mean = 2.1) and Written Communication (mean = 2.4) were not very good. Similarly, the cognitive skills such as Analytical Thinking or Personal Planning and Organizational Skills have low mean scores of 2.3 and 2.4 respectively. However, some skills related to technology such as Computer Literacy (mean = 3.3), Information Seeking (mean = 3.6) were appraised as relatively good. When answering these questions, Nam humorously added that the interns were even faster than him in 'Googling' information.

With regard to intern attitudes during their internship, some of the managers and mentors gave positive comments such as “*well-mannered*”, “*obedient*” and “*disciplined*”. The survey data also reflected that their organizational awareness such as understanding the company’s regulations and knowing constraints was comparatively good (mean = 3.4). However, the majority of the interviewees reflected that the interns were too “*passive*”, “*timid*”, and “*lacking in confidence*”. Intern self-confidence was confirmed by the managers to be low according to the survey data (mean = 2.3). In Thanh’s opinion, “*most of the interns do not know what to do. They always wait for me to assign tasks for them*”. Another comment was that the interns were not well prepared for their future career. Therefore, they were disillusioned when they actually engaged in the real world of work.

Table 1: The HR Managers’ Rating of the Interns’ Different Generic Skills (N=10).

Generic skills	Very Good (5)	Good (4)	So-So (3)	Not Very Good (2)	Poor (1)	Mean
1. Teamwork and cooperation (fosters group facilitation and management, conflict resolution, motivation of others, creating a good workplace climate)		2	2	6		2.6
2. Flexibility (adaptability, perceptual objectivity, staying objective, resilience, behaviour is contingent on the situation)		2	5	2	1	2.8
3. Relationship building (networking, establish rapport, use of contacts, concern for stakeholders (e.g., clients))			5	3	2	2.3
4. Computer literacy (able to operate a number of packages and has information management awareness)	1	3	4	2		3.3
5. Conceptual thinking (pattern recognition, insight, critical thinking, problem definition, can generate hypotheses, linking)		4	2	3	1	2.9
6. Technical expertise (job related technical knowledge and skills, depth and breadth, acquires expertise, donates expertise)		2	3	5		2.7
7. Organisational awareness (understands organisation, knows constraints, power and political astuteness, cultural knowledge)	1	4	3	2		3.4
8. Concern for order, quality and accuracy (monitoring, concern for clarity, reduces uncertainty, keeping track of events and issues)		1	7	2		2.9
9. Impact and influence on others (strategic influence, impression management, showmanship, persuasion, collaborative influence)		2	4	4		2.8
10. Initiative (bias for action, decisiveness, strategic orientation, proactive, seizes opportunities, self-motivation, persistence)		2	4	4		2.8
11. Customer service orientation (helping and service orientation, focus on client needs, actively solves client problems)			3	6	1	2.2
12. Developing others (training, developing others, coaching, mentoring, providing support, positive regard)			3	5	2	2.1
13. Directiveness (assertiveness, decisiveness, use of power, taking charge, firmness of standards, group control and discipline)		2	3	5		2.7
14. Team leadership (being in charge, vision, concern for subordinates, builds a sense of group purpose)		3	2	4	1	2.7
15. Analytical thinking (thinking for self, reasoning, practical intelligence, planning skills, problem analysing, systematic)		1	3	4	2	2.3
16. Self-control (stamina, resistance to stress, staying calm, high Emotional Quotient, resists temptation, not impulsive, can calm others)		2	3	5		2.7
17. Organisational commitment (align self and others to organisational needs, business-mindedness, self sacrifice)	1	3	2	3	1	3.0
18. Ability and willingness to learn (desire and aptitude for learning, learning as a basis for action)		3	3	4		2.9
19. Interpersonal understanding (empathy, listening, sensitivity to others, diagnostic understanding, awareness of others’ feelings)		4	2	4		3.0
20. Self-confidence (strong self-concept, internal locus of control, independence, positive ego strength, decisive, accepts responsibility)		1	3	4	2	2.3
21. Personal planning and organisational skills (ability to organise self and others, effective time management, organises and completes tasks effectively and efficiently)		1	4	3	2	2.4
22. Written communication (relevant skills/appropriate use of emails, internal memos, internal and external reports, letters to clients)		2	2	4	2	2.4
23. Information seeking (problem definition, diagnostic focus, looking deeper, contextual sensitivity)	2	4	2	2		3.6
24. Achievement orientation (task accomplishment, seeks results, employs innovation, has competitiveness, seeks impact, aims for standards and efficiency)		4	4	2		3.2
TOTAL MEAN SCORE						2.75

Note: Missing values: 3.

Nam explained,

Some interns choose the job because of the high salary and travel opportunities, without foreseeing the difficulties, and feel discouraged when they are actually engaged in the work. They do not make enough effort to cope with the obstacles, and fail to meet the demands of our company.

Phu added,

Many interns have vague ideas about their future career. Most graduates do not have a proper vocational orientation. In a class that I teach as a casual lecturer, only several students are keen to work in their specialization field after graduation.

A number of interns showed their disinterest in the internship. Kha was upset, revealing, “*Some students quit their shift without notice. These students also reported to the institution that the company did not assign tasks for them to do.*” Chu concluded, “*Only thirty per cent of interns really concentrate on every detail. They listen carefully, take notes while being instructed and completed the tasks satisfactorily. The rest do jobs reluctantly*”. The majority of the interviewees expressed their discontent with a number of interns who only came for paperwork and attendance, not for actual learning.

6. Students’ perspectives towards their employability skills and the institutions’ roles in their skills development:

Table 2 presents the participants’ self-appraisal of the generic skills that they believed they were equipped with during their tourism programs. The findings show that the graduates were more confident than the current students about their generic skills. About ten out of twenty-four soft skills were believed to be improved by over fifty per cent of the graduates, while only three skills were selected by more than half of the students.

Computer Literacy and Information Seeking were the skills most chosen by the graduates (93%) while these skills equally received only 45% of the student selections. The graduates confirmed in the interview that they could improve these skills thanks to searching for information, and preparing Power Point slides as required in some subjects. Several graduates attributed the development of these skills to the internships when they were assigned to type documents.

Ranked equally third on the recent graduate list were Teamwork and Cooperation as well as Relationship Building (79%). On the current student list, the former was the most selected (70%) but the latter was not highly ranked (39%).

Although over three quarters of the students ticked the above two skills, the interview data revealed that these skills were not actually developed through the training programs, but in other contexts. Duyen shared,

I could improve teamwork skills thanks to the activities in the Youth’s Strength Club of which I was a member. For example, when we went on a voluntary trip to a highland hamlet, we did lots of things in groups such as teaching ethnic people, helping them to eliminate weeds and cooking meals etc. We felt very mature after such activities.

Table 2. Student Appraisal of Generic Skills Learned during Tourism Programs (N_{RG} = 14; N_{CS} = 266).

Generic skills	Number of Responses (%)	
	RG	CS
1. Computer literacy (able to operate a number of packages and has information management awareness)	92.9	44.7
2. Information seeking (problem definition, diagnostic focus, looking deeper, contextual sensitivity)	92.9	44.7
3. Teamwork and cooperation (fosters group facilitation and management, conflict resolution, motivation of others, creating a good workplace climate)	78.6	70.3
4. Relationship building (networking, establish rapport, use of contacts, concern for stakeholders (e.g., clients))	78.6	38.7
5. Self-confidence (strong self-concept, internal locus of control, independence, positive ego strength, decisive, accepts responsibility)	71.4	53.8
6. Written communication (relevant skills/appropriate use of emails, internal memos, internal and external reports, letters to clients)	71.4	50.0
7. Concern for order, quality and accuracy (monitoring, concern for clarity, reduces uncertainty, keeping track of events and issues)	64.3	42.1
8. Customer service orientation (helping and service orientation, focus on client needs, actively solves client problems)	64.3	43.2
9. Achievement orientation (task accomplishment, seeks results, employs innovation, has competitiveness, seeks impact, aims for standards and efficiency)	64.3	29.3
10. Team leadership (being in charge, vision, concern for subordinates, builds a sense of group purpose)	50.0	29.3
11. Flexibility (adaptability, perceptual objectivity, staying objective, resilience, behaviour is contingent on the situation)	42.9	38.0
12. Ability and willingness to learn (desire and aptitude for learning, learning as a basis for action)	42.9	41.0
13. Interpersonal understanding (empathy, listening, sensitivity to others, diagnostic understanding, awareness of others' feelings)	42.9	41.4
14. Personal planning and organisational skills (ability to organise self and others, effective time management, organises and completes tasks effectively and efficiently)	42.9	32.7
15. Conceptual thinking (pattern recognition, insight, critical thinking, problem definition, can generate hypotheses, linking)	35.7	37.6
16. Impact and influence on others (strategic influence, impression management, showmanship, persuasion, collaborative influence)	35.7	38.0
17. Initiative (bias for action, decisiveness, strategic orientation, proactive, seizes opportunities, self-motivation, persistence)	35.7	35.7
18. Directiveness (assertiveness, decisiveness, use of power, taking charge, firmness of standards, group control and discipline)	35.7	30.8
19. Self-control (stamina, resistance to stress, staying calm, high Emotional Quotient, resists temptation, not impulsive, can calm others)	35.7	34.6
20. Technical expertise (job related technical knowledge and skills, depth and breadth, acquires expertise, donates expertise)	28.6	36.5
21. Organisational commitment (align self and others to organisational needs, business-mindedness, self sacrifice)	28.6	29.3
22. Organisational awareness (understands organisation, knows constraints, power and political astuteness, cultural knowledge)	21.4	34.0
23. Analytical thinking (thinking for self, reasoning, practical intelligence, planning skills, problem analysing, systematic)	21.4	34.6
24. Developing others (training, developing others, coaching, mentoring, providing support, positive regard)	7.1	18.8

Notes: RG = recent graduates; CS = current students.

Several graduates challenged the idea of class-based group activities in enhancing the students' teamwork skills. They suggested that they were asked to work in groups for assignments, but each member did separate parts or some members were reluctant to cooperate and passed most of the tasks to the team leaders. For presentation tasks, normally the group leader or dominant member took the initiative to give presentations, rather than sharing the opportunities to all members, due to a lack of time or a large class size. As a result, teamwork skills could not be developed through such class activities. However, the active and motivated students could make progress through working in teams, since they could learn from their peers.

Concerning relationship building, several graduates believed that they could make a good impression on others, especially customers. They thought some subjects like Culture, Tourism Psychology or Communication provided them with knowledge about diverse cultures to help communicate efficiently with tourists from different cultures. Some graduates thought that contact with experienced industry workers in the internship could help them improve this skill.

At equal fifth position on Table Two are Self-Confidence and Written Communication (71%). These two skills were also perceived as well developed by the current students (53.8% and 50.0% respectively). The interview data placed more focus on clarifying the choice of Self-Confidence than Written Communication. Several graduates believed that they improved their confidence thanks to presentation tasks. Linh said, "*As required in many subjects, we must give presentations in front of the class. These tasks encouraged us to be more confident in public speaking.*" Some interviewees, particularly those assigned to specialized tasks during the internship, took the placement into consideration when asked about the factors influencing their confidence. However, seemingly contradictorily, many graduates admitted that they were still very nervous when speaking in front of a class or attending recruitment interviews. They could only gain confidence when they started working.

Over 60% of the graduates believed they were equipped with Concern for Order, Quality and Accuracy, Customer Service Orientation and Achievement Orientation. A few graduates said they were able to increase these skills from the internship. According to Hai, after the internship, administration skills such as "*answering the phone effectively, prioritizing tasks, and focusing on the customers' needs*" had been improved. For some other graduates, the program included useful subjects which helped equip them with these skills such as Communication in Business or Psychology. Nonetheless, "*it is a pity that these subjects were just taught as theory rather than in practice*" (Nghị).

Although half of the graduates thought they had Team Leadership skills, their self-assessment of Developing Others, very surprisingly was rated lowest (7%). On the current students' list, these two skills received almost equally low rankings, with 29% for the former and 19% for the latter. Other skills related to dealing with others such as Interpersonal Understanding together with Impacts and Influence on Others also did not receive high ratings from the graduates (43% and 36% respectively) nor from the current students (4% and 33% respectively). Therefore, it seemed that the graduates were quite self-doubting about their management skills. The interview data revealed that many were not really sure about their leadership skills either, when they had not been the leader of any teams. Some graduates who had led some teams in class were not happy with their roles, since their peers were "*stubborn*" and refused to follow their instructions (Hong). Some team leaders complained that if they were assigned any tasks, the team leaders themselves had to complete the tasks rather than the team members. Other graduates believed that their leadership skills were developed by themselves, not by the training program. Thi was confident:

About leadership skill? I developed it myself. We often distributed our duties by ourselves for group assignments. Our lecturers did not instruct us how to encourage or support each other. There were no subjects that particularly provided us with that skill.

Several cognitive skills received just a few ticks from the two groups of graduates and students (Analytical Thinking with 21% and 38% and Conceptual Thinking with 36% and 35% respectively). According to the interview data, the graduates said that due to lack of time, the lecturers normally read the content from books to let them take notes, rather than giving them questions to answer. Some graduates asserted that these skills were only developed when they commenced working. However, for a few graduates, class presentations accounted for the development of these skills, when they had to argue with their classmates to solve problems.

Similarly, the skills involved in organization were also not highly ranked by the two participating groups: graduates and current students (Organization Commitment both with 29% and Organization Awareness with 21% and 24%). Some other skills, namely Flexibility (43% and 38%), Ability and Willingness to Learn (43% and 41%), Personal Planning and Organization Skills (43% and 33%), Initiative (both 36%), Directiveness (36% and 31%), Self-control (36% and 35%) and Technical Expertise (29% and 37%), were also below average in the ranking. The interview data demonstrated that many graduates emphasized the significance of these skills, but they were disappointed that the training programs did not pay enough attention to them. For instance, in Thi's opinion:

The Personal Planning and Organization Skills are very important since they can help me to manage my time successfully while dealing with various tasks. However, I have only developed these skills at work. My lecturers at the college never taught me to make plans or organise time.

In a similar vein, talking about Technical Expertise, Quyen commented:

During some of my first days at work, I could not use office equipment such as the fax machine, or photocopy machine properly. The experienced staff in my company trained me how to use them, and prepare them when they are broken. At the college, we had no opportunities to use real equipment, not to mention how to repair it.

Only 36% of the graduates believed they were equipped with initiative since they were not strongly encouraged to seize opportunities. Hong gave an example:

“When there was a special event such as welcoming foreign visitors, only a small number of good students were chosen to join the activities. The college indirectly limited the opportunities for the students to use their initiative”.

7. Discussion and conclusion:

The results show that there are asynchronous responses in the provision of graduate skills through tourism training programs in the VET and HE systems. The skills training activities in the VET institutions are generally ad hoc, fragmented and unsystematic. The college lecturers criticize their institutions for not organizing extra-curricular activities such as clubs or events to enhance student generic skills, and justified this negligence on the grounds of shortages of staff, lack of budget and lack of student interest.

On the other hand, they asserted that the lecturers themselves are aware of and proactive in building and strengthening the students' employability attributes through practical tours, and classroom activities such as role-play, group work, presentations, and problem solving. However, the spontaneous and single-sided initiative from the lecturers is insufficient to transform student generic skills which are hard by nature to train (Nettleton, 2007), thus it is deemed as precarious and unsustainable. The effectiveness of such activities

is challenged due to a lack of support at the institutional level, and minimised by infrastructural issues such as noise, large class sizes and limited space. The findings add to Tran's (2013) list of challenges with which education providers are confronted to enhance the work-readiness of graduates.

The study results differ from Tran (2013) when it comes to the HE institutions' responses to the call from the industry. The universities, and particularly the non-public institutions with their financial advantage, claim to be proactive in organizing both curricular and extracurricular activities to enhance student employability skills. Extra-curricular activities such as competitions, clubs, fairs, camping and talks by experts in soft skills are provided. Commendably, Institution F incorporates life skills such as communication skills, study skills, intercultural communication, and negotiation skills into the training curriculum. Yet, as Hager and Holland (2006) and Hind et al. (2007) maintain, employability skills cannot be deemed as isolated attributes and singly acquired by just one-off workshops or embedded in one module, but must be incorporated throughout the curriculum at all levels, and via various contexts, where the skills are applied and observed.

While the VET lecturers corroborate their efforts in embedding skills through teaching activities, and the HE lecturers emphasize the importance of student generic skills on the institutional agenda, the tourism companies and the students themselves are critical of the effectiveness of the academic efforts, showing their dissatisfaction with the actual outputs. From the company perspective, the intern and graduate generic skills are, generally speaking, weak and far from their expectations.

These findings are consistent with previous research (Tran, 2013, 2015; Trung & Swierczek, 2009). Specifically, student professional skills in tour guiding are seriously challenged. The students are thought to be lacking in essential real world knowledge such as tourist tastes and their travel trends, or specialized skills during a tour to provide timely and quality services to accommodate their needs. Also, they are thought to be deficient in career overview, which discourages and disillusiones them in their transition from educational to professional contexts. The companies then criticize the institutions for their imbalanced focus on, and delivery of, theory and practice, as well as their ignorance in providing consultancy for career development.

Additionally, the graduates and intern generic skills, which are in high demand by the employers as evidenced in previous studies (Felisitas et al., 2011; Jackson, 2010; Rees et al., 2007; Wang, 2008; Yorke & Harvey, 2005) are deemed far below expectations. The skills related to dealing with others, such as teamwork and cooperation, relationship building, customer service orientation, developing others, and written communication, are assessed as not very strong. Similarly, cognitive skills such as analytical thinking or personal planning and organizational skills are not deemed satisfactory by the companies. The interns and graduates are only thought to be good at computing skills and information searching, while they still lack the ability to synthesize the information and make use of it in their assigned tasks. Their attitudes at work are evaluated as lacking in confidence and being passive, although most were obedient and well disciplined. A small number of interns who showed a lack of commitment towards work-based learning caused disappointment and irritation, for the employers.

The companies' perspective is incongruent with the graduates and current students' self-evaluation of their generic skills. The student cohort believes that they have developed many of the generic skills that the employers require. Interestingly, the current students rate their teamwork skills, self-confidence and written communication as the most developed, although they also say that skills related to leadership and working with others are most in need of improvement.

Though the findings contradict Trung and Swierczek (2009) who criticize the graduates' lack of interpersonal skills for effective teamwork, they are to some extent consistent with their previous study in the sense that external contexts such as part-time jobs or provincial clubs or their own initiatives play a crucial role in skill improvement. Although the students do not completely deny educational factors in the acquisition of generic skills, they blame many of the classroom-based activities for being theoretical and tokenistic, and their lecturers for lacking genuine effort in promoting and strengthening their skills. A highlight in this study is that the students acknowledge the internship and the host companies for being instrumental in the improvement of skills, which are not in focus at the institutional level.

In summary, this multi-faceted study was conducted to investigate the stakeholder perspectives towards the preparation of employability skills for tourism graduates in both VET and HE systems in Vietnam. There is a clash between the views of the three key players, yet their inputs provide educational merits and implications for all parties to provide the graduates with a smooth transition to the employment world.

The training providers, especially the government and VET institutions, have not accorded adequate emphasis in skill promotion, yet the lecturers deserve credit when they take initiatives to embed skills through their teaching delivery. However, they should create a more inclusive environment and provide more equal opportunities to all students, not just dominating or leading students. They should also make the classroom activities more interactive and practical by giving individual students hands-on experiences. The institutions also need synchronous moves in their strategies to promote graduate skills, by organizing more extra-curricular activities and placing more emphasis on facilitating classroom-based interactions through infrastructure investment, as the two non-public institutions have done.

They also need to acknowledge the host companies for their support in skills development through internships. The companies, in their turn, should take on accountability as on-the-spot training providers, to continue their efforts in building up the interns' employability skills rather than just passing the responsibilities to the institutions as Tran (2015) recommends. Finally, the findings also reiterate Trung and Swierczek (2009) and Tran (2013) in the call for more student effort both inside and outside class activities to improve their graduate skills. With synchronous collaboration between the key stakeholders, the graduates will have more opportunity to improve their skills, and the tourism industry will benefit from a quality pool of human resources.

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