

# Transferable skills development: Implementation at a Vietnamese university

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**ABSTRACT:** *This paper reports findings from a study conducted to identify university preparation of transferrable skills in an undergraduate course at a Vietnamese university. The paper first reviews the concept of transferrable skills and relevant literature on the development of transferrable skills both in international and Vietnamese higher education context. It then outlines the data collection instruments and the data collection procedure, from which insights into transferable skills development at the specified institution were drawn. The findings reveal that despite clearly articulating learning and skillset outcomes, the university under investigation adopted an isolated ad hoc approach and did not provide a range of opportunities and contexts for its students to master the transferable skills expected. The paper highlights the importance of adjusting teaching and learning practices in a way that students can develop useful skills for their personal, academic, and professional life.*

**KEYWORDS:** Students' perception; transferrable skills; soft skills; interpersonal skills; work-related skills; personal attributes; skills development; university preparation.

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## 1. Introduction

Technological advances and changes in the skill demands in the labour markets have placed higher education institutions under constant pressure to prepare their graduates for continued education and employment. It is now a shared agreement among educators and employers that a university qualification alone does not suffice as a testimony of graduates' work readiness, both due to an over-supply of available labour and the increasing complexities and mobility of the workplace (Tran, 2020). The nature of employment in today's modern workplace often demands the expertise and the collaboration of employees from different disciplines (Ivanaj & Ivanaj, 2010). Transferable skills, therefore, have been recognised as the key to personal, academic, and professional success.

Transferable skills are defined as a broad set of interdisciplinary knowledge, skills, work habits, and character traits that are of critical importance to personal, academic, and professional success (Abbot, 2016; Heckman & Kautz, 2012; Treleaven & Voola, 2008). They have been referred to by different terms, for example, "21<sup>st</sup>-century skills", "applied skills", "cross-curricular skills", "noncognitive skills" or "soft skills"

(Bowman, 2010). While transferable skills are universally applicable across disciplines, it has been argued that these skills cannot be separated from subject-specific instruction (Abbot, 2016). In other words, the teaching of transferable skills is deemed most beneficial when embedded in the teaching of subject-area skills and knowledge.

As a dynamic economy of the world, Vietnam has witnessed noticeable improvements in its educational, social, and economic aspects. The country has a Human Capital Index (HCI) of 0.69 in 2020 and is ranked 37 out of 174 countries in the global HCI ranking by the World Bank in 2020. This HCI is higher than the average for the East Asia and Pacific region and other countries in the lower-middle-income group (World Bank, 2020). Vietnam's labour productivity, however, remains low, only amounting to 8% of Singapore's labour productivity index and 35% of that of Thailand (Viet Nam News, 2020). It is argued that Vietnamese students are ill-equipped with essential skills, especially transferable skills, that can boost production to a higher level (Quang, Pimpa, Burgess, & Halvorsen, 2020). The lack of transferable skills among Vietnamese graduates is held accountable for a high unemployment rate among university

graduates and overall low productivity. Reports by Vietnam Institute of Education Research and Ministry of Labour-Invalids and Social Affairs (in Nguyen, Lu, & Ho, 2018) show that up to 83% of Vietnamese graduates lack essential soft skills, which is responsible for 37% of unemployment. The mismatch between fresh graduates' competencies and employers' expectations is further exacerbated as top Vietnamese businesses lament that 90% of Vietnamese graduates are not work-ready (Nguyen, 2016).

Criticisms against Vietnamese students' lack of employability skills are plentiful in media coverage yet research on transferable skills development at Vietnamese institutions is scarce. Given the importance of transferable skills and the currently limited literature in Vietnam, this paper examines the development of transferable skills for students at a Vietnamese university. The paper first reviews the concept of transferable skills in international and Vietnamese higher education. It then outlines the procedure in which data were collected and reports the findings concerning the development of transferable skills for students at the given university. Discussions and recommendations are provided before the paper is concluded.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1. Transferable skills development in higher education**

Transferable skills are often referred to as an extensive list. Abbot (2016), for example, identifies the most valued skills - though this identification is not exhaustive - to include critical thinking, problem-solving, research skills, creativity, self-discipline, oral and written communication, leadership, teamwork, information and communication technology (ICT) literacy, ethical literacy, intercultural competence, global awareness, and wellness literacy. There exist different frameworks that further group these attributes into different types of capital, for example, human capital, social capital, cultural capital, psychological capital, and identity capital (Tomlinson, 2017).

Universities in the world have been found to employ different approaches and initiatives

to develop transferable skills for their students. Reviewing the literature, Drummond, Nixon, and Wiltshire (1998) identify three approaches that have been employed to deliver transferable skills in the curriculum, namely (a) integrated development, (b) stand-alone development, and (c) work-based learning. In the first approach, transferable skills are embedded in the curriculum at different stages of a degree course (Al-Mahmood & Gruba, 2007; Barrie, Hughes, Smith, & Thomson, 2009). This can be in the form of randomly introduced topics, fixed core modules, or skill mapping onto a progression. While this approach has clear advantages, it has been deemed difficult to implement effectively. In the second approach, transferable skills are delivered as add-on modules, for example in the form of student tutoring or student development activities (Drummond et al., 1998). The strength of this approach lies in the explicitness and intensity of skills development and the varied learning experience that students can be exposed to. However, the challenge lies in the lack of appreciation from students when modules are delivered in a vacuum and not attached to a specific academic module. In the third approach, students develop their transferable skills when they engage in work placements or also known as work-integrated learning (WIL). This has been an actively promoted form of student-centred learning due to the personally meaningful and practical benefits to students (Bilsland, Carter, & Wood, 2019; Jackson, 2018), yet it is often challenging to seek placements as well as monitoring students' engagement.

There are two main criticisms against the training of transferable skills for graduates. The first reaction is that the topic of transferable skills has been exaggerated. It is argued that transferable skills have always been part of a university curriculum - it is just that they are not given a label. There are concerns that less teaching time will be allocated to content-based instruction, which will affect students' knowledge base (Abbot, 2016). The second criticism of current soft skills development practices is contrary to the first one just described. Transferable skills have been promoted both

as international initiatives, such as the Tuning project launched in Europe in 2000 (González & Wagenaar, 2003), and governmental policies, involving many countries such as the UK, Australia, France, Africa, and Vietnam (Barrie et al., 2009; Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2014; Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, 2013). Given such a scale of promotion, it is criticised that universities have not sufficiently attended to the development of transferable skills for their students (Quang et al., 2020; Tran, 2020; Trung & Swierczek, 2009). Tran (2018, 2020), for example, showcases how soft skills training has been fragmented and disregarded by certain stakeholders, including faculty members. The consequence is that university graduates have not been able to fit seamlessly into the labour market with the skills their courses equip them with.

## **2.2. Transferable skills in the Vietnamese higher education curriculum**

Transferable skills are referred to as “soft skills” in the Vietnamese curriculum. Concerns over insufficient attention to postsecondary preparation and success of students have led government authorities and educators to call for placing a greater emphasis on the development of these soft skills. In its 2008 and 2010 guidelines, Vietnam’s Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) (2010) urges higher education institutions to publicise the learning outcomes of their educational programmes, including the knowledge, hard skills, soft skills, and attitudes that students are expected to achieve on graduation. Vietnam National University Hanoi has been among active pioneers to implement compulsory soft skill training in its curriculum (Vietnam National University Hanoi, 2010), yet its early scale of implementation dated back to 2010 was confined to high-quality training programmes and joint-degree training courses that involve foreign partnership. Currently, many universities have publicised the generic and professional attributes desired of their graduates on graduation, which often include English

language proficiency, information technology literacy, and soft skills. Soft skills are often delivered as a stand-alone module of 2 or 3 credit points (equivalent to 30 to 45 contact hours) in the first two years of coursework of an undergraduate programme. They are increasingly considered as a condition for graduation eligibility by many Vietnamese universities. The University of Finance and Marketing (2016), for example, requires students to master at least two out of four study skills (i.e., presentation, teamwork, time management, and creative thinking) and two out of four employability skills (i.e., communication, problem-solving, job search, and career planning) to be eligible for graduation.

Research on transferable skills development at Vietnamese institutions is scarce. From a limited number of studies that have examined the topic, it has been found that the implementation of soft skills training in Vietnam is often challenged by the lack of curriculum autonomy, the inexperience from both institutions and faculty members, a shortage of resources, including qualified human resources, and the exclusion of external stakeholders from the development and delivery of soft skills training activities (Tran, 2020). Besides, transferable skills are considered a concept of ambiguity and inconsistency as their identification and categorisation need to be interpreted to suit different disciplines, school settings, and social contexts. Studies conducted in different industries in Vietnam reveal variations on what transferable skills are perceived as significant or what constitutes as capability shortages. Vietnamese human resource managers are found to particularly need leadership, problem-solving, decision-making, time management, prioritisation, and information management skills (Duong, 2020). The hospitality industry, meanwhile, values interpersonal and communication skills, which university graduates are generally criticised to be weak at (Le, 2016). As for administrative assistants, the soft skills valued in the past were typing, agenda management, meeting preparation, and basic computing, whereas, those required currently are extensive ICT skills,

coordination, problem-solving, critical thinking, and abilities to work with publishing platforms (Montague, 2013). These instances highlight the importance of having discipline-specific studies to evaluate the adequacy of the current training of soft skills.

Drawing on relevant literature, Nguyen et al. (2018, p. 116) propose a soft skill framework for use in undergraduate programmes in Vietnam. The framework clearly illustrates the personal, interpersonal, and social aspects of transferable skills in its four domains and ten criteria (Table 1). It, however, is limited in terms of uses other than denoting the different types and functions of soft skills. In such a case, Tran's (2020) soft-skills-implementation models can better serve studies seeking insights into the implementation

of soft skills in Vietnamese higher education like the current study.

The three models of soft skills implementation that Tran (2020, p. 71) has used to examine the topic in the context of Vietnamese higher education are illustrated in Table 2. All the models share the same implementation concept, which is to help students become work-ready. The scale of implementation differs across these models, being either school-wide or university-wide. The main channels to develop soft skills also differ, with soft skills either being taught in extracurricular activities without connection to the main academic context or embedded in the curriculum. The model is useful to inform the institutional approach to soft skills development for this study.

**Table 1: Soft skill framework proposed for undergraduate courses in Vietnam**

Domains	Criteria
Ways of thinking	Creativity and innovation Critical thinking, problem-solving, decision-making Learning to learn, metacognition
Ways of working	Communication Collaboration
Tools for working	Information literacy (including research on sources, evidence, biases) ICT literacy
Living in the world	Local and global citizenship Life and career Personal and social responsibility, including cultural awareness and competence

### 2.3. Research design

The research site for this study is a non-public university that has operated for nearly 15 years (hereafter referred to as "the University" so that the research site can remain anonymous). The University is an inter-disciplinary higher education institution that offers a wide range of fields of studies at the undergraduate level. The scope of this study was narrowed to cover only the English for Tourism course offered by the University. To investigate the studied topic, the study employed a qualitative approach to data collection and analysis. Qualitative data were collected through one-on-one interviews with 2 department heads and 10 lecturers from the University. The interviewed academic heads and faculty members were

**Table 2: Three models of soft skills implementation in Vietnam**

Models	Scale	Delivery channels	Pedagogical approaches
School-wide, extra curriculum-based	School-wide	Extracurricular activities; stand-alone subjects without connection to the disciplinary context	Soft skills are not explicitly taught and assessed as a subject.
University-wide, extra curriculum-based	University-wide	Extracurricular activities; stand-alone subjects without connection to the disciplinary context	Soft skills are not explicitly taught and assessed as a subject.
University-wide, curriculum-based	School-wide	Formal curriculum; complemented with extracurricular activities	Work-integrated learning is used to develop soft skills for students. Soft skills are explicitly taught and assessed.

**Table 3: Transferable skills in the University's articulated learning outcomes**

Categories	Upon the completion of the course, students are expected to
Discipline-specific transferable skills	Be able to analyse, critique, evaluate, and use the information to improve service and management procedures Use data management software and modern technical facilities of tourism services Be proficient in search engines and exploring data on the Internet Develop a lifelong learning and self-research attitude to meet industry requirements and the society's demands
Generic transferable skills	Give oral presentations at a high level of confidence, proficiency, and fluency Communicate effectively with customers and colleagues and as a member of the community Support, organise, and lead operations to achieve effectiveness in different professional groups Have the skills to apply cultural knowledge to the requirements of their professional field Be independent in complex jobs in different situations

directly involved in designing and implementing the English for Tourism course - which is the main scope of investigation in this study. The questions used in interviews centred around soft skills development activities for students both in the curriculum and in extra-curricular activities. Due to the small sample size, interview data were entered in a word document for manual analyses of dominant themes and the relationships between these themes.

### 3. Research findings

#### 3.1. Transferable skills taught in the course

As required by MOET, in 2013, the University updated its curriculum and syllabus documents. This involved articulating the transferable skills that it aimed to develop for its students. Table 3 contains the generic and discipline-specific transferable skills that were articulated for students enrolled in the University's English for Tourism course at the undergraduate level. It can be seen that some skills commonly referred to as generic skills were identified as discipline-specific skills by the University. For example, the ability to think critically was interpreted as the ability to "analyse, critique, evaluate information" and subsumed under the discipline-specific transferable skills category.

Soft skills for the specified course at the University were taught in one stand-alone module ("Soft Skills Module") which was worth 2 credit points (or 30 contact hours) and

was offered in the second year of coursework. The content in this module was organised into three themes and 21 topics in Figure 1. As can be seen, the topics covered for the "Soft Skills Module" were rather extensive, spanning across a wide range of study skills and interpersonal skills that could help students function and navigate through initial academic and collaboration activities. The topics can be said to be compatible with the articulated learning outcomes in Table 3 yet did not completely overlap the University's mission. More focus from the Module appeared to be on academic, personal, and interpersonal skills while the soft skills articulated in Table 3 were framed in the University's orientation towards employability to prepare students for the future workplace. Also, since the content was rather packed for the given amount of in-class instruction, these topics were likely to have served only as an introduction to transferable skills. In their last year of study, students had an option to either write a graduation paper or study elective substitute modules, including the "Critical Thinking Module", the "Language and Culture" Module, and the "English in Negotiations" Module. These modules could only be offered on the condition of a sufficient number of enrolments, and it was noted by the interviewees that students generally chose to sharpen their research skills with the graduation paper rather than opting for elective modules.

Adjusting to college life  
 Getting to know about the university, department, and peers  
 Developing computer literacy and using search tools  
 Setting achievable goals  
 Managing time and organising study plans  
 Understanding personal learning styles and learning strategies  
 Managing academic conventions  
 Reading critically  
 Writing academically

Taking effective notes  
 Giving oral presentations  
 Upgrading personal skills  
 3.1. Strengthen motivation  
 3.2. Improving concentration  
 3.3. Enhancing memory  
 3.4. Maintaining wellbeing and dealing with stress  
 Upgrading interpersonal skills  
 4.1. Developing group work skills  
 4.2. Developing leadership skills  
 4.3. Communicating effectively and solving conflicts  
 4.4. Developing cross-cultural communication skills  
 Achieving lifelong success  
 5.1. Building job-seeking skills  
 5.2. Writing a successful CV  
 5.3. Preparing for a job interview  
 5.4. Maintaining professionalism at the workplace

*Figure 1: Themes and topics taught in the “Soft Skills Module” of the course*

As shared by the interviewees, the learning outcomes articulated for the whole course in terms of transferable skills were not operationalised in each module delivered as part of the course. There were also no records of quality assurance or assessments regarding whether transferable skills were indeed attained as promised. For one thing, it was not a requirement from MOET

that each module needed to have the expected soft skills articulated. This resulted in a lack of progression in terms of where students were at after the completion of each module. For another, the University admitted lacking experience and guidance on how to design soft skills development for their courses. Faculty members who were interviewed argued that during the curriculum or syllabus development process, individual lecturers or a team of lecturers would be assigned to be in charge of writing subject or module descriptions. The heavy workload of lecturers coupled with the limited opportunities to collaborate across all the teams to exchange discussions or feedbacks often resulted in course descriptions being developed out of the experience and expertise of an individual lecturer or a group of lecturers.

### **3.2. Models of transferable skills development**

The approach adopted by the University for soft skills development in the specified course - English for Tourism - had the characteristics of the first model of delivery (Table 2) identified by Tran (2020). In other words, the University assigned the tasks of designing and implementing skills development activities to the responsible academic faculty. “Soft Skills Module”, despite tapping into the overall stated learning outcomes for the English for Tourism course, was offered as a stand-alone or add-on subject that demanded little logistic or structural connection to the remaining subjects or modules. There was one lecturer assigned to teach the “Soft Skills Module”. Supplementary soft skills topics, such as community engagement, skill classes, or job share events were organised university-wide by the University’s Youth Union Association. Other lecturers teaching other subjects in the course claimed to try to embed soft skills content and practical activities in their lectures whenever possible but there lacked a clearly articulated or consistent approach within the faculty. Due to the lack of empirical data regarding what students or employers perceive as important to be work-ready, for most of the times, lecturers had to rely on their own intuition, experience,

and expertise. The “Soft Skills Module” was taught as a subject and students were assessed but mostly on a pencil-and-paper format with knowledge-recalling question types, depriving the opportunities for students to display how much of the skills targeted was actually mastered. It should be noted that English for Tourism is a course that demands a lot of involvement with the hospitality and catering industry. The fact that no soft skills were clearly articulated for students’ placements or field trips and interwoven into students’ overall course experience may have missed reinforcing for students how their soft skills could be strengthened.

### 3.3. Changing practices at the University

Given the mission statements and learning outcomes having been articulated, it was expected that the University and the faculty had adjusted their administration, coordination, teaching, and assessment practices to facilitate soft skills development activities. Ideally, these would need to include:

- Mapping graduate attributes along with the course subjects from students’ entry to exit

- Adjusting pedagogical approaches and materials

- Enhancing students support services

- Internationalising the curriculum

- Providing self-assessment/ reflection tools for students to record their achievements

In fact, these are strategies employed by Australian institutions to implement graduate skills (documented in Nunan, George, & McCausland, 2000). Comparing what had been done at the University with the expected changes above, the interviewed heads and faculty members noted that they had adjusted their teaching to be more student-centred. However, the curriculum and syllabus were criticised as being controlled top-down and still heavily theoretical. The faculty members felt they were not empowered with much authority to initiate changes in the classrooms, both due to their lack of training to embrace a student-centred pedagogy and the lack of flexibility in changing the content.

Regarding other tasks such as mapping soft skills progression onto the course subjects or operating student-support services, the resource-intensive nature of these activities had discouraged the faculty and the University alike. As there were no significant changes in the infrastructure to launch new skills training, it was no surprise that soft skills development had always been done on the surface.

## 4. Discussions and conclusions

The University under investigation has implemented some initiatives to equip transferable skills for its students. Its approach, however, is often isolated and *ad hoc* and has not provided a range of opportunities and different contexts needed to facilitate the progression or transferability of skills for its students. The University, for example, lacks a clearly defined and holistic view of how transferable skills will be developed over a four-year course of study. It has activated teachers and students’ awareness of the importance of transferable skills and disseminated knowledge of good practice models among its faculty members yet has failed to delve into deeper layers of the infrastructure that can support changes. The literature agrees that skills development can only yield desirable outcomes on the basis of student-centred pedagogies and focus (Bilsland et al., 2019). The current departmental management system and teaching and learning approaches are not designed in such a direction. The University, therefore, has only had limited success in effecting meaningful changes.

The current situation concerning how transparent and credible Vietnamese universities’ soft skills development activities are supports the findings by Tran (2020). Tran (2020) notes that except for Vietnam National University Hanoi, almost no other Vietnamese universities publicise how soft skills are developed for their students and whether their claims made regarding the attainment of soft skills are reliable and valid. This highlights an implication regarding the transparency needed in articulating soft skills progression and soft

skill mapping at Vietnamese institutions. In this regard, Australian institutions have done well in tracking their graduates' employability and graduate attributes throughout their degree courses. The publication and reporting of graduate employability by Australian institutions (for example, Bennett, 2016; Buddelmeyer, van de Ven, & Zakirova, 2013) is one useful lesson that Vietnamese institutions can learn from if they are to uphold the quality of their education and training services. Barrie et al. (2009) and Tran (2020) recommend from the experience of institutions successfully implementing soft skills development that goals and approaches need to be clearly communicated to all intended stakeholders and that incentives and resources are set aside for soft skills development activities. This is a long-term process but essentially needs to include adjusting pedagogical approaches to

become student-centred.

English for Tourism is a course whose graduates will need certain practical transferable skills to enter the labour market. As a field of profession that deals with customers and involves the contribution of other professional fields, it is important that students are equipped with communication, cross-cultural competence, language, and teamwork skills. One beneficial approach to develop soft skills for students can be through the form of work-integrated learning (WIL), for example, structured scenarios, community engagement, supervised industry observations, or placements, in which students have an opportunity to learn and reflect on these skills. Such arrangements are resource-intensive but once set up will yield practical and meaningful benefits as already recognised in the literature (Jackson, 2018).

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