

University graduates' perceptions of the COVID-19 recession: A survey of employment and individual post-graduation action plans

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ABSTRACT: *Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic reached most countries globally, economies have suffered more or less a change in all activities. Vietnamese firms have been struggling with economic consequences associated with social distancing measures and lockdown. Firms in Vietnam have had to apply strategies of reshaping business, cutting costs and laying off staff. In this context, graduating students should have concerns. This study investigates their perceptions of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on employability and their perceptions of training gaps. The study explores what graduating students prepare to find a job after graduation and their future career intentions. In addition, the research is aimed at students' proposals for universities' support to help them cope flexibly with the changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. The study used quantitative research methods, including an online questionnaire designed on Google Forms to collect data over a 3-week time frame in May 2020. More than 500 suitable responses were collected for descriptive statistical analysis with the support of SPSS software. The results of the study reveal that the final year students are well aware of the disadvantages when they graduate in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The majority of them are willing to accept the difficulties and adjust themselves to survive and have a job. This study proposes solutions to assist graduating students by providing justifications, adaptation and skill improvement sets for better employability. In addition, this study also highlights information for higher education institutions with students' perceptions of career orientation and new skill training to respond to Vietnam's market demands.*

KEYWORDS: COVID-19, employment, university graduates, students.

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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic originated in China in December 2019 and has now spread across the globe. The economies of many countries have experienced a year and a half of turmoil due to the severe impact of the COVID-19 epidemic. To limit the spread of Coronavirus, like many other countries, Vietnam has applied strict social distancing measures, even lockdowns in some localities. Measures to control the spread of COVID-19 have had a negative impact on the country's economy. Although in December 2020, the introduction of a vaccine against COVID-19 is helping to control the pandemic and restore economic activities, the overall situation is still very bleak and the world is still struggling. It will take a long time for the world to repair the

damage.

According to the World Bank (2021), Vietnam's economy has been heavily affected by the COVID-19 pandemic due to extensive economic integration. The global Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth rate was estimated at 2.9% in 2020. In the Global Economic Outlook report for 2021, the World Bank forecasts that the world economic growth will reach 4%, and the growth of Vietnam, one of the few countries with positive growth in 2020, is expected to reach 6.8% if the country can put the spread of the virus under control, while export-oriented manufacturing industries perform well and domestic demand recovers strongly.

According to government data (Department of Business Registration Management, 2020), in

the first 11 months of 2020, 93,490 businesses withdrew from the market, up 59.7% over the same period in 2019; the number of enterprises registered to suspend business in the first 11 months of 2020 was 44,440, up 59.7% over the same period in 2019. The number of enterprises registering to suspend business continued to increase sharply over the same period last year, which shows the impact of the COVID-19 epidemic on business operations. Along with that, the number of jobs in the future will decrease. The International Labor Organization (ILO, 2021) reports that global working hours in 2020 have decreased by 8.8% compared to the fourth quarter of 2019. In Asia and the Pacific (data from Australia, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Hong Kong and Viet Nam), working hours dropped 7.1% in the first quarter of 2020 from the fourth quarter of 2019 (ILO & ADB, 2020). The loss of working hours increased to 13.5% in the second quarter of 2020. These enormous losses resulted in an 8.3% drop in global labor income, equivalent to US\$3.7 trillion or 4.4% of global gross domestic product. In Vietnam, according to the General Statistics Office (2021), in the first quarter of 2021, the whole country still had 9.1 million (equivalent to 9.3% of the population) people aged 15 and over who were negatively affected by the COVID-19 epidemic, of which the number of people under the age of 25 accounts for more than one-third. According to Asian Development Bank (ILO & ADB, 2020), in comparison with neighbor developing countries in Asia and the Pacific, the youth unemployment rate increased in 2020 (10.8% and 13.2% respectively in 2020 under the 3-month scenario and 3 months and over, vs 6.9% in 2019) but is much lower than Thailand (16.4% and 22.1% in 2020, vs 4.2% in 2019), Philippines (15.1% and 19.5% in 2020, vs 6.8% in 2019), or India (29.5% and 32.5% in 2020, vs 23.3% in 2019).

In this situation, graduates will face more challenges in finding jobs than in previous years. Forsythe (2016) confirms that businesses in a recession are afraid to recruit young workers due to concerns about quality. Forsythe (2016) also reveals that the salary of graduates during the economic downturn is also lower than in previous years and this salary can remain for

8-10 years later. In short, graduates in this period face difficulties in finding jobs in the short term and suffer long-term effects. In previous works of Kahn (2010) and Oreopoulos et al. (2012), the results show that graduating college during a recession causes long-lasting wage losses.

The information outlined above suggests the many challenges are awaiting the final year graduating students of 2021. These challenges have culminated in, what the author believes, are a number of perplexing questions for these students: How do they plan to prepare to find a job after graduation? What do final year students require the university to help them adapt to the challenges of jobs application during the crisis? In Vietnam, Hanoi is the center city with the most universities and academies in the North, and it is also home to the top schools in Vietnam. According to the data from the website tuyensinhso.vn - the Digital Admissions website providing official enrolment information from the Vietnam Ministry of Education and Training and universities and colleges across the country, the list of universities and institutes in Hanoi includes 93 schools (among more than 200 schools in total). So, to assist in addressing the questions mentioned above, the authors surveyed to uncover the perceptions and plans of final year students at Vietnamese universities, mainly in Hanoi, to give suggestions and recommendations to help students best prepare for their professional future after graduation.

2. Theoretical background and Methodology

This study is based on the theory of planned behavior (TPB) elaborated by Ajzen (1985), which is rooted in the theory of rational behavior (TRA) created by Ajzen & Fishbein (1975). If a person has a positive attitude towards suggested behavior, if their significant others also expect them to perform the behavior (i.e., Subjective Norms), and if an individual's perception of the ease of performing a particular behavior based on the availability of resources and opportunities to perform that behavior (Perceived Behavioral Control) is high, they are more likely to have a higher level of behavioral intention (more motivated intention) and more likely to act

(Behavior) (Ajzen, 1985). Attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioral control are highly correlated with behavioral intention; the behavioral intention is correlated with actual behavior. This study only focuses on studying behavioral intentions and how they will help predict students' behavior in choosing work situations.

Based on TPB and to answer the questions about the graduating student's perceptions on employment and their plan, a quantitative study was conducted through an online questionnaire designed on Google Forms to collect data over a 3-week time frame in May 2020. Sampling was carried out using both random and convenience sampling methods through social networking forums, university websites and a number of teachers of Vietnamese universities. The questionnaire consists of 6 parts. Part 1 assesses students' perceptions of the impact of COVID-19 on the economy in general. Part 2 explores students' perceptions of difficulties and challenges for graduates to apply for a job in this period. Part 3 identifies the main causes of difficulties in finding a job in the coming period. Parts 4 and 5 look at the response plans and solutions that students are prepared for finding a job after graduation. Each part has a number

of questions rated on a Likert 5-point scale (1- Totally disagree to 5- Totally agree). Part 6 asks about post-graduation plans (7 options are given to probe students' intentions after graduation including starting a job right away, applying for the right job, changing careers, earning a temporary work, self-employment, further study and still no clear intention). Students were also asked open-ended questions about their recommendations to the university's assistance in finding a suitable job or supportive training programs. After having the data, the study used descriptive statistical analysis techniques to analyze data with the support of SPSS software.

3. Results

3.1. Data description

After a 3-week time frame, five hundred and sixty-eight (568) answer sheets to the survey questioner were received from participants who are final students at 16 universities (among whom there are 22 respondents from universities of out Hanoi). After cleaning the data and removing inappropriate answer sheets, 550 responses (54.2% were female and 45.8% were male) were suitable for inclusion in the data analysis. Majors of the respondents is as shown in Table 1.

The students majoring in engineering and

Table 1: Majors of the respondent

No.	Major	Number of respondents	Percentage (%)
1	Education Science & Teacher Training	14	2,5
2	Arts	2	0,4
3	Business & Management; Law	120	21,8
4	Life Sciences; Natural Sciences	14	2,5
5	Mathematics & Statistics; Computer & IT; Technology & Engineering; Engineering; Manufacturing & Processing; Architecture & Construction; Fishery; Veterinary Medicine	260	47,3
6	Healthcare	21	3,8
7	Humanities; Social sciences and behavior; Press and Information; Social Services; Tourism, Hospitality, Sports & Personal Services; Transportation Service; Environment and Environmental Protection	67	12,2
8	Others	52	9,5
	Total	550	100

technology accounted for 47% of the respondents. Next is the business, management and law group which accounted for 22%. Humanities; social sciences & behavior; press & information; social services; tourism, hospitality, sports & personal services; transportation service; environment and environmental protection accounted for 12% of the students responded. Not many students from other disciplines such as educational sciences, natural sciences, life sciences and health participate in the survey.

3.2. Awareness of the impact of COVID-19 on the economy

The study confirms that most of the students who responded to the questionnaire are aware that the COVID-19 has had a very negative impact on Vietnam’s economic development this year and the next 1-2 years (M: 3.90; SD: 0.93). The analysis results also show that students are aware of the consequences that the number of dissolved enterprises increases compared to previous years (M: 3.90; SD: 0.87), and at the same time, the number of jobs is fewer than before (M: 3.72; SD: 1.02). If comparing this result with the research data gained in the survey for students of Thuyloi University (Doan & Nguyen, 2020), the awareness of difficulties among Thuyloi University students is higher. Final-year students are aware of the general risks and difficulties caused by the COVID-19 to the economy, especially the risks for the service industries, industrial production and services that need imported input materials (M: 4.19; SD: 0.86). This perception may result from the level of daily

information coverage through the mass media, social networks and the government’s active communication on social networking channels besides the traditional ones. However, the overall average score below 4 (4= agree) shows that many students are unaware of the difficulties. This may be because of the characteristics of young students who are optimistic and confident about their future job.

3.3. Awareness of difficulties in finding a job after graduation

The average of the answers ranges from 3.25 to 3.79 and the specific standard deviation is less than 1: low probability of finding the right job (M: 3.61; SD: 0.952), low chance of being selected for jobs (M: 3.51; SD: 1.04), low ability to apply for a job right after graduation (M: 3.45; SD: 1.06), lower salary compared to the previous period (M: 3.52; SD: 1.02). With the average below 4 (4- agree), it can be said that although students feel there will be difficulties in finding a job after graduation, they are still not too pessimistic. Students still have 2-3 months of study at the university, so they have not directly faced the risk of job decline yet. Moreover, the situation of the COVID-19 pandemic has not been accurately predicted, so these direct risks have not been taken into consideration seriously. Students are still optimistic that they will find a job and still have the opportunity to choose a job as well as the salary will not be lower than in previous years. This result answered the central question of our study. Among the responses about direct risk perception, awareness of the ability of

Table 2: Awareness of the impact of COVID-19 on the economy in general

No.	Items	Mean	Standard Deviation
	Perception of difficulties for the economy due to COVID-19 pandemic	3,90	0,93
1	COVID-19 has a very negative impact on Vietnam’s economic development this year and the next 1-2 years	3.79	0.98
2	The number of dissolved enterprises increased compared to previous years	3.90	0.87
3	The number of jobs is less than before	3.72	1.02
4	Many economic sectors were strongly affected with great damage, especially service industries, industrial production and service industries that needed imported input materials.	4.19	0.86

Table 3: Awareness of difficulties for students

	Items	Mean	Standard Deviation
	Awareness of difficulties for students	3.49	1.00
5	Low chance of finding a job	3.40	1.00
6	Low possibility of having chances to choose a job	3.44	1.03
7	Low probability of finding the right job	3.51	1.04
8	Low ability to apply for a job right after graduation	3.45	1.06
9	Lower salary compared to the previous period	3.52	1.02
10	Higher requirements from employers	3.48	1.01
11	The fear of employers towards the unguaranteed quality of graduates during the pandemic	3.25	1.09
12	Ability of self-study to adapt to digital transformation in businesses	3.79	0.91

self-study to adapt to digital transformation in businesses got the highest score (M: 3.79; SD: 0.91), which demonstrates students’ willingness to risk management in the context of the pandemic.

3.4. Awareness of the causes of difficulties in finding a job

According to students, the cause of difficulties in finding a job is the economic downturn (M: 3.74; SD: 0.93), due to limited contact with internship companies where students can create relationships for future job applications (M: 3.63; SD: 0.93). Personal factors such as not absorbing enough required knowledge, ineffective learning, low self-study ability and limited communication with teachers are also the reasons that make it difficult for them to find a job.

3.5. Preparing for a job after graduation

Students were asked about two important factors leading to behavioral intention: willingness to accept work situations (corresponding to attitude towards behavior in TPB model) and autonomy in self-regulation, knowledge, skills, and information preparation (corresponding to perceived behavioral control in TPB).

3.5.1. Willingness to accept work situations

With the awareness of possible risks due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the research team provided case options to survey students’ readiness to adjust their job application behavior after graduation. Among the eight options, some students seem willing to accept the challenges of being away from home (M: 3.57), lower salary (M: 3,32), temporary off-site jobs. (M:

Table 4: Awareness of the causes of difficulties

	Items	Mean	Standard Deviation
	Awareness of the causes of difficulties	3.35	1.01
1	Not absorbing enough necessary knowledge	3.17	1.01
2	Ineffective learning	3.16	1.01
3	Low self-study ability	3.22	1.08
4	Limited opportunities to research businesses to apply for jobs	3.22	1.04
5	Limited opportunities to communicate with teachers	3.34	1.04
6	Limited contact with internship companies	3.63	0.98
7	Economic recession in general	3.74	0.93

Table 5: Willingness to accept work situations

	Items	Mean	Standard Deviation
1	Accept to work outside the trained profession as long as there is a job	3.33	0.99
2	Accept lower-paid work than usual	3.32	0.94
3	Accept to work far from home	3.57	0.90
4	Accept jobs in undesired cities and provinces	3.28	0.97
5	Accept unsatisfactory conditions and working environment	2.84	0.99
6	Accept short-term jobs in the inappropriate industry	3.14	1.02
7	Accept to start work at a company with bad conditions	3.05	1.00
8	Accepting temporary jobs (grabber, sales staff, ...)	2.96	1.06

3.33). However, it seems difficult for them to accept the very popular jobs such as selling and running grab or accept unsatisfactory conditions and working environment (below 3- hesitant to decide). In general, students seem hesitant to accept unfavorable work situations. This result corresponds to their moderate perception of the direct difficulties that they will have.

3.5.2. Autonomy in self-regulation; knowledge, skills and information preparation

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, final year students were surveyed about self-regulation of behavioral intentions, preparation of knowledge, skills and information to graduate and apply for jobs. Most students are well aware of the need to prepare knowledge, especially skills, in which foreign language skills are considered the most important (M: 4.18). This perception is

appropriate because learning foreign languages, especially English, has become urgent and is even proposed to become a second language (Vu, 2018). Learning another profession is rated less important (M: 3.54) than other activities such as professional development, soft skills training, information search and job application preparation (M is above 4).

3.6. Post-graduation Individual action plans

According to the Ministry of Education and Training regulations, from 2018, universities have to announce the percentage of employed graduates. Every year, universities publish a very high employment rate on their websites, usually over 90% after 6-12 months of graduation. However, there are almost no announcements on final year students' job intentions. In this study, final year students were surveyed

Table 6: Autonomy in self-regulation; knowledge, skills and information preparation

	Items	Mean	Standard Deviation
1	Cultivate professional knowledge	4.09	0.81
2	Cultivate professional skills	4.13	0.81
3	Learn a foreign language	4.18	0.84
4	Enhance information technology and digital platform applications	4.14	0.79
5	Self-study other complementary soft skills	4.11	0.80
6	Learn another profession	3.54	0.88
7	Find information about employers and recruitment criteria	4.02	0.76
8	Make a job application plan (identifying the employer, time to apply, preparing cv or resume,...)	4.08	0.78

Table 7: Plans after graduation

	Intention after graduation	Number of respondents	Frequency
1	Have already had a job	88	16.0
2	Change profession to easily apply for a job	12	2.2
3	Apply to businesses and organizations suitable for the trained profession	318	57.8
4	Plan to go to higher education, not go to work right away	33	6.0
5	Self-employ (open company, store,...)	18	3.3
6	Find a temporary job (grab, sales, worker,...) while waiting for an opportunity	22	4.0
7	Have not had a plan yet	59	10.7
Total		550	100.0

about their intentions after graduation in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. 57.8% of responded students plan to apply to businesses and organizations suitable with their trained profession, 16% have already got a job, 6% plan to go to higher education. The percentage of responded students planning to create their own jobs (establishing their own company, opening their own business) accounts for 3.3%. The number of students who are aware of difficulties and accept temporary jobs accounts for 4%. In that scenario, a large proportion of responded students (10.7%) have not yet figured out what they will do when they graduate.

3.7. Expectations from students for university support

An open-ended question was used to understand students' desire for university support. A majority of students (41%) expect their universities to help them approach businesses. The universities can introduce jobs, organize job fairs, provide information about business recruitment, and coordinate actual business activities in teaching to obtain more practical knowledge,... This result shows that many students are missing or do not have information from employers. Twenty-four percent % of students expect to graduate on time with flexible graduation conditions in this period. Students also expect that universities and teachers provide them with more practical knowledge and skills (23%). For example, sharing practical work experiences, assigning practical projects, providing skills needed to work and integrate

into the working environment, etc. Only 15% of the responded students answered that they had no request for the universities.

4. Conclusion

Thus, although there have been signs of recovery, the world economy in general and the Vietnamese economy in particular, is still in a recession due to the mandatory use of social distancing, limited or temporary measures, and suspending activities to prevent COVID-19. The number of jobs is fewer. Businesses also limit the recruitment of new staff who lack practical experience. Therefore, the final year students at this stage are faced with many difficulties in finding jobs. The survey results show that final year students in Vietnamese universities are aware of these difficulties and challenges. However, most students believe that the difficulties on their way of finding a job are due to external factors, not by themselves.

This study also helps highlight that universities and lecturers need to provide timely support to help graduates overcome difficulties when entering the labor market. Besides these contributions, this study has some limitations, including only focusing on descriptive statistical analysis. In future studies, further investigation of subjective norms and running the TPB model will help researchers predict more about the influence of attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control factors on the intention and behavior of college graduates in the recession, so more implication is expected.

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