Essential Soft Skills for Successful Business Graduates in Vietnam

Hang T. T. Truong, Ronald S. Laura

Abstract
In recent years, an impressive research literature of relevance to business education has accumulated from several diverse areas of study to show that without the acquisition of what have come to be called “soft skills”, the level of potential success in the context of business transactions, production, and international trade cannot be maximised. To be clear, soft skills refer to an array of personal skills such as the capacity to communicate, and problem-solve, possess leadership qualities, and the ability to work well in a team, be amicable, and a good listener. Indeed, there are some studies to which the authors will allude that reveal that “soft skills” are in fact more important to success in business than competencies of “hard skills” or the technological production skills upon which business itself must also depend. The central objective of this paper is to exhibit the relevance of this new understanding of the integral role played by soft skills in business success, and thus to the economic growth enjoyed by a country. What the authors say about the particular pertinence which the research on soft skills has for Vietnam is likely to be equally important to improving success in business for other developing countries.

Keywords
Soft skills, hard skills, curriculum reform, business success

Vietnam has been one of the best performing economies in the world over the last decade. Nonetheless, the economy is facing multiple challenges of globalisation. A key challenge is to maintain growth in the context of environmental concerns which have been heightened through global integration. Therefore, it requires a high-quality workforce adequately equipped with potential skills to be ready to adapt effectively and quickly to competitive business challenges and environments. This burden places considerable pressure on higher education, particularly in business education which has the responsibility for producing graduates who are well-equipped with a balance of the contextually appropriate hard and soft skills required to advance economic development through the country and internationally.

Nonetheless, according to overseas researchers, it has been shown that educational institutions in Vietnam have not yet succeeded in developing a fully competent workforce, and this is due, in large part, to not having effectively incorporated a contextually appropriate set of soft skills into the business curriculum (Mitchell, Skinner, and White 2010). It has been established also that there is an acute imbalance in the provision of soft and hard skills education in Vietnamese business institutes (Dang 2009). Although soft skills have implicitly been perceived to be

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important by employers, the dearth of soft skills education actually provided in universities has not been sufficient to satisfy employers’ needs. Lamentably, soft skills education remains neglected in the explicit curriculum objectives of Vietnamese business schools, and thus curriculum design is still deprived of the market-orientation it requires to be truly competitive. It is thus clear that there exists a mismatch between the needs of employers and the current educational provision of soft skills, thereby making it difficult for educational institutions to catch up with the current stage of demand associated with the Vietnamese economy (Trung and Świerczek 2009; Tuyet 2012). As a result, it is estimated that 83% of higher degree students in Vietnam remain deficient in soft skill areas. This leads to an increasing number of graduates, for example, who are unable to get jobs (50% in 2008 and 64% in 2011) and 50% of employees who have to be retrained at work (Giao Duc Vietnam 2012; British Council 2012; Tuyet 2010; Vallely and Wilkinson 2008).

Recently, the Vietnamese government and the national education system, together with its cognate and diverse research institutions, are slowly becoming aware of this problem. It is to be admitted that some efforts, are presently made to ensure that one of the three strategic breakthrough proposals scheduled to be implemented between 2011 and 2020 will involve a comprehensive renovation of the national education system (Vietnamese Strategies 2011-2020 2011; Loc 2009). At this stage, this task is to identify the problems impeding economic growth, and then for educational leaders to articulate new directions in the curriculum designed to resolve the burgeoning economic crisis. An increasingly determinate pedagogic focus on the significant role to be played by soft skills in developing the competitiveness of the economy in general is to be made, with a commitment also to improving the technological efficacy of workforce hard skills, in particular (Hung and Chen 2010). The argument of this piece is that to achieve the objectives set by the government proposal strategy, more needs to be done than just assume that the incorporation of any of the vast array of soft skills identified will suffice. The argument, supported by a growing body of literature is that to compete effectively within the global economic market, the efficacy of “hard skills” mediation and deployment requires that the people who make use of them must possess a high level of competency, in “soft skills” and “hard skills” generally, the deeper challenge is to identify the particular sets or configuration of “soft skill” sets which are required within a mercurial market of dynamic process. This being so, the authors argue that the importance of contextually defined soft skill acquisition is so imperative for business success that its importance warrants a robust revision of the current business school curricula in Vietnam which will accurately reflect contextually defined sets of “soft skills” specifically required for particular types of “hard skills” trading situations.

THE CONCEPT OF SOFT SKILLS

The understanding of what should be recognised as a soft skill is still a disciplinary facet of an inchoate academic discourse, and thus varies widely from one economic milieu to another. Nevertheless, there is emerging within the scholarly literature, a more precise account of the general concept of soft skills, which reflects a certain degree of coherence amongst the sundry perspectives proffered.

As defined by Perreault (2004), the concept of “soft skills” is intended to emphasise an individual’s personal qualities, attributes, and communication skills which enable that person to inform and shape productively the rudimentary ideas of others into transparent and pragmatic scenarios. According to Meenu and Kumar (2009), “soft skills” are considered as “transferable skills” that complement “hard skills” or “academic skills” which service the technical requirements of a particular job. As such, soft skills
COMPETENCIES in business education (Laud and Johnson 2012; Osman, Girardi, and Paull 2012; Mitchell et al. 2010). These “soft skills” are largely grounded in communication ability, negotiation skills, flexibility, and a capacity to adjust to new situations and amicably negotiate challenging proposals. Soft skills encourage forms of empathetically motivated interaction, with the aim of building bonds of trust and relationships of loyalty with colleagues and customers. Soft skills interaction of this kind is now being recognised as the foundation upon which the edifice of successful business relationships can be built. Hard skills are admittedly the foundation of certain aspects of technological production, but to achieve long-term success, even in this area, requires that employees with these technical skills are able to get on amicably and civilly with each other. Thus, it is the balance between the acquisition of hard skills and soft skills that allows for a sufficient level of personalisation to be formed within business relationships.

It is clear that a significant number of studies around the globe concur that the integration of soft skills into all business disciplines is the best way to develop these traits among business students (Bowers and Metcalf 2012; Osman et al. 2012). An abundance of evidence has accumulated to establish that the current business curriculums in developing countries plays a marginal role in contributing to the overall outcome process which defines success in business (Laud and Johnson 2012). On this construal, the pedagogic cultivation of soft skill programs has an extremely important role to play in advancing business potential and the economic success of all nations, but especially nations of developing economy. Improving soft skill pedagogy is also central to increasing youth employability in developing countries, especially Vietnam, which to date, as the authors have shown, has failed in perceiving the
importance of soft skills in business education. In the light of the foregoing studies, the authors are confident that the importance of soft skills in business success is now well-established, and thus justifies that the business curriculum in Vietnam should be revised in the ways required to reflect the salient role identifying contextualised “soft skills set” can potentially play in maximizing the economic success of the country.

CONCLUSIONS

The need for integrating soft skill training into in the business education programs is increasingly being acknowledged among many business organisations, and even the Vietnamese government today, but the pragmatic vision as to how programmes of soft skills acquisition should be implemented, and what such programs should look-like, are cogitations which are still problematic and rudimentary... Unfortunately, much research is still required to articulate a satisfactory model to achieve these goals. The authors have argued also that the elaboration of “contextually relevant soft skills” is also a critical challenge that has not yet been properly addressed. Whether business education institutions in Vietnam can move fast enough, and in a sufficiently comprehensive manner that features the place of soft skills sets in the business education curriculum will also provide a daunting task of monumental importance. Given the limitations of space, this paper has obviously not been able to address specific issues relating to the kind of soft skill program sets required to achieve the standard of pedagogic excellence required. Nevertheless, the authors hope that the research findings to which they have referred and elaborated here may serve to provide a measure of insight and direction for educational leaders, managers, and policy makers. Based on the argument presented here, it is incontestably clear, however, that until business education programs include soft skills training of the comprehensive kind they have adumbrated here, the critical balance between soft and hard skills necessary for ensuring Vietnam’s economic success will inevitably remain elusive.

References


### Bios

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