

Thesis abstract

Critical reflections on the vital importance of soft skills, and the strategies for the integration of essential soft skills into the curriculum of higher education business institutions in Vietnam

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Investing in human capital is one of the most relevant factors affecting the economic growth of a country, and one of the most important aspects of this investment is education. Thus, in developing countries such as Vietnam it is imperative that the government supports policy priorities committed to strategies for creating a knowledge foundation for the development of a skilled and adaptable workforce capable of contributing to the goals of business competitiveness at the local and especially the global level. Within Vietnam's system of higher education, its schools of business do play a vital role in supporting the country's economic objectives. However, one of the major objectives in this thesis is to show that the crucial contribution which soft skills are capable of making to achieve maximal success within the business sector has to date not been adequately recognized by its business schools. This being so, the development of the business school curriculum in Vietnam has not been able to "catch up," so to say, with the requirements of the local and global business market. This being so, the central argument of my thesis is that in Vietnam there is a burgeoning need to provide students with comprehensive a soft skills program designed to meet the national

and global business standards increasingly exhibited within the current objectives of their potential employers. This being so, it is essential that the formal curriculum of Vietnam's business schools be restructured to incorporate an up-to-date and effective coursework component for the delivery and development of business soft skills.

To fulfil the requirements of curriculum reform, the thesis focuses on three objectives. First, to assess the status of soft skills proficiency possessed by tertiary business graduates, thereby revealing the presence and quality of any soft skills programs in Vietnamese business higher education institutions. The second purpose is two twofold: the first task is to make explicit the extent to which major Vietnamese stakeholders acknowledge and value the potential role which soft skill competencies can play in maximizing business success. Through that, the second task is to determine which particular soft skills these stakeholders discern as best serving to improve Vietnam's economic competitiveness within the national and global marketplace. Third, to identify the most efficacious strategies for the development of soft skills programs in Vietnamese business schools.

A Sequential Exploratory Mixed-methods Approach was deployed in which in the first phase semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted, with 15 business employers representing the reputedly largest business enterprises across Vietnam. In the second phase, a questionnaire was conducted with 577 business educators from three major universities of business, representing different regions of the country.

The study makes four main contributions: First, this is the first comprehensive exploration and collation of the literature exploring the definition and importance of soft skills in the field of business, thereby accumulating a legacy of valuable information for employer and educational stakeholders in Vietnam to better understand the status of soft skills in the local business workplace and global market. Second, the results of the study identified the essential soft skills for success selected by Vietnamese business employers which can be integrated into the formal business curriculum of business higher education institutions. This contribution also serves as a benchmark skill checklist for staff development and recruitment for employers. Third, preferred approaches to soft skills development were identified by employers and business educators that are suitable for the current status of the country's higher education system, culture and economy. Finally, the findings indicate that increased collaboration between educational institutions and business enterprises in the development of soft skills for Vietnamese business schools is more likely to result in accrued benefits to the economy. This has been achieved by focusing on the development of the specific soft skills needed to increase the employability of business graduates and upon a shared

utilization of resources to enhance the effectiveness of soft skills training.

In summary, this study represents a comprehensive investigation of strategies for soft skills curriculum development which draws upon the contributions of relevant key stakeholders, namely, those Vietnamese business employers who are most likely to hire business school graduates, and the university educators of business who are responsible for their soft skills training in accord with the reformed curriculum of Vietnamese business schools. Thus, the study bridges the hiatus between the soft skills competencies required by Vietnamese employers on the one hand, and the adequate provision of soft skills development programs by soft skills educators in Vietnam's higher education business institutions on the other. Findings from this study could be used productively to inform and shape the nature of the curriculum reforms and pedagogic interventions that need to be undertaken collaboratively by knowledgeable staff from both tertiary business universities and business employment organizations.

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