

Chapter 6

Graduate Employability: Critical Perspectives



Thi Tuyet Tran

Abstract This chapter discusses the issues beyond the skill agenda provided by higher education. It argues that graduate employability in Vietnam is a complex issue and that the effort of sole universities will not create a positive change. It calls for a more productive collaboration and better understanding of mutual responsibility among all related stakeholders in enhancing graduate employability in Vietnam.

Introduction

The notion of employability has been high on the political agenda for higher education, not only in advanced western economies but also in the economies with lower level of development in Africa and Asia (Artess et al. 2011; Hager and Holland 2006; Tomlinson 2012). A number of employability and career guidance frameworks have been created to reinforce the relevance of higher education and training to the workplace; these include Canadian Blueprint,¹ Australian Blueprint for Career Development,² US National Career Development Guidelines,³ European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network⁴ and Competences for Lifelong Learning: European Reference Framework.⁵ The issue of graduate employability is given a special concern in the context of a shifting interrelationship between higher education and the labour market, the current climate of wider labour market uncertainty and the

¹ Canadian Blueprint: <http://206.191.51.163/blueprint/home.cfm>

² Australia Blueprint for Career Development: <http://www.blueprint.edu.au/>

³ US National Career Development Guidelines: http://www.learning4liferesources.com/Nationalcareerdevelopmentguidelines/Aftergraduation_000.pdf

⁴ European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network: <http://ktl.jyu.fi/ktl/elgpn>

⁵ Competences for Lifelong Learning: European Reference Framework: <http://www.scribd.com/doc/33445618/Key-Competences-for-Lifelong-Learning—A-European-Framework>

T. T. Tran (✉)
RMIT University, Melbourne, VIC, Australia
e-mail: june.tran@rmit.edu.au

changing regulation of graduate employment (Department for Business Innovation and Skills (DIUS) 2008; Tomlinson 2012). Universities have gradually moved their focus on enhancing graduate employability. Modules have been developed, and practices have been implemented, all with the same aim: to equip students with knowledge and skills desired by prospective employers.

In Vietnam, making university relevant to the workplace or, in other words, providing skilled workers for industrialization and modernization of the country has long been the central mission of the higher education system (HES). Nonetheless, due to the loose connection between the HES and the industry, the knowledge and skills which universities have equipped students with have increasingly been considered irrelevant to the needs of the contemporary labour market. The HES is still struggling to find ways to address the problem.

This chapter will review the relevant international literature in the first part to explain why graduate employability has become popular in many university practices. It will also differentiate the notion of employability from the notion of employment and argue that enhancing the work-readiness of students does need the collaboration and input from enterprises in the labour market. The second part of this chapter will discuss the issues of employability and employment in the specific context of Vietnam and suggest that the situation of students with poor employability and high unemployment tendency will remain unless a more effective and sustainable connection between higher education and enterprises is developed.

Graduate Employability in the International Context

It has been argued that the connection between the knowledge and skills students acquired from universities and those required by employers has been traditionally flexible, loose and open-ended (Tomlinson 2012). This has also not presented problems for either graduates or employers when higher education remained elite (Little and Arthur 2010). However, over time, this traditional relationship has been reshaped. The expansion of higher education with a more heterogeneous mix of graduates (Scott 2005) coupled with an increasing intensification in the labour market in a globalized competition for skilled labour force and the pressure from neoliberal government to maximize the output of universities (Brown and Lauder 2009) have created a strong impact on the role of higher education in meeting the new needs of employers, graduates and the governments. The call for HESs to make explicit the task of developing students with skills and knowledge required by the contemporary employers has been clear and loud. The key structural changes both to higher education and the labour market have shifted their interrelationship (Tomlinson 2012).

The most obvious change higher education has experienced over the past few decades is its massification. This is resulting in a wider body of graduates in a crowded graduate labour market (Tomlinson 2012). Mass higher education also raises the concern around the traditional mission of HE as to 'prepare the elite to

govern the nation', to 'provide an institutional basis for research into all forms of knowledge' (Jarvis 2002, p. 43) and to facilitate access to desired forms of employments (Scott 2005). In the early twentieth century, when higher education remained elite, Clark (1930) had already argued that educated people could earn more with better employment positions, not because they were educated but because they were scarce. Now the oversupply of graduates caused by mass higher education will result in the fall of earnings capacities. Higher education credentials do not seem to be a sufficient condition for obtaining employment, let alone a desired form of employment. Brown et al. (2003) seem to be right when they argue that employability is ultimately about the state of demand for labour in the market and the amount of competition of other applications.

Together with massification, universities have also moved towards greater autonomy and accountability. In most countries, the state commitment to public financing of higher education has been decreasing. Students increasingly have to pay tuition fees for their study and have somehow become 'customers' of the services provided by universities. Evidence suggests that employability is increasingly important in student choice of institution (Artes et al. 2011). This is not only because of the increasingly competitive graduate labour market but also because students realized the changes required by employers when recruiting skilled labour. On the one hand, students and graduates increasingly see themselves as the ones in charge of their own employability. Being a graduate and possessing graduate-level credentials no longer warrant access to a desired form of employment, as so many others share similar educational and pre-work profiles (Tomlinson 2012). In other words, graduates see a disrupted link between higher education participation and their future returns caused by mass higher education (Brooks and Everett 2009; Little and Arthur 2010). On the other hand, graduates also experience increasingly demanding recruiting requirements from employers. Under the impact of globalization and neoliberal policies, economies have become more competitive and flexible, which are now characterized by more intensive competition, deregulation and lower employment tenure (Tomlinson 2012). Market rules have dominated the market; and employers, in competitive market conditions, and allowed by a crowded pool of graduates, become more selective in their choices. They are no longer willing or no longer have to seek and train their workers and are able to recruit work-ready graduates. Many even can recruit graduates to positions previously been filled by school leavers (Brown et al. 2003). This gives them a significant cost saving but places challenges for new graduates and, in turn, challenges for universities to provide work-ready graduates.

Taking on-board employability has become universities' 'pragmatic response' (Clarke 2008) to the competition among universities and to the requirements of both students and employers. In many universities, employability has now become 'a standard mode of discourse – not only for the media and government ministries, but also academics marketing their institution on parent-centred University Open Days' (Taylor 2013, p. 851). Apart from students and employers, universities are also under the state pressure to be more responsive to the needs of the economy and to be able to provide graduates who can be able to adapt to their working environment

and are adaptable within it (Cable 2010). In many countries, the state continues to exert pressures on the HES to enhance outputs, quality and the overall market responsiveness (Department for Education 2010; European Commission 2003, 2005, 2011; Tomusk 2004). Governances have different ways to make sure universities taking on board the employability agenda, e.g. through public funding, program measurement and audit. In most HESs now, universities's performance in terms of employability has been linked to quality assurance (Knight 2001). In short, all related stakeholders, including policy makers, employers and students, have created a strong influence on the higher education agenda in order to ensure that graduates leaving the system are fit-for-purpose (Harvey 2000; Teichler 2007).

What Is Graduate Employability and How to Best Address It in Higher Education Curriculum?

Employability has attracted increasing attention from researchers and policy makers in higher education agenda. However, there has been no common definition of this terminology in the research literature. Harvey (2001) suggests, for instance, that employability definitions can be grouped into two broad groups. The first relates to the ability of the student to get and retain work after graduation (e.g., see Hillage and Pollard 1998). Nonetheless, from the employers' perspective, employability is often placed in relation to the requirements and contribution to the workplace (e.g., see Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry & Business Council of Australia 2002). However, as Boden and Nedeva (2010) argue, it seems impossible to define precisely the content of employability as that is where different employers' needs and graduate attributes meet, and this varies in different places and over time.

However, there is a need to differentiate between employability and employment. Harvey (2001, pp. 97–98) emphasizes that employability is the 'propensity of the individual student to get employment', or in other words, it is equipped for a job, rather than it is actually getting a job. Being employed means having a job, but being employable means having the qualities necessary for one to gain and maintain employment and progress in the workplace (Weligamage 2009). Employability is often regarded as the fitness for graduates to join the labour market. It may increase opportunities for graduates to obtain desired jobs, but does not assure them (Cabellero and Walker 2010; Clarke 2007; Helyer et al. 2011; Knight and Yorke 2004; Leong and Kavanagh 2013; Yorke 2006). This is because gaining employment does not only depend on the knowledge and skills one possesses, but it also depends on the general economic conditions and the context of the current labor market, as well as on one's personal circumstances and characteristics (Clarke 2007; McQuaid 2006).

The next question is how to enhance graduate employability in the higher education context. The current trend is to develop a list of skills desired by employers and create initiatives/activities to enhance those skills. The list of skills claimed to be desired by contemporary employers have been expanded with different umbrella terms such as generic skills, soft skills, transferable skills, cross-disciplinary skills, graduate attributes, core skills, key skills, basic skills, cross-curricular skills, common skills, essential skills, enterprise skills or even employability skills (Caballero et al. 2011; Cabellero and Walker 2010; Hager and Holland 2006; Lowden et al. 2011; Rust and Froud 2011). These types of skills are claimed to be important for any individual in the changing context of life, and especially essential for graduates in the employment context, as these skills are important to make them “‘prepared’ and ‘ready’ for success in rapidly changing work environment” (Cabellero and Walker 2010, p. 16). Moreover, these skills are also claimed to be important for the competitiveness of the national economy:

National competitive advantage is increasingly dependent on the skill base of the workforce, and more specifically, on the ability of both firms and individuals to engage in innovative activity and in new economic activity. This has created an imperative for both general skills, as these, it is suggested, are related to innovation, and for specific enterprise skills, which are related to new venture creation. (Hytti and O’Gorman 2004, p. 11)

Universities worldwide have gradually taken up the employability agenda. Strategies have been developed and employed with the aim to enhance graduate work-readiness. Students and academic staff are required to share responsibility for developing employability skills. Initiatives such as engaging prospective students to determine the role employability plays in decisions over course of study, making use of alumni network, applying credit to employability activities, highly evaluating the value of extracurricular activities or the engagement with employment have been reported rather popular across HESs around the world. These initiatives have started quite early in developed countries such as the UK, USA, Australia or Europe. Nonetheless, the effort of universities has not been paid off yet. There still exists a skill perception gap between universities and employers. For example, Bisoux (2015) finds that while 96% of university presidents in the USA believed that their graduates were adequately prepared for the workforce, only 33% of senior executives had the same view. Similarly, a global study finds that 72% of interviewed education providers responded that they were adequately preparing their students for the labour market; in contrast only 42% of employers shared this opinion (Mourshed et al. 2012). A study in the Middle East and North America also reveals a similar gap when almost all the interviewed education providers believed that their graduates had the necessary skills for the employment market; only 20–35% of employers agreed with this view (Kandri et al. 2011). A study about graduate employability in Asia also suggests that the perspectives of universities and employers differ when it comes to the issue of skills students acquired before entering the labour market. While, in most cases, universities considered their students to be

well prepared for employment, employers often complained about the lack of vital skills graduates possess before negotiating their transition to employment (UNESCO 2012).

The literature also suggests a broad mismatch between the skills developed by universities equip and those required by the industry. Various studies, such as Handel (2003); Sala (2011); Tran (2012a); Nicolescu and Paun (2009); Dewey et al. (2008); and Hernández-March et al. (2009), have reported different perspectives and different expectations students, employers and universities hold, in terms of work-oriented skills and abilities developed through higher education. Interestingly, some skills such as interpersonal, presentation skills or project management skills are often claimed to be developed during university time; nonetheless, these skills somehow differ from the interpersonal, presentation skills or project management skills desired by employers (Dewey et al. 2008). Some reasons have also been suggested in the literature. First, universities have not shifted the focus to applied learning and functional skills and remained their focus rigidly on academically orientated provision and pedagogy (Tomlinson 2012). Second, the notions of graduate ‘skill’, ‘competencies’ and ‘attributes’ often convey different things to different stakeholders, i.e. students, universities and employers (Barrie 2006; Handel 2003; Knight and Yorke 2004; Sala 2011; Tran 2012a). The perception gap is often reported to be wide, and a research reported by McKinsey and The Conference Board (2012, p. 23) even provides a negative conclusion that ‘there is an issue with education systems that fail to produce future workers with the kinds of skills required by today’s organizations – let alone those of tomorrow’.

Stakeholder collaboration is also suggested in the literature as an important area that needs to be tackled in order to improve the situation and bridge the perception gaps among stakeholders. There is a need to increase communication and mutual understanding among universities, graduates, employers and policy makers, and university-enterprise collaboration (UEC) is considered an important way to improve the authenticity of the process of enhancing graduate employability (Gibbs et al. 2011; Stone et al. 2013; Tran 2015a). Secondly, the UEC should be designed to provide students with experiential learning, which is considered vital in enhancing the preparation and success of students in the entry-level market (Gault et al. 2000). Employers have been reported to highly evaluate graduates’ work experience, and they often view it as an indicator of workplace readiness (Andrews and Higson 2008). Thus, it is suggested pre-graduate work experience in the forms of internships, work placement, co-ops and other related activities enables students, on the one hand, to develop their skills by experiencing real-world challenges and applications (Cooper et al. 2010; Ferns et al. 2014; Ferns and Moore 2012; Smith et al. 2010) and, on the other hand, to have opportunities to understand the real needs of the employment market and gradually develop the right skills that is desired in that market (Ferns et al. 2014; Kogan et al. 2011). It is not surprising when different forms of UEC have been focused in the literature on graduate employability and work-based learning and work-integrated learning are viewed as particularly effective approaches to promote the employability of graduates (Etzkowitz 2004; Lowden et al. 2011; World Bank 2012).

Graduate Employability Issue in Vietnam

Vietnamese Higher Education and the Mission of Providing Skilled Workers for Industrialization and Modernization of the Country

Although Vietnam has opened its door to the world economy since 1986, its economy and the HES are still at much lower stages of development compared with the developed countries in the West. The central mission of the HES is still limited in training skilled labour force for the development of the country (George 2010; Tran 2006). Unlike higher education in the West, the Vietnamese HES has been ‘fundamentally designed to meet the needs of the labour market’ (George 2010, p. 34) with different small, mono-disciplinary universities operating under both their Line Ministries and the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) (Tran 2012b). Now, under the impact of the globalization, the West-East influence and the mass higher education movement, coupled with the recognition about the needs to provide flexibility and more choices for students and the aim to prepare skilled labour force for a knowledge economy, multidisciplinary universities, both the state and the private ones, have been founded. Vietnam seems to achieve its goal of expanding the HES. The number of students enrolling in the system in the school year 2014–2015 had increased more than 200% compared to the school year 2000–2001, and the number of HEIs increased from 178 to 436, with the number of universities nearly tripling (increased from 74 universities in 2000 to 219 in 2015). This is not to count the other 30 HEIs who are under the Ministry of Military (MOET 2013, 2015; Vietnamese Government 2015). The expansion of the HES with the aim to strengthen a knowledge economy and to increase graduates’ adaptability to new technologies and flexible market (Lee and Healy 2006) is claimed to be essential for Vietnam to become ‘a major player on the world scene economically, culturally, and intellectually’ (Pham and Fry 2004, p. 329).

Nonetheless, mass higher education also comes along with its problems. When the system has been expanded rapidly, and when the resource and experience in managing the growing system is still limited, the HES is struggling to maintain their capability to provide high-skilled labour force for the industry. This, coupled with the loose connection with the labour market which has been developed fast in an increasingly open market economy, has kept the HES far behind the development of the economy. The HES has gradually failed to implement their central mission of providing high-quality labour force for the modernization and industrialization of the country. The claim about the poor capability of universities in enhancing or equipping students with the knowledge and skills required by the employer has been loud (Pham 2008; Tran 2006; Tran and Swierczek 2009; Tran 2013c). The rate of unemployed graduates has also increased rapidly. In 2010, the number of unemployed HE graduates aged from 21 to 29 was less than 60,000. Despite the fact that the number of students enrolling in the system has remained rather stable since 2010 (MOET 2013), by the end of 2015, the number of unemployed graduates had

reached 225,500 (Ministry of Labor – Invalids and Social Affairs & General Statistics Office 2015).

To be fair, mass higher education is not the only reason painting the dark picture of the transition to employment among university students in Vietnam. Although the HES in Vietnam has expanded rapidly recently, it is claimed that the number of graduates from the system are still lower compared to the high demand of skilled labour force from an increasingly integrated economy (Tran 2016; World Bank 2008, 2012). Looking from the overall employment market, the ratio of the workforce with higher education qualifications is still very low (currently around 9% of the workforce) and much lower than the ratio in its labouring countries such as China or Thailand (Ministry of Labor – Invalids and Social Affairs & General Statistics Office 2016; Nguyen 2014; Tran 2016). It is suggested that the labour market can still absorb more university graduates, given the condition that university education are more relevant to the workplace requirements; nonetheless, this remains a work in progress (Postiglione 2011). Vietnam seems to share a common characteristic of the education systems in developing countries where the focus has still been on teaching basic cognitive skills and facts, labour market skills are still equated with technical skills and employers continue to lament the difficulties in finding employees with required skills for the contemporary competitive labour market (Cunningham and Villaseñor 2014).

Research into the issue of graduate employability among Vietnamese university students has indicated the inadequate quality of students and graduates (Fatseas 2010; Nguyen 2014; Tran 2006, 2015a; Tran and Swierczek 2009; Truong 2006). There is also a common support to Tran and Swierczek's (2009, p. 580) claim in naming the reasons for the low level of responsiveness of the higher education to the demand of the labour market: the primary focus of university on explicit knowledge, the design of the curriculum depriving the market orientation and the lack of or the ignorance of the need of employers in most universities. In 2006, the World Bank's Vietnam Development Report found that skills and education of available workers ranked third in the list of constraints of doing business in Vietnam (World Bank 2008). However, in 2012, skills and education become the biggest obstacle in the business climate in Vietnam (World Bank 2012, p. 41). Then in 2015–2016, Vietnam higher education and training (one of the efficiency enhancers of the economy) is ranked low – 95th in 140 countries in the World Competitiveness Index – and the inadequately educated workforce has become the third problematic factor for doing business in Vietnam (World Economic Forum 2015, p. 366).

Research of Tran (2014) has also identified the key quality deficits among Vietnamese graduates. These are the poor and outdated professional knowledge, the lack of experience/practice to apply the learnt knowledge in the real context of work, the poor foreign language skills (especially English) and the lack of work experience. She also suggests that the main reasons for the situation come from the loose connection between the HES and the labour market, the weak capability and limited resources of universities to enhance graduate employability, the interference of Vietnamese cultural features and also the weak capability of the industry to absorb the increased number of graduates.

The Effort of the HES to Address the Problem

The Vietnamese HES has also recognized its weaknesses and has made some efforts to address the problem. This is clearly evident in many documents, policies and instructions recently issued by MOET and the government. In 2005, the Vietnamese government launched an ambitious reform, namely, ‘Fundamental and Comprehensive Reform of Higher Education in Vietnam 2006 – 2020’ (also known as Higher Education Reform Agenda or HERA) (HERA 2005). The reform promotes an agenda which maintains and emphasizes a strong focus on job orientation, in which up to 80% of students will enrol in professional-oriented programs and only 20% in research oriented by the year 2020. HERA also aims to develop a curriculum that has strong professional orientation with the shift from the instructional to the learning paradigm and pays special pedagogical consideration to bring higher education training more align with the demand of the labour market (Harman and Nguyen 2010; Pham 2010). If this is to be followed, the involvement of enterprises in university practices should be the main focus in the educational reforms in Vietnam.

Indeed, some measures have been taken to drive universities towards better communication and collaboration with employers. According to MOET’s circular number 37/2012/TT-BGDĐT, universities are required to consult employers when designing university curricular and evaluating university practices. They also have to report on the rate of employed recent graduates, to provide evidences of consulting employers’ opinions and contribution towards developing or revising syllabus/ curriculum and to take into account market demands into university everyday practices. These are part of the quality assurance criteria that MOET has urged each and every university in the system to follow. MOET has issued another circular⁶ requiring, again, the involvement of employers in university curriculum design. In addition to this, in 2008, the Vietnamese government launched the US\$450 million National Foreign Language 2020 Project (Project 2020) in order to reach an ambitious aim of upgrading the language capability of its students so that by 2020 most students can use a foreign language (especially English) confidently in their daily communication (MOET 2008). These efforts all aim to address the problems and overcome the deficits mentioned by Tran (2014) in the above section.

It is now more than a decade since the launch of HERA and Project 2020; however, positive indicators for the change in the outcome quality of the system seem to be underachieved reversely, the number of unemployed graduates has non-stop increase and complaint about the mismatch between what graduates can offer when negotiating employment and what employers expect from them has been getting louder. Reports have been issued and submitted; universities are still going their ways which are not always the same as reported. It is suggested that there is a lack of sustaining policies which can help translate the political wills into practice in the system (Pham et al. 2013).

⁶Circular 12/2017/TT_BGDĐT

Nonetheless, in some universities, especially the top state and private universities, there are growing evidence of cooperation between universities and enterprises. For example, the collaborations between technical universities like the Hanoi University of Science and Technology; Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology; University of Engineering and Technology – Vietnam National University, Hanoi; University of Communications and Transport; University of Civil Engineering; and enterprises in petroleum, electric power, telecommunications, information technology and transportation are increasing. However, in general, private universities take more initiatives towards collaboration with industry partners. This is easy to understand as the competitions to attract students among private universities are more ‘serious’ than among state universities. In the top-ranked private universities such as the Haiphong Private University, Duy Tan University, Lac Hong University or FPT University, the integration of theory and practice in teaching and the collaboration with employers in developing curriculum and internships have become one of their central missions. Nonetheless, the impact of the effort from these universities on the whole system seems to be modest, and reports on effective and sustainable cooperation between universities and firms to enhance the practical knowledge and skills for students remain rare.

Clearly, Vietnamese universities are weak in enhancing employability for their students. However, other related factors also need to address and to be taken into account to develop appropriate steps in enhancing graduate employability in the Vietnamese context. Some of such factors are discussed in the following section.

Other Related Factors

The Interference of Cultural Features

Vietnam is a typical Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC)⁷ country, where the Confucian values such as respecting elders and the ‘face saving’ culture remain alive (Tran 2013b). In Vietnam, power distance or ‘the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organisations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally’ is very high (Itim international’s HOFSTEDE CENTRE 2014). In that context, children are still taught and expected to respect older people and to obey parental guidance and orders (Ramburuth and McCormick 2001). There is still popular the case where parents interfere into or even decide personal matters for their children: parents decide which school children go, which job children should follow or even who children should get married to. In short, Vietnamese children, the same as children raised in other Eastern culture countries, are traditionally and normally more protective than Western children (Chalamwong et al. 2012).

⁷Examples of CHC countries are Vietnam, China, Singapore and Japan where they have strong influence of Confucianism; children in CHC are often expected and taught to respect people who are older or who have higher ranks, i.e. parents, elders and teachers (Nguyen et al. 2005; Ramburuth and McCormick 2001; Tran 2013b).

This tradition has somehow made the child obedient and passive, and this is viewed as a negative factor affecting students' transition to employment (Tran 2015a). On the one hand, it has created the expectation from the students that their schools or universities should equip them with enough knowledge and skills necessary for them to negotiate their transition to employment. This hinders their efforts to make full use of extracurricular activities, to get involved in different volunteering and community work, to expand their network and to increase their understanding about the outside world during the time at university. These activities would all help them to enhance the skills appreciated by the employers in the labour market (Tran 2014). On the other hand, the deep interference of parents who may not fully understand their child's interests, strengths and weaknesses and who may have limited understanding about the change in the industry may mislead the child. Evidence suggests that it takes longer for some students to find their ways to their first stable and satisfactory job because they have to follow their parent's guidance and orders to learn in the discipline that they do not like and to work in a position/place that they do not find suitable (even when their parents have to spend much money to geese the machine and place them in that position). In many cases, parents virtually become an obstacle preventing students from deciding their own matters and being in charge of their own career management.

The Weak Career Services Inside and Outside the Education System

To be fair, Vietnam is a fast developing society, and globalization and an open policy for people to get access to the Internet have reduced the cases of parents interfering into children's own matters. Moreover, parents are getting busier; they have less time than their children to update information about the tendency in the labour market; some of them also understand that they should empower their children to make their own decisions. Thus, more and more children are allowed to decide their own career management issues now. Nonetheless, when being given the right to manage the career route, many young people are struggling. They seem to hover the zone of unknown. They are not sure which job they should follow, which university they should apply for, how to enhance the knowledge and skills desired by employers and how to approach the labour market and deploy their assets in a way to resonate employers (Tran 2014). Career services are virtually absent or ineffective in both high schools and universities. In addition to that, the function of easing the transition to work among young people of employment centres outside the education system does not seem to work effectively either. Seeking the help of the employment centre is one of the least methods used by youth when they need job advice or when they look for a specific job (Tran 2015b).

The Low Stages of Development of Both the HES and the Labour Market

When suggesting the reasons for the low employability among Vietnamese university graduates, there is a need to mention the low levels of development of not only the HES but also of the Vietnamese economy in general and of the employment market in particular. The weak capability of employment centres mentioned above is somehow reflected a weak function of the Vietnamese labour market. Apart from the weak capability to manage the incoming labour force, the Vietnamese labour market, especially the public sector, has still inherited many characteristics of the central command economy where corrupted recruitment procedures are still rife. Evidence of using money, bribery, gifts, offspring or relative relationships to gain access to employment and be promoted at work are still popular (Tran 2013a). This has created more confusion for the young people who are wobbling around to find their ways to employment.

The increased number of unemployed and underemployed university graduates also indicates the weak capability of the labour market to absorb the increased number of young people finishing higher education training (Elder 2014). In the knowledge economy era, only around 9% of the working age population are university graduates (Ministry of Labor – Invalids and Social Affairs & General Statistics Office 2016), but the claim of ‘*thừa thầy thiếu thợ*’ (too many masters, too few labourers) is still popular. This somehow indicates the low level of development of the economy in general and of the skilled labour market in particular. The labour market does not seem to run their functions well. At the current stage, it is still unclear which jobs are or will be of high demand and how many new jobs are created each year. In the last few years, it is claimed that the number of new jobs is even less than the number of jobs that disappeared as a result of the economic crisis. Moreover, the oversupply of graduates in some fields, and the undersupply of graduates in other fields, was another issue (UNESCO 2012). Adding to the dark picture is the low qualifications of the majority employers and their limited knowledge of human resource (Nguyen 2014; Tran 2014). Clearly, the Vietnamese economy and its labour market also have many problems needed to be addressed and tackled.

When both the employment market and the HES still have many internal problems needed to be settled, and when enterprises do not think enhancing graduate employability is their mission (Le and Truong 2005), the loose connection between them is understandable. Nonetheless, without an effective and strong university-enterprise collaboration, it is hard to enhance the integration of theories and practices, an essential condition to enhance graduate employability in a neoliberalised economy (Etzkowitz 2004; Lowden et al. 2011; World Bank 2012). In other words, the solo effort of the university will never bring the desired outcome when it comes to the issue of enhancing graduate employability.

Interestingly, Vietnamese universities often complain that the active involvement of employers in the collaborations with universities is rare. Apart from approaching

universities for recruitment of graduates, for scholarship sponsoring, sometimes for sponsoring students' extracurricular activities and advertising their company images or products, not many enterprises actively approach universities to discuss the collaboration in teaching or training (either for their staff or for university students) or for research collaboration (Huynh 2012). Many employers still keep the thought that the university-enterprise cooperation mainly brings benefits for universities and students, not for firms; thus, they are not really actively involved in that collaboration (Pham 2013). In many state organizations, the recruitment process is still unclear and interfered by corruption which has created a certain negative impact on students who believe that money, social connection and luck are essential for them to negotiate their transition to employment (Tran 2013a).

Moreover, at the current stage, when the HES in Vietnam was still dominated by state universities, who are mostly still managed in similar ways like in the central command economy before, the government grants most of the university expenses, staff salary included, and students' tuition fees are very low. Thus, most university entrance exam takers aim to go to the state universities. The internal competitiveness is, therefore, low. Most state universities are not under real pressure to increase students' employability to attract new students. The market share for the private universities is very small as the tuition fees in this sector are often much higher than in the state universities. Recently many private universities are struggling to attract enough students to maintain their teaching and learning practices (Hanh 2016). Some of them have made effort to initiate the collaboration with firms to enhance employability for students and consider this as a way to attract new students. Nonetheless, the impact of such effort is still considered modest.

Conclusion

The development of the Vietnamese HES shares some similarities as elsewhere under the impact of neoliberalism and the mass higher education movement. The size of the system is getting bigger with more requirements and pressures from students, employers and the central government for university responsibility and accountability. Nonetheless, when in most developed countries, universities now seem to accept enhancing graduate employability as its subset mission and have been working towards developing university-enterprise collaboration to integrate theories and practices, the Vietnamese higher education does not seem to fulfil its traditional duty of training and providing high-skilled labour force for the industry. Despite some internal efforts and the pressure coming from educational policy makers, there have been, conversely, increased indicators for the poor and mismatched knowledge and skills students equipped during university time and the ones required by the industry. Both the number and the ratio of unemployed graduates have significantly grown year after year. The claim of the employers over the general quality of graduates has become louder. The dissatisfaction of most related stakeholders over the inadequate teaching and learning at the HES has

become popular. In short, all eyes are on the HES, and most stakeholders see higher education as the one who needs to take responsibility for the low employability and employment rate among recent graduates.

The Vietnamese HES, indeed, is weak in enhancing employability for its students. The limited resource, experience and understanding to manage the change internally (the growing number of enrolling students) and externally (the changes in the market-led economy) are considered the key problem the Vietnamese HES has to face in order to address the issue of employability at the current stage. In addition to this, the lack of internal competitiveness and the low interest from enterprises in cooperating with universities to create more practical lessons for students both have negatively impacted on the university process of enhancing graduate employability in Vietnam. Evidence suggests that even when MOET is struggling to find ways to increase the responsiveness of the HES towards the needs of the industry, there is still an absence of a practical and sustaining policy or measure to change the wills into practice.

Nonetheless, the university cannot take the sole blame for recent graduates' difficulties in finding and retaining employment. The discussion in this chapter suggests that universities are not the only stakeholder that has impacted on the employability development of their students. Efforts by universities, if any, will not work without the cooperation and input of other related stakeholders during this transitional period of the economy. Other related stakeholders, including employers, students and their families, all need to acknowledge the changes in society. They should be aware of the cultural features affecting the university-workplace transition and should recognize their responsibility in this process. Without mutual efforts and understanding to bridge the gap between theories and practices, to build a sustainable university-industry collaboration to provide and prepare students with skills and knowledge desired by the industry, the transition to the workplace of Vietnamese university graduates will remain to be a painful process.

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