



Research Article

JOB SATISFACTION OF GRADUATES BASED ON THE TRAINED KNOWLEDGE AND SOFT SKILLS: A CASE STUDY AT NONG LAM UNIVERSITY ON GIA LAI CAMPUS

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research aims to explore the job satisfaction of the graduates based on the trained knowledge and skills as well as to investigate what soft skills the graduates in needs. The mixed method was employed through the quantitative and qualitative approaches. The qualitative data was used to support and explain for the numeric data. The findings showed that most of the graduates satisfied with their current job in spite of having some different aspects in relation to the trained knowledge and skills. The results of self-evaluation about the trained knowledge and skills reported that most of the graduates in the majors of Agronomy, Forestry, Food technology and Accounting found them useful while others supposed to be useless. Besides, their expectation of training soft skills for the current job position was also indicated.

Keywords: curriculum; job satisfaction; knowledge; labour market; soft skills

1. Introduction

The education as well as the labour market is changing very rapidly. A few decades ago, graduates who had an excellent academic record with added work experience were well sought by most of the businesses. However, academic record and experience are not sufficient for the businesses' requirements. Employers nowadays tend to hire graduates who are resourceful, ethical, and self-directed with soft skills. Lack of soft skills in the graduate candidates has resulted in low hiring by businesses. Although many universities combine soft skills in curriculum, its effectiveness seems to be inconsiderable. This reveals not only the failure of teaching methods but also the awareness of students about the importance of

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soft skills for their future job. Consequently, many graduates recognised these issues until they had left university. Thus, graduates are currently expected by the employers to not only obtain good degrees and excel in the academics, but also to be equipped with soft skills.

Soft skills have become one of the crucial elements after quality for careers in labour market. According to Serby (2003), requirements of the businesses are to look specifically for graduate candidates who can add value to their organization with the soft skills and the ability to develop and use soft skills making the difference between a job offer and enjoyment of employment. This requirement in a job has made the competition for job acquisition. Some studies pointed out that nowadays graduates from universities are unable to meet the employers' expectations and relevant job requirements in the changing economic environment (Kahirolo et al., 2016). This is attributed to lack of soft skills (Tran, 2018; Huynh, 2017). Practically, employers are seeking those who have both the appropriate academic qualifications and highly soft skills, which assist the businesses to compete successfully in the market (Shiau et al., 2018; Kalaivani et al., 2012). Yet, many graduates do not have the right combination of excellent academic qualifications and soft skills as required by employers (Kahirolo et al., 2016; Kalaivani et al., 2012). As a result, job seekers are unable to gain the employment which subsequently contributes to a high graduate unemployment rate.

In the recent studies, researchers have emphasised that soft skills are more important because it has been receiving greater attention in businesses and are in higher demand by employers (Dunbar et al., 2016; Stewart et al., 2016). It is noticed that lack of soft skills as the area where job seekers have the largest deficiency, which may derive from education system, particularly university education (White, 2013). Evidently, to become professionals not only needs academic and technical skills but also soft skills to meet the goals of the business. The findings of Tang's study (2019) further emphasised on the vital importance of non-academic skills to employability. Obviously, soft skills are becoming more and more coveted with many organizations and businesses.

Many employers assume that the most practical involvement of soft skills is standard when it comes to their employees, but this is not always the case. As suggested by Kember et al. (2007), there is increasing recognition for awareness that soft skills can support students to achieve academic and job related aims upon their graduation. It is argued here that employers would like to look for additional skills besides graduates' qualifications and experience. Obviously, the technical skills processed by employees are less important compared to the soft skills that can be transferred between different jobs and employment sectors when linked with different roles. Therefore, employers desire their staff who has the right skills and qualities to accomplish their role and contribute to the organisational success.

Literature shows that new graduates are found to be lacked essential soft skills for employment, and they believe that the soft skills training is insufficient. According to Williams (2015), universities need to help students to enhance the relevant soft skills as employers place importance on soft skills. Hence, soft skills training strategies should be tailored to meet the needs of students and employers, because this can be a chance for students' success in the future employment. A study conducted by Serby (2003) also stated that soft skills are important for workplace success. Obviously, there is a gap between how graduates prepare for their future job and how employers find them to be. This can be the biggest skills gap while the workforce is plentiful in technical skills, but lacking in soft skills, which are supposed to some elements challenging businesses.

Indeed, learning outcomes, soft skills, work experience are less or more influencing the student's job application process. Each factor has a certain effect on each job position. Although many scholars and employers emphasize the decisive role of soft skills when applying for jobs, many students are not fully aware while sitting in the lecture hall. Furthermore, it is not for this that we focus on soft skills but forget about other factors such as professional knowledge and professional skills. This can make students less competitive and loses more job opportunities. Organizations and employers around the world recognize that, in order to gain a competitive advantage, employees need to know how to handle themselves at work and how to acquire soft skills that are needed.

With the brief overview above, this study sought to answer the following questions: (1) examine the satisfaction of the current employment status of graduates; (2) what the graduates self-evaluate the trained knowledge and skills; and (3) what skills they need for the current job position.

2. Methodology

As the main purpose mentioned earlier, this research was employed a mixed method to gather information. The quantitative approach was to examine the satisfaction of the current job of graduates and also to investigate the participants' self-reports about the trained knowledge and skills and how they self-evaluated their achieved academics and skills through the questionnaires. In the meantime, the qualitative approach was conducted with the deep interviews focusing on the participants' opinions and desires about the trained knowledge and skills in order to support and explain for the numeric data. The data in this paper were part of a big project "*The employment situation of students from Ho Chi Minh Nong Lam University on Gia Lai campus after graduating*" carried out at Gia Lai campus.

All the participants, who graduated from Ho Chi Minh Nong Lam University on Gia Lai campus, were invited to the study basing on their consents. 262 graduates agreed voluntarily to answer the questionnaire and 13 participants of those were randomly selected to the deep interview. The questionnaire was designed basing on the criteria as indicated by

Creswell (2009). The asked items in the questionnaire were to rate each statement by the level of agreement in a close ended 3 and 4 point-Likert scale. The usage of 3 or 4 point Likert scale is basically a Likert scale as pointed out by Taherdoost (2016). Accordingly, this scale was to force the participants to form their opinion and answer the specific responses for the purposes of this research. All the items were ascertained through the calculation of Cronbach α coefficients with the acceptable score ($\alpha = 0.69$). Additionally, the 12-item soft skills with answering “yes” or “no” in the questionnaire were adapted from the study of Hewitt (2008) and Bora (2015) and modified to suit with the current study. An interview protocol consists of several crucial questions to explore the perspectives of the participants. Each interview lasted 15 to 20 minutes. In order to ensure an accurate record of what was mentioned in the interviews, all the interviews were digital-recorded for transcription purposes.

Microsoft Excel (version 2013) was employed to analyze the collected data from the questionnaire and descriptive statistics was conducted to determine the frequency and the percentage of the demographic profile and the data. The interview data was transcribed and coded according to the themes of the study purposes and Microsoft Excel was also used to sort out depending on the groups of the themes. The analysed interview data was presented under quotations and the interviewees' names are anonymous.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. The satisfaction of the job position

Table 1. Levels of the suitable job with the trained major

Majors	Unsuitable	Suitable	Very Suitable	N
Agronomy	4 (6.3%)	18 (28.1%)	42 (65.6%)	64 (100%)
Forestry	10 (20.8%)	19 (39.6%)	19 (39.6%)	48 (100%)
Accounting	6 (10.4%)	26 (44.8%)	26 (44.8%)	58 (100%)
Environmental Management	26 (72.2%)	5 (13.9%)	5 (13.9%)	36 (100%)
Land Management	21 (61.8%)	3 (8.8%)	10 (29.4%)	34 (100%)
Food Technology	9 (40.9%)	7 (31.8%)	6 (27.3%)	22 (100%)
%	29%	29.8%	41.2%	262

For new graduates, seeking a suitable job is importantly practical. A job position relevant to a trained major can make graduates feel satisfactory. This may be the desire of many students after graduating. The result presented in Table 1 reveals that over 78% of the

graduates in Agronomy, Forestry and Accounting major, who found the suitable job with their trained major. By contrast, the graduates in Environmental Management and Land Management major reported that they could not find the suitable job as trained with 72.2% and 61.8% respectively. This finding indicates that most of the graduates found the suitable job as trained major expect Environmental Management and Land Management major (see more Table 1).

The results in Table 2 can confirm that whether the graduates worked in a suitable position as trained feel satisfied or unsatisfied with their current job. The satisfactory of the graduates relating to the job position is concerned by most educators (see more Kahirolo et al., 2016). As showed in Table 2, over 90% of the graduates in Agronomy major feel satisfied with their job while 47.2% of the graduates in Environment major feel unsatisfied with their current job. This is possible that the satisfaction based on the level of the job position, which the graduates undertake, relating to their trained major. In other words, the graduates feel happy when they work in the major they learned. Another explanation can be when undertaking the job, which the graduates are particularly interested in it or personally wish to do it, making them feel satisfied. The qualitative data in this study can be the answers in more details for the findings above.

“I graduated in Agronomy on Gia Lai campus. [...] Now I am working for Provincial Seed Centre in Gia Lai. [...] I feel excited about this position because I can use what I have studied in my job. [...] Although there is a little something I have to learn by myself and colleagues, I think my studying is useful for my job. I am happy with that.”
(Ms A1, an engineer in Agriculture)

Table 2. Levels of the job satisfaction

Majors	Unsatisfied	Satisfied	Very Satisfied	N
Agronomy	1 (1.6%)	15 (23.4%)	48 (75.0%)	64
Forestry	0	17 (35.4%)	31 (64.6%)	48
Accounting	4 (6.8%)	27 (46.6%)	27 (46.6%)	58
Environmental Management	17 (47.2%)	16 (44.4%)	3 (8.4%)	36
Land Management	6 (17.6%)	9 (26.4%)	19 (56.0%)	34
Food Technology	1 (4.5%)	6 (27.3%)	15 (68.2%)	22
N	29	90	143	262

“I work in Commune People’s Committee. [...] you know, I have studied in Environmental Management major [...] but here I work as a secretary. It is boring to me and I feel unsatisfied with my job [...] but I need money for my living, I have no way to do, because finding a job is quite difficult. [...] my parents have paid for me for a 5 year schooling [...] so I need to live independently. [...] I regret what I have studied.” (Mr. EM1, an engineer in Environmental Management)

Thus, the satisfaction of the job position and seeking a suitable job can be important for graduates and employers. The findings in the current study are in line with the suggestions of Williams (2015) and Tang (2019) for the satisfaction of the job position based on the trained knowledge and skills. Therefore, if a graduate finds a suitable job as trained, this can lead him or her to success and satisfaction. In addition to this, the personal interests for the job position can make him or her feel satisfied. On the contrary, a graduate feels bored when working with an unsuitable job position as trained. This may be waste of money and time for a student and his or her family. The finding suggests that the career counseling programs play an important role, which should be concerned.

3.2. Self-evaluation of the trained knowledge and skills

The knowledge trained in the university is a key element to help graduates succeed in their job. As presented in Table 3, most of the graduates in the majors of Agronomy, Forestry, Food technology and Accounting reported that the trained knowledge in the institution was useful (over 80%). Conversely, the graduates in the major of Environmental Management and Land Management responded that the knowledge they learned was “a little useful” with 40.9% and 61.8% respectively. Particularly, 11.1% of the graduates in Environmental Management major stated that the trained knowledge was “useless”. This can be explained basing on the interviewing data below.

Table 3. Self-evaluation of the trained knowledge

Majors	Useless	A little Useful	Useful	Very Useful	N
Agronomy	0	1 (1.6%)	26 (40.6%)	37 (57.8%)	64
Forestry	0	9 (18.7%)	27 (56.3%)	12 (25.0%)	48
Accounting	0	3 (5.2%)	46 (79.3%)	9 (15.5%)	58
Environmental Management	4 (11.1%)	20 (55.6%)	12 (33.3%)	0	36
Land Management	0	21 (61.8%)	13 (38.2%)	0	34
Food Technology	0	9 (41.0%)	12 (54.5%)	1 (4.5%)	22
N	4	63	136	59	262

“I am interested in Land Management major. However, finding a job in this major is really hard for me. [...] I am working as a salesgirl in the shop, which is not related to what I have learnt. This is very terrible. [...] This makes me bored [...] and what I have studied becomes useless...” (Ms. LM1, a bachelor in Land Management).

Obviously, the trained knowledge is necessary for students when they are at the lecture hall of the university. Although these results are the self-evaluation of the graduates, those who are working for the specific job understanding exactly what knowledge they need and spend practical experience. This is supported by a suggestion of Kalaivani et al. (2012), which students should experience more field trips during their studying at university. However, as discussed in the previous section, it is possible to be believed that the trained knowledge becomes “useless” because the graduates do not work in the certain major as what they have studied. This can be the fact that the curriculum of the institutions should be revised with the needs of the labor market. In addition to this, the career orientation courses should be applied in this regard. This suggests that there is a big gap between theory and practice.

Table 4. Self-evaluation of the trained skills

Majors	Useless	A little Useful	Useful	Very Useful	N
Agronomy	0	11 (17.2%)	53 (82.8%)	0	64
Forestry	0	35 (72.9%)	12 (25.0%)	1 (2.1%)	48
Accounting	0	20 (34.5%)	37 (63.8%)	1 (1.7%)	58
Environmental Management	2 (5.6%)	27 (75.0%)	7 (19.4%)	0	36
Land Management	0	29 (85.3%)	5 (14.7%)	0	34
Food Technology	0	21 (95.5%)	1 (4.5%)	0	22
N	2	143	115	2	262

Furthermore, the combination of professional skills and soft skills in the curriculum is significant. Evidently, many graduates are not employed because of lacking the necessary soft skills as suggested by White (2013). The findings in this paper show that the graduates in the majors of Agronomy and Accounting usefully appreciated the trained skills with 82.8% and 63.8% respectively, whereas the graduates in the major of Forestry, Environment, Land Management and Food Technology reported that the trained skills were “a little useful”

with the rate around 72.9% and 95.5% (see Tables 4). To respond these findings, the interview data below can be an explanation.

“The thing we have learnt becomes too old for whatever we are doing. [...] There are a lot of new technologies we must update now because our job needs it. [...] We ourselves must learn the new things for our job. [...] I feel that I start learning as a beginner.”(Mr. EM2, an engineer in Environmental Management)

“All the things I have studied [...] some things are good, but some things are not used much in my job. [...] I have to study more and more things in order to manage in my job. Now I need more soft skills because my job position requires those. [...] I think the university should focus more on teaching and training the soft skills for students, which helps them much in their future job. I think I am an example for this.” (Ms. Ac1 a bachelor in Accounting).

Basing on the findings, it can be understood that the graduates undertake the unsuitable job with things they have been studied, so they find the trained skills “a little useful”. On the one hand, this may be attributed to the teaching method and the curriculum that are not met the practical desire of job positions in the specific major. On the other hand, it implies that the graduates have not applied well the skills as trained. These findings are in accordance with the findings of Stewart et al. (2016) and Dunbar et al. (2016), the graduates lack the potential skills for the job positions as required for employers. This is important to note that the needs of training the skills in a job position and a combination between the curriculum and the teaching method, which should be more consideration.

3.3. Expectations of graduates about the skills for current job position

The trained knowledge and skills are a necessary condition for students to be ready for labour market. As discussed in the previous section, the question is raised whether the trained knowledge and skills are sufficient for students before taking part in the job market. As presented in Table 5, the list of twelve skills which the graduates desired to learn for their current job and ranked from 1 to 12. The results show that a majority of the graduates participating in the research wished to have more skills to undertake their current job duties. The three items of the list selected most were “Planning”, “Organizing the implementation of the plan” and “Communication” with over 92%. This indicates that most of the graduates really need these skills for their job.

“I am an engineer in Forestry major. [...] If I work in the forest, everything will be okay. However, I am working in the office of Forestry Department, so I need a lot of soft skills to carry out my job duties. [...] You know, working with the technical work is easy, because less or more we have been trained. While we work as a secretary or an officer, we need lots of soft skills.” (Mr F2, an engineer in Forestry).

“I have been working as an engineer for the private company for 6 years. [...] I have two main duties in the company, [...] one is a technical expert for processing food package, and another one is in Department of Marketing. [...] so my work requires both technical and soft skills. But I think when I was at university, learning the soft skills in curriculum were not sufficient for my job.” (Ms. FT1, an engineer in Food Technology).

Table 5. Graduates' desire for the soft skills in the current job

	Soft skills	N	%	Ranking
1	Creative thinking	66	25.2	12
2	Understanding the goals of the job	171	65.3	7
3	Writing report	129	49.2	10
4	Executive and organization of work	230	87.8	4
5	Team work	206	78.6	5
6	Analyzing and evaluate the information	171	65.3	6
7	Communication	241	92.0	3
8	Independently work	131	50.0	9
9	Data collection	119	45.4	11
10	Presentation	158	60.3	8
11	Planning	246	93.9	1
12	Organizing the implementation of the plan	245	93.5	2

Similarly, Table 5 shows that 9 skills out of 12 items were required to learn more to meet the requirement of the job (over 50%). This may be the fact of demands about the soft skills which graduates are in need, because they have experienced in the real works. In other words, nobody knows exactly what skills they need rather than those have experienced. The findings in the study are deal with the suggestions of Williams (2015) and White (2013) relating to training soft skills for students as relevant employability skills. It is noticeable that some of soft skills which may be absent from the curriculum or the teaching method do not fit with the curriculum as required. It is also implied that students need equipping and training some of the specific skills in order to meet the requirement from the labour market and the practice of job positions. These results recommend that the universities or the institutions should consider how to impart these into the curriculum in the future.

4. Conclusion and recommendation

The findings in this study provide both quantitative and qualitative data as a mixed methodology that reflect the graduates' level of job satisfaction and their desires of soft skills for the job positions. Based on the results, conclusions can be drawn that a majority of the

graduates satisfied with their job. However, there were some differences of job satisfaction among the graduates in different trained majors. The graduates who worked in the suitable majors as trained seem to feel the trained knowledge and skills more useful than those worked in the unsuitable fields. This suggests that the needs of training soft skills, and the combination between the curriculum and teaching method should be done in order to supply students more necessary skills. Additionally, the graduates also had the high demands of training soft skills to support their current job. This means that the impartation of soft skills in the curriculum and teaching these skills should be drawn more attention.

To enhance the quality of human resource training for the labour market, the educators should learn that awareness about the importance of soft skills and the consequences of shortcomings are important for students. The lack of soft skills can cause graduates many obstacles on seeking a job and taking part in the job market. Therefore, students should be motivated to be trained in soft skills in latest training methods to broaden their horizon. Although the curriculum is overloaded with technical syllabus, making hard to add soft skills on, the best way is to incorporate soft skills training along with other subjects in the academics.

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**SỰ HÀI LÒNG CÔNG VIỆC CỦA SINH VIÊN ĐÃ TỐT NGHIỆP
DỰA TRÊN KIẾN THỨC VÀ KỸ NĂNG MỀM ĐƯỢC ĐÀO TẠO:
MỘT NGHIÊN CỨU TÌNH HUỐNG TẠI ĐẠI HỌC NÔNG LÂM – PHÂN HIỆU GIA LAI**

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TÓM TẮT

Mục đích của nghiên cứu này nhằm xác định mức độ hài lòng trong công việc của sinh viên đã tốt nghiệp dựa trên kiến thức và kỹ năng được đào tạo cũng như tìm hiểu những kỹ năng mềm mà sinh viên cần. Phương pháp hỗn hợp được sử dụng thông qua tiếp cận định lượng và định tính. Dữ liệu định tính được sử dụng để giải thích cho dữ liệu số. Kết quả cho thấy hầu hết sinh viên đã tốt nghiệp hài lòng với công việc hiện tại mặc dù có một số ý kiến khác nhau về kiến thức và kỹ năng đã được học. Kết quả tự đánh giá về kiến thức và kỹ năng được đào tạo chỉ ra rằng phần lớn sinh viên tốt nghiệp ngành Nông học, Lâm nghiệp, Công nghệ thực phẩm và Kế toán đều thấy hữu ích, trong khi những người tốt nghiệp chuyên ngành khác cho rằng không hữu ích. Bên cạnh đó, sinh viên cũng mong muốn được đào tạo thêm kỹ năng mềm cho công việc hiện tại.

Từ khóa: chương trình giảng dạy; sự hài lòng công việc; kiến thức; thị trường lao động; kỹ năng mềm