

WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING CURRICULUM: AN EFFECTIVE DESIGN TO ENHANCE GRADUATE EMPLOYMENT RATE IN VIETNAM

Quy H. Nguyen

University of Foreign Language Studies, The University of Danang; nhquy@ufl.udn.vn

Abstract - Universities are improving quality of education to attract more students. Students will choose to study at a university that not only equips them with good knowledge of disciplines but also with skills to work in the workplace. Ministry of Education and Training of Vietnam requires universities to conduct a survey about employment rate of graduates within 12 months of graduation. The graduate employment rate of a university cognitively reflects the teaching quality of the institution as well as its reputation. This puts pressures on Vietnamese universities to apply strategies to improve student learning outcomes and prepare them to become work-ready employees. However, there are gaps between what students learn at universities and what they are expected to perform at work. Currently, many graduates do not meet the demands of enterprises and become unemployed after graduation. Therefore, a university-enterprise partnership in the implementation of work-integrated learning (WIL) curriculum is necessary. WIL is a course focusing on the integration of disciplinary knowledge and workplace practice. The paper suggests the need to design WIL into university curriculum in Vietnam although it has some challenges. The paper also informs university leaders, policy makers, and employers in Vietnam about the importance of WIL.

Key words - work-integrated learning; graduate employment; employability skills; graduate attributes; curriculum

1. Introduction

1.1. Social and Cultural Context of University-Enterprise Partnerships in Vietnam

In a knowledge-based economy and society of the 21st century, education and training plays an important role in the development of all countries. The missions of Higher Education system and universities are greatly emphasized. Obviously, university stakeholders such as employers around the world express their growing concern about teaching and learning performance of universities in terms of learning outcomes of students. This gives pressures to universities as they are expected to develop not only theoretical knowledge, technical skills but also generic skills of students. Generic skills are used to refer to graduate, professional, transferable, work ready employability. There is no exception in the context of Vietnam.

Many employers across the country have expressed their concerns regarding gaps in graduate skills. They require graduates to have a certain level of language proficiency (especially English) and other generic skills such as good communication skills, teamwork and personal skills, critical thinking, presentation or decision-making. Most of them perceive that Vietnamese students have a good knowledge base but lack the ability to intelligently apply theoretical knowledge to the work setting. In practice, Vietnamese enterprises not only invest little time and effort in shaping the curriculum or processes for learning of students but also have little care about the learning processes and products of universities. However, they often place great emphasis on the outcomes of student learning and even complain about the quality of teaching

and training of the universities. Graduates are often complained to lack disciplinary knowledge, foreign languages, and generic employability skills (VL, 2016; Vuong, 2017).

Not only employers, Vietnamese graduates admit that they are not sufficiently provided generic skills at the universities. Students often complain that they have few chances or activities to develop skills and practical knowledge. As employability skills are under-developed, the professional preparation for future career of students attracts much attention from students, their parents, employers, and society. The under -preparation for graduates in terms of professional knowledge and the soft skills required at the workplace brings about disadvantages for Vietnamese graduates in the international market. While many foreign companies rate teamwork, initiative and communication skills as important skills at work, these are usually the weak capabilities of Vietnamese graduates. This problem is a challenge for Vietnamese graduates in the international labour market where they are equally expected to perform the same work skills as graduates of other developed countries to be successfully recruited. There are reflections from students that they must take some compulsory courses that do not directly relate to their disciplines at the expense of critical thinking and other skills expected by employers. Facing skill shortage, it is very difficult for Vietnamese graduates to integrate into the international labour market. Therefore, an increased rate of graduate unemployment is a result of this problem.

1.2. Graduate Unemployment Rate in Vietnam

According to statistics of the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs of Vietnam, in the fourth quarter of 2016, some 471,000 graduates failed to find a job in their chosen field (Vietnamnet, 2017). One of the popular reasons for this high unemployment rate is that graduates do not meet the demands of the workplaces. Nguyen (2017) reported the opinion of a 25-year-old unemployed graduate that students only received heavy theoretical training. The statement of the above-mentioned student is like the previous observation of Professor Nguyễn Minh Thuyết who is a legislator and Head of the Committee of Culture, Education, and Youth of Vietnam National Assembly. According to Professor Thuyet, the training of impractical subjects in universities should be reduced. However, the progress is still very slow and not much has been done. Consequently, “unemployment among college graduates is the highest in the nation” (Nguyen, 2017, p.1). According to that report, universities in Vietnam have been failing to prepare graduates for higher-level employment. While Vietnam’s economy needs a more highly qualified workforce, such a high rate

of unemployment among university graduates slows down the development of the country.

Accordingly, T. Nguyen (2016) reported the opinion of Emanuela di Gropello, an economics expert in the human development department of the World Bank's East Asia and Pacific region: "Higher education in Vietnam has made significant progress. However, it still needs improvement in training and providing students with soft skills and in cooperating with research institutes and especially workplaces." Also, "90% of Vietnamese graduates do not possess the soft skills necessary for work and that this is one of the most important reasons why every year more than 400,000 university graduates fail to get a job" (opinion of Mr. Tran Trong Thanh, chairman of one of the biggest companies in Vietnam, Vinapo Inc cited in T. Nguyen, 2016).

1.3. An Emergence of Changes in the Changing World of Higher Education

In the context of Vietnam where the number of unemployed graduates is increasing, the pressures that students, their parents, and society put on universities are overwhelming. Although universities are becoming more conscious of the above-mentioned needs of enterprises, they are not able to meet the demands of enterprises because enterprises are traditionally passive partners in the process of education and training of universities. In the new context of the competitive markets, enterprises must become active partners of universities. Their collaboration and contribution to universities are considered as an investment in the universities in which they will get a return in terms of skilled workforces.

According to the Law on Higher Education 2012 of Vietnam, all universities must be accredited by 2020. This strategic plan is not only to ensure the institutional quality but also to help universities approach the international standards of higher education. Being accredited institutions, universities have more responsibility to society in terms of authority, power, and accountability over the contents of teaching and learning. More importantly, the outcomes of student learning in terms of graduate attributes should meet the national academic standards and even international ones to improve the employment rate of graduates.

2. Work-Integrated Learning Curriculum

2.1. Work-Integrated Learning

Work-integrated learning (WIL) is a curriculum design in which students combine theory at universities and practice at the workplaces that are relevant to their training programs and future career. More specifically, "WIL is a curriculum strategy that incorporates high-authenticity real-world experiences into the curriculum" (Smith & Worsfold, 2014, p. 1070). Similarly, Jackson (2015) defines WIL as the practice of combining traditional academic study, or formal learning, with student exposure to the world-of-work in their chosen profession, has a core aim of better preparing undergraduates for entry into the workforce.

As a strategy of placing students in real workplaces or highly authentic simulated environments and training

workplaces, WIL is widely used to help students. In this practice-based approach of teaching programs, course content is fused with work tasks.

Although WIL is not a new term in the world of higher education, this jargon does not seem to be familiar with many universities in Vietnam. In Vietnam, final-year students often have a period of practice at workplaces to experience work and to learn professional practices. But that is not enough to develop their professional skills. Therefore, the development of WIL programs is necessary to show the responsibility of universities to society in terms of responding to the needs of society. This is a very important mission of universities.

There are several forms of WIL which encourage students to experience authentic work practices, learn and practice applying skills and knowledge in a real-world context such as work placements, internships, field work, sandwich course degrees, or even service learning (Jackson, 2015). For these collaborative programs, regular, intensive contact sessions are envisaged, typically held onsite at the company premises on a regular basis of schedules.

2.2. Benefits of Work-Integrated Learning

It cannot be denied that the implementation of WIL in the university curriculum brings many benefits not only to students but also to enterprises. Actually, when students focus their attention on contextual and tacit areas of workplace practice, their experiences contribute to the development of employability skills (Francis, 2008). By studying at the workplaces, students can explore their understanding of what they have been taught in class in different ways. Furthermore, involving in a variety of employability skills such as team working, problem-solving, communication information literacy and professionalism accelerates maturity and enhances motivation and accountability in students (Mandilaras, 2004). Previous studies have found that students who have participated in WIL programs become critical and rational graduates. They have good ability to function effectively in the modern workplace as well as their career development. These advantages of WIL improve employment prospects of graduates (Freudenberg, Brimble, & Cameron, 2011; Jackson, 2015).

Through WIL programs, students' confidence in their workplace capabilities is built as WIL provides students with a better understanding of the nature and standard of industry required skills (Billet, 2011). Having work experiences, WIL results in student innovation which then drives work productivity of graduates in the future.

For the benefits of enterprises, students participate in WIL programs are required to demonstrate an understanding of new knowledge and apply that knowledge in ways that offer benefits to the enterprises in which students are practicing. Smith (2012) mentioned that WIL offers a better return on investment to students; meets employer demands for work-ready graduates, and provides employers with skilled employees at low cost.

2.3. Work-Integrated Learning in Australian Universities

In Australia, since 2000s, many universities have

designed WIL courses and successfully implemented them to better support student learning. The country has established an organization named Business, Industry, and Higher Education Collaboration Council (BIHECC) oversees the connections between universities and enterprises. According to McLennan and Keating (2008), such establishment of BIHECC reflects an appreciation and recognition of the role of enterprises as a unique and valuable learning environment for students.

In its summary report published in 2015, BIHEC emphasized the important role of higher education in creating a strong and sustainable future of Australia. Particularly, an increased collaboration and partnerships between education, research, business and government is crucial to generate and act on ideas which aim to ensure prosperity and economic growth of Australia.

Recognizing the importance of this relationship, businesses in Australia have been trying their best effort to establish relationships with universities to make a knowledge transfer and research development. The Australian Industry Group reports that it has good relationships with universities and the relationship is getting better (Howard, 2016). The results of interviews with Australian businesses reveal that most enterprises that are working with universities do not want to dictate curriculum or research but they want universities to take into account the challenges that they are facing. In other words, Australian enterprises do not see universities as contractors but as organizations interested in their business. Successful collaborations are not dictated by one side or the other but are based on discussion, engagement and, above all, trust.

In Australia, the following five organizations have closely worked together to promote WIL programs: Universities of Australia, Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Business Council of Australia, The Australian Industry Group, and Australian Collaborative Education Network Limited. These organizations believe that strong partnerships between universities, industry, academics and the community improve the quality and capacity of Australian education systems and the innovation, breadth and competitiveness of the Australian economy as well as shape future prospects of Australia (ACEN, 2015). Upon this fundamental awareness, all universities in Australia have a wide range of WIL courses. WIL courses' components enable students to put their knowledge into practice in real settings. Students have more opportunities to contact and work with a wide range of employers. The synergistic collaborations are crucial to help students meet the challenges and opportunities required by rapidly changing global realities at the workplace.

3. Lessons for Vietnam

3.1. University-Enterprise Training Partnership

In Vietnam, most students spend much time to study theory at universities and do not have many chances to practice at the workplaces. The awareness of educational leaders of Vietnam about the importance of practice at the workplace has been increased in recent years. Some universities have established relationships and partnerships

with enterprises and organizations to get support for students. Such approach is good but not enough and effective. The most important thing is to develop or design curriculum which are integrated in student learning.

To effectively implement WIL in university curricula, the real partnership between universities and enterprises is crucial. Being considered an innovative model of teaching and learning at universities, WIL requires much effort and contribution of enterprises. Universities and enterprises need to work closely and appropriately to design and facilitate learning in the workplace.

While university academics and students have theoretical knowledge of the disciplines, people at the workplaces have practical expertise that significantly contributes to the productivity of WIL programs. In this partnership with enterprises, academics are no longer the dominant artists at universities and business workers are no longer the dominant ones at the workplaces. Both academics and enterprise staffs share responsibilities and roles in the development and teaching of WIL programs.

In WIL courses, students are normally required to complete an industry placement or an internship (paid or unpaid) as part of the course. This is particularly common in hands-on fields such as hospitality, engineering, IT and communications. For example, in Australia, industry placements may be offered in both degrees and Vocational Education and Training (VET) qualifications. The courses' length varies from a few weeks up to a year. Even if some university degrees do not offer a compulsory or optional industry placement option, students may be able to organize one independently with industry.

The partnership between universities and enterprises confronts with challenges facing our world. How university graduates can apply their knowledge to real challenges of the world motivates universities in this partnership. According to Smith (2012), when universities develop WIL courses in the curriculum, universities show their responsibilities to society and enterprises in producing work-ready graduates. Universities value the contribution and cooperation of stakeholders in creating a sustainable growth for the universities. Without such cooperation, it is difficult for universities to fulfill their missions in this highly competitive market of Higher Education.

3.2. Challenges of Work-Integrated Learning Implementation

Although the university and enterprise partnership has many benefits for both universities and enterprises, it has some difficulties in the implementation. For example, Choy and Delahaye (2011) indicate that the development of a WIL curriculum relies on genuine partnerships between the universities and organizations. These types of partnerships require lengthy processes of negotiating the curriculum and pedagogies to support learning based on the workplace. Such requirement presents challenges both in its formation and implementation for organizations due to limited resources of universities and enterprises, and large and diverse student cohorts. Furthermore, within the universities, the pressures of 'publish or perish' draws

academics' attention away from teaching and learning activities (Freudenberg et al., 2011).

Also, in this partnership, there is a transition in the role of academics, from traditionally pure teaching roles to the different ones. For example, academics are expected to understand the social-cultural environment of the workplace and to develop knowledge about the enterprise's business (Choy & Delahaye, 2011). The design of learning experiences for students requires a substantial involvement of both academics and the workplace's managers. It is critical that enterprises consider them as important stakeholders of universities. Their partnership with universities not only brings benefits for universities and students but also has good outcomes for the enterprises.

From the view of pedagogy, Billet (2011) raises the need for strong pedagogic practices of WIL design, rather than resources and infrastructures. It is necessary that enterprises as the host organizations provide adequate access to academics who work as supervisors of students at the workplaces, offer learning support and induction processes for students. Also, enterprises should clearly establish, design, and articulate their expectations of graduates in WIL programs to create authentic learning activities that are well aligned to learning objectives, expected learning outcomes, and course assessment. These factors should be well integrated together, so that students can make links between their learning in the different contexts (classroom, on-campus, off-campus). Such experiences offer students better understanding of what is expected for effective practice of targeted skills and knowledge at the workplace.

4. Implications for a Successful Implementation of Work-Integrated Learning in Vietnam

4.1. For Universities in Vietnam

The development of WIL is a strategic response of universities to the demands of enterprises and society. It is the responsibility of universities to find measures that improve employability skills of graduates. If the alumni's career is good, the universities will be able to attract more students as well as funding, sponsorship from different industries.

During the implementation, WIL content should be systematically integrated into curriculum of university degrees. It might be a formal course or a professional program assisting theoretical studies of students. Researchers have found that students who involve in WIL demonstrate significant gains in both disciplinary knowledge and generic skills compared to those who do not participate in WIL (Choy & Delahaye, 2011; Smith, 2012). These results highlight the potential gain for universities from investing the necessary resources to develop WIL opportunities for their students to assist learning their outcomes. Therefore, universities should be more active to establish partnership with different industries to design WIL programs for their students.

Besides, the universities should discuss with enterprises to build more makerspaces within the universities or at the workplace. These places will function as good learning environment for students. The recent

opening of the Maker Innovation Space at the University of Danang, Vietnam is an evidence for this necessity of the partnership between universities and enterprises. Through such space, students of the University of Danang have good opportunities to discuss with their friends, apply knowledge to the real context, identify problems, learn and apply skills, and share experiences with others.

4.2. For Enterprises in Vietnam

Choy and Delahaye (2011) emphasize the importance of creating a long-term partnership between universities and businesses. Senior management of organizations should be highly and proactively involving in it. Each organization should involve its partners in its strategies for development, and not merely in technical tasks or short-term activities. Facilitating this partnership, enterprises need to create the authenticity of WIL from which students can engage in a real environment, observe, interact and respond to the complexities of real practice. Such requirement indicates a fact that the role of enterprises is very important in making WIL programs effective.

4.3. For Government of Vietnam

The government of Vietnam and ministries such as Ministry of Education and Training and the others should support the development of WIL programs to connect undergraduate students with businesses to strengthen the development of graduate employability. Without the above suggested support of the government and relevant ministries, the development of students' employability skills and ties with business becomes very difficult.

5. Conclusions

WIL is an umbrella term for a range of approaches and strategies that integrate theories with practices within a purposefully designed curriculum. The implementation of WIL provides students with valuable practical experiences related to their courses, demonstrates required characteristics as taking initiative and being proactive at the workplaces. WIL also assists a smooth transition from the university to the workplace as well as productivity outcomes for the enterprises and the whole economy. The implementation of WIL in university curriculum is a response to labor and skill challenges of industry. It is considered not only a pathway for work-readiness in professional education but also one of the key opportunities for improving the work-readiness of all graduates. For those purposes to be achieved, the following fundamental dimensions need to be well considered: authenticity of the program, integrated learning supports both at university and the workplace, and the alignment of teaching and learning activities and assessments with integrative learning outcomes. Cates and Jones (1999) emphasize the consideration of skill transfer in the design of assessments and activities as well as the use of formative assessment in WIL courses.

Potentially, the implementation of WIL would serve the needs of universities, graduates, and enterprises. This collaborative design is only successful when all three parties in this triangle highly and actively demonstrate their commitment to the activities such as teaching of university academics, learning of students, and instruction of the

workplace's staff. In this partnership, academic knowledge should be indeed integrated into the workplaces, so it takes much time and effort for every involved parties. Through the partnership, academics gradually learn about the complexities of the enterprises, the students as worker-learners in the WIL courses understand the theories and ascertained ways to apply such knowledge to the specific context of the workplaces.

We believe that WIL is an effective approach/design that can improve employability skills of graduates. In a broader sense, the partnership between universities and enterprises will help to increase workplace participation and productivity and to reduce the unemployment record. In the rising global competition nowadays, WIL enhances national productivity of Vietnam. As human capital underpins the future capability and competitiveness of all countries, the extent to which Vietnam can adapt, develop, and deliver a quality of life compared with that of other developed countries in the world, will depend in large part on how well Vietnamese universities and enterprises collaborate.

REFERENCES

- [1] ACEN. (2015). National Strategy On Work Integrated Learning In University Education. Retrieved from <http://cdn1.acen.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/National-WIL-Strategy-in-university-education-032015.pdf>
- [2] BIHECC. (2007). *Graduate employability skills*. Retrieved from Canberra: <https://aces.shu.ac.uk/employability/resources/GraduateEmployabilitySkillsFINALREPORT1.pdf>
- [3] Billet, S. (2011). *Curriculum and pedagogical bases for effectively integrating practice-based experiences*. Strawberry Hills, NSW: Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC).
- [4] Cates, C., & Jones, P. (1999). *Learning outcomes: The educational value of cooperative education*. Columbia, MD: Cooperative Education Association.
- [5] Choy, S., & Delahaye, B. (2011). Partnerships between universities and workplaces: some challenges for work-integrated learning. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 33(2), 157-172. doi:10.1080/0158037X.2010.546079
- [6] Francis, H., and J. Cowan. (2008). Fostering an action-reflection dynamic amongst student practitioners. *Journal of European Industrial Training*, 32(5), 336-346.
- [7] Freudenberg, B., Brimble, M., & Cameron, C. (2011). WIL and Generic Skill Development: The Development of Business Students' Generic Skills Through Work-Integrated Learning. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education*, 12(2), 79-93.
- [8] Howard, J. (2016). Business insight into more successful collaboration. Retrieved from <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/higher-education/opinion/business-insight-into-more-successful-collaboration/news-story/495cf2267d60eb0249db99cb52c7458e>
- [9] Jackson, D. (2015). Employability skill development in work-integrated learning: Barriers and best practice. *Studies in Higher Education*, 40(2), 350-367. doi:10.1080/03075079.2013.842221
- [10] Mandilaras, A. (2004). Industrial placement and degree performance: Evidence from a British higher institution. *International Review of Economics Education*, 3(1), 39-51.
- [11] McLennan, B., & Keating, S. (2008). *Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) In Australian Universities: The Challenges Of Mainstreaming WIL*. Paper presented at the ALTC NAGCAS National Symposium, Melbourne.
- [12] Nguyen, D. T. U. (2017). In Vietnam, the best education can lead to worse job prospects. Retrieved from <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-08-20/in-vietnam-the-best-education-can-lead-to-worse-job-prospects>
- [13] Nguyen, T. (2016). Employers lament lack of soft skills in graduates. *University World News*, (397). Retrieved from
- [14] Smith, C. (2012). Evaluating the quality of work-integrated learning curricula: a comprehensive framework. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 31(2), 247-262. doi:10.1080/07294360.2011.558072
- [15] Smith, C., & Worsfold, K. (2014). WIL curriculum design and student learning: a structural model of their effects on student satisfaction. *Studies in Higher Education*, 39(6), 1070-1084. doi:10.1080/03075079.2013.777407
- [16] Vietnamnet. (2017). Graduate unemployment rises. Retrieved from <http://english.vietnamnet.vn/fms/society/175579/graduate-unemployment-rises.html>
- [17] VL. (2016, 12/10). Sinh viên mới ra trường thất nghiệp do đâu? *Lao động*. Retrieved from <https://laodong.vn/ky-nang-mem/sinh-vien-moi-ra-truong-that-nghiep-do-dau-600529.bld>
- [18] Vương, T. (2017, 28/4). Thiếu ngoại ngữ và kỹ năng là lý do sinh viên ra trường thất nghiệp? *Giáo dục Thời đại*. Retrieved from <http://giaoduc.net.vn/Giao-duc-24h/Thieu-ngoai-ngu-va-ky-nang-la-ly-do-sinh-vien-ra-truong-that-nghiep-post176178.gd>

(The Board of Editors received the paper on 12/10/2017, its review was completed on 14/12/2017)