



# Game of blames: Higher education stakeholders' perceptions of causes of Vietnamese graduates' skills gap

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## ABSTRACT

This article reports a mixed-method study that explored higher education stakeholders' perceptions of the causes of Vietnamese graduates' skills gap. Email interviews with 38 stakeholders and a survey with the participation of 475 final-year students, graduates, academics, and employers revealed 27 factors perceived to have caused the skills gap. Among them, factors related to impractical university curriculum, constant changes in the labor market, and students' passivity in planning and developing their career were perceived to be the most influential. The study also revealed that stakeholder groups were blaming each other for who should be responsible for the skills gap.

## 1. Introduction

Studies conducted in many countries consistently show that there is a huge skills gap in tertiary education graduates (Association for Talent Development, 2015; Bodewig et al., 2014; Lindorff, 2011; UK Commission for Employment and Skills, 2016). Generally, research in this area uses employers' perspectives and ascribes the skills gap to poor quality tertiary education, and calls on tertiary education institutions to improve the quality of teaching and training activities to better prepare a skilled labor workforce. However, it is unjust to blame the skills gap on tertiary education institutions alone, because graduates' skill levels appear to be associated with several factors instead of solely with tertiary education. Therefore, further studies must be conducted with the participation of different groups of stakeholders to confirm our understanding about the causes of the skills gap.

In Vietnam, the skills gap of tertiary education graduates has recently been detected, which is forecast to affect socio-economic development of the country (Bodewig et al., 2014; Manpower Group, 2011). In particular, the skills gap of higher education (HE) graduates appears to raise the concerns of many stakeholders, because Vietnam is now in need of a skilled HE workforce to sustain its socio-economic growth as well as competition in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and internationally (Bodewig et al., 2014; Manpower Group, 2011; Menon and Melendez, 2015). Therefore, in 2016–2017, a study was conducted to explore HE stakeholders' perceptions of the causes of the skills gap in Vietnamese HE graduates. This exploratory

study will partially address the issue of what or who should be principally responsible for the graduates' skills gap. Recent socio-economic changes as well as unprecedented educational reforms in Vietnam also add some unique characteristics to the research issue. Overall, the study has implications for improving students' skills development programs in higher education, which in turn contributes to socio-economic development of a country.

## 2. Literature review

Researchers often employ different perspectives to examine the skills gap in the workforce. From an organizational development perspective, a skills gap is viewed as a significant gap between an organization's current capabilities and the skills that it needs to achieve its goals (Association for Talent Development, 2015). From a labor supply/demand perspective, it occurs when the demand for workers for an occupation is greater than the supply of workers who are qualified, available, and willing to work under existing market conditions (Shah and Burke, 2003). From an evaluation perspective, a skills gap exists when an employee is deemed by their employer to not be fully proficient or able to do their job to the required level (UK Commission for Employment and Skills, 2016). In this article, the evaluation perspective will be used to explore HE stakeholders' perceptions of the causes of the skills gap of Vietnamese HE graduates, not only at the point of graduation, but also later, when they have already entered the workplace.

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Recent studies, mostly using employers' perspectives, consistently report that tertiary education graduates are increasingly unable to perform work duties as effectively as expected. For example, the [Association for Talent Development \(2015\)](#) reported that employees in the United States lacked soft skills more than technical skills, especially communication, managerial and supervisory, teamwork and problem-solving, leadership, and project management skills. A study conducted in Australia by [Lindorff \(2011\)](#) with the participation of approximately 10,000 individuals involved in management of different firms also suggested a severe lack of skills in employees. The study found that in participants' experience, even if employees possessed a high level of basic skills, they had not attained a sufficient level of leadership, management, and profession-specific skills ([Lindorff, 2011](#)). Similarly, involving 91,000 employers in their study, the [UK Commission for Employment and Skills \(2016\)](#) reported that about 1.4 million staff were lacking skills necessary to perform their jobs. The survey found that staff members commonly lacked people and personal skills related to workload management and teamwork. The survey also found a shortage of technical and profession-specific skills in staff, especially complex analytical skills. Generally, studies of this type critique recent graduates' lack of skills and call for universities to improve the quality of their teaching and training activities so that they can produce a better labor workforce.

In search of reasons behind such a skills gap, existing literature provides concrete evidence suggesting that tertiary education institutions are responsible for the shortage of skills in their graduates ([Sin and Amaral, 2017](#)). Despite recent efforts to identify and embed relevant employability skills into the existing curricula, tertiary education institutions' curricula are often found to fail to capture the need for skills in the labor market so that they can develop relevant employability skills for students (e.g., [Harman et al., 2010](#)). Consequently, content knowledge and skills imparted to students are of little use and applicability in real-life work contexts ([Harman et al., 2010](#)). Similarly, pedagogical practices are also found to cause the graduate skills gap. Although student-centered approaches have been found to be conducive to skills development, many academics are found not to engage with teaching employability skills using this approach due to numerous reasons, including their lack of expertise and confidence in using these approaches ([de la Harpe and David, 2012](#)). Work-integrated learning is used to help students to develop relevant work skills; however, a lack of collaboration between tertiary education institutions and industries ([Tran, 2015](#)), inexperience of the interns, and a lack of support of mentors can hinder its use ([Jackson, 2015](#)). Accompanying teaching, if assessment activities are not used effectively with quality constructive feedback, students would not be able to recognize and improve their weaknesses to develop a sufficient level of competency ([Gibb, 2014](#)). Many institutions have also organized career education services or extra-curricular activities to develop employability skills for students, but there is a lack of resources, leadership, and student engagement ([Al-Ansari et al., 2016; Tran, 2015](#)). In short, several factors have been found to inhibit the effectiveness of skills development programs in tertiary education institutions, including a lack of leadership and management, inadequate teacher capacity, student disengagement, inadequate resources, and a lack of support from external stakeholders ([de la Harpe and David, 2012; Jackson, 2015; Moote and Archer, 2017; Tran, 2015](#)).

However, it is unjust to place total blame for the graduates' skills on tertiary education institutions. Firstly, the level of skills that each graduate or employee possesses depends on their effort in developing relevant skill sets for their profession. For students, during the time at school and university, they should understand the requirements and nature of a targeted profession and invest effort to develop relevant employability skills accordingly ([Jackson, 2016](#)). Unfortunately, many students only study for degrees rather than engaging with activities available at the university for real competence ([Moote and Archer, 2017; Tran, 2015](#)). In addition, for employees, the knowledge and skills

that they acquire during their tertiary education can also serve as the foundation for them to gain entry to a profession. They should actively participate in work tasks to polish their professional and soft skills, identify their skills gap in order to fill it, and develop their professional identity. All of these have been evidenced in studies related to organizational learning theories, including the well-known 'community of practice' ([Wenger, 2010](#)), where employees socially interact with each other, fully assimilate into a professional community to develop existing skills, and acquire new skills in order to better perform their professional duties. Even when employees actively seek learning opportunities at work, it largely depends on an employer's strategy for staff development. For example, in her study, [Lindorff \(2011\)](#) found that employers hesitated to further develop skills for their employees due to financial constraints or their fear of these employees transferring to a different company.

Moreover, recent changes in the labor market have contributed to widening the skills gap in graduates. Expansion of tertiary education has resulted in an overabundant supply of graduates, which causes unemployment at their education level (e.g., [Li et al., 2014](#)); therefore, many of them are forced to accept jobs that traditionally do not require a postsecondary education ([James et al., 2013](#)). In this situation, these graduates may lack the skills necessary to perform the accepted job and simultaneously cannot deploy certain skills that they have been trained for in their degree specialization. Constant changes in the labor market, the appearance of new jobs, and technological development also generate demands for new skills that graduates may not be able to quickly develop. For example, more and more information technologies and applications are being used at work, demanding employees to be able to learn how to use them effectively; those who cannot will obviously become under-skilled employees and may face the risk of unemployment ([Royle and Laing, 2014](#)).

In conclusion, the skills gap may result from an array of factors, both from the supply side and demand side as well as contextual factors. However, there is a lack of studies that comprehensively examine the causes of the skills gap with the participation of principal HE stakeholders. If it is conducted, the study will produce a better insight in this regard and have implications for education and training practice in tertiary education, which in turn will contribute to improving socio-economic development.

### 3. The present study

#### 3.1. Context of the study

Vietnam, a middle-income developing country located in Southeast Asia, has recently emerged as one of the countries with the fastest GDP per capita growth rate in the world, averaging 6.4% per year in the 2000s ([World Bank, 2017](#)). The so-called socialist-oriented market economy rescued the country from an imminent collapse and has helped it to achieve remarkable socio-economic achievements: poverty reduced, basic living conditions assured, human rights increased, education equity improved, etc. ([World Bank, 2017](#)).

The HE system, which forms part of the tertiary education system, has lately been expanded and reformed to produce an adequate number of skilled workers to meet socio-economic objectives ([Harman et al., 2010](#)). However, recent studies have detected a large skills gap among university graduates ([Bodewig et al., 2014; Manpower Group, 2011](#)). For example, Nhan Viet Management Group reported that 94% of employees in 500 businesses in Ho Chi Minh City needed further training organized by their employers prior to the commencement of work. The employers stated that 61% of their employees needed training in soft skills, 53% in leadership skills, and 92% in specialized or technical skills ([Ha, 2011](#)). A study by the [ManpowerGroup \(2011\)](#) also revealed that employers were not satisfied with the skills possessed by workers in food processing, textiles, healthcare, construction, transportation and logistics, and others.

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