

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

Solutions for Improving Students' Competences under Alumni's Perspectives at Vietnam National University, Hanoi, Vietnam

Dr. Hong Cong Sai

Deputy Director, Institute for Education Quality Assurance, Hanoi, Vietnam

Director, Center for Testing, Vietnam National University, Hanoi, Vietnam

Anh Thi Duong

Ph.D. Student, University of Sydney, Australia

Abstract:

This study focuses on enhancing the quality of graduates by surveying graduates' satisfaction and perspectives on solutions to improve the curriculum and quality of training programs at Vietnam National University Hanoi (VNU HN). With that aim, the study has conducted survey for 934 graduates from 10 majors which are chosen randomly from 10 member universities and schools of VNU HN. Data was collected by questionnaire and then analyzed by statistical programs. Study results indicate that most of graduates need to take extra training courses to increase the opportunities of employment in which supplementary courses of professional knowledge and skills were the most necessary. By the way, graduates have proposed some solutions to better their training programs to meet the demand of labor market.

Keywords: quality of programs, solutions, students' competencies, graduates' satisfaction and perspectives, VNU HN.

1. Introduction

In the era of information technology and global integration, it requires that university graduates are skilled in the labor force if they are to meet increasing demands of societal development. Education plays an important role in this societal development is reliant upon graduates' competencies so that they have the abilities and skills to deal with real working situations instead of relying on theoretical knowledge. There are many ways to continuously improve the quality of teaching and learning, but Howard and Maxwell (1980) and Hampton (1993) consider the quality of education to be the most important factor in regards to student satisfaction.

According to some researchers, student satisfaction is the students' personal evaluation about their perceptions and experiences of the training programs they undertook (Elliot and Shin, 2002; Elliot and Healy, 2001 in Yusoff et al, 2014). Therefore, gaining feedback on the quality of training programs via surveying students and graduates will help improve the quality of education. Feedback from students allows training institutions to restructure their curriculum to meet learner's demands and control the effectiveness of their services (Elliot and Shin, 2002).

One study conducted by Petruzzellis and Romanazzi (2010) found that the University of Bari, Italy could attract more students when current students highly evaluated the services they were provided. However, Staley and Trinkle (2011) has shown that it is a challenge for the universities to maintain quality and present the added value of their training programs. This study focuses on exploring graduates employment and satisfaction that may contribute to the development of strengths and minimize the weaknesses of current training programs.

1.1. The Context in Vietnam

Employment is a problem concerning not only the graduates but their families, schools and society. It is the desire of not only graduates but undergraduates to acquire a job within the area of their training major. Employment so far has become difficult due to many reasons including an instable business and manufacturing situation, which reduces the demand of the labor force. One reason for the employment difficulties experienced by graduates is the abundance of staff in funded organizations who require increasingly higher levels of qualifications (National Resolution on Fundamental and Comprehensive Innovation of Education, 2013). It is the case that graduates from public or private universities cannot find a job immediately following the completion of a bachelor degree. Another reason is that there are a lot of training institutions with a variety of majors that has resulted in the number of graduates exceeding the labor force demand.

Acquiring a job somewhat relates to many factors such as qualifications, competencies, personalities, attitudes and skills. The fact is that there are a number of candidates applying for a job each year, but only few of them satisfy the requirements from employers. Aforementioned challenges mean that training institutions and learners themselves need to have a new perspective on employment after graduating. The National Education Strategic Development Plan 2011-2020 of Vietnam (2012) has identified the goal of tertiary

education as “Training the creative individuals who have independent critical thinking, responsibility, ethic and skills of career, foreign language, labor discipline, industrial style, job creating and ability of adapting to flexible changes from labor market, etc.” (p.9). However, the National Resolution on Fundamental and Comprehensive Innovation of Education (2013) has indicated the reality that the quality of training and education did not meet the societal demand. Most graduates were unsuccessful in acquiring a well-paid and suitable job. While graduates in some specific majors found employment, others may find it difficult. This is also one of the issues affecting students’ choice of major study prior to applying to study at university. After years of studying and job seeking, some students have accepted work outside their field of expertise. It is not strange in the current economical market for graduates with one major to find work in the area of another major.

The more the value is perceived by students, the more likely they would recommend university programs to others (Lai et al, 2015). The more developed the country, the higher the requirement of qualification, expertise and well trained professional skills. However, a great number of graduates feel pressured to find a job each year. Because curriculums are key stones in educating, assuring the quality of training programs has been a necessary and scientific issue. Every program seeks to achieve the learning goals to meet the demand of socio economic development. The university has paid specific attention to designing the training programs around the orientation of real social development. A program is considered to be effective and efficient if it contains a variety of professional courses, ensures the expected learning outcomes and meets the demand of the labor market.

Therefore, with the aim of bridging the gap between what the students achieved and the services provided, this study is carried out to evaluate the graduates’ employment and the level of satisfaction of employers to propose solutions for improving the training quality. The study took place at Vietnam National University Hanoi and surveyed graduates within 10 years of employment following graduation. The study sought to use feedback from those surveyed to improve and enhance the training quality of programs. Assessment instruments (criteria) for assuring and enhancing the quality of all programs from member universities of VNU HN focus on such issues as the content, learning outcomes, teaching methods, assessment methods, learning journey, the quality of students, supportive activities and survey for stakeholders’ satisfaction and supports for finding employment.

2. Instruments and Sample

A questionnaire was used as a data collection instrument. The questionnaire comprised of three parts: Part 1- Introduction; Part 2- 05 items on personal information of graduates; Part 3- 13 items on graduates’ employment (02 open items)

Study sample included graduates of 10 majors from 6 member universities and schools, in detail: Group 1 consists of 6 majors at high demand from labor market and easy to seek employment including Pharmaceutical, Press and Media, English, Business Administration, Information Technology and Law. Group 2 contains 4 majors of basic science, medium and hard to find employment including Mathematics, Philosophy, Russian and History Teaching.

Random stratification was used to gather the sample for the study. Sample size comprised of 934 graduates within 10 years of employment from VNU HN. Result of statistical descriptive analysis indicates the ratio of majors is rather equal (Graph1).

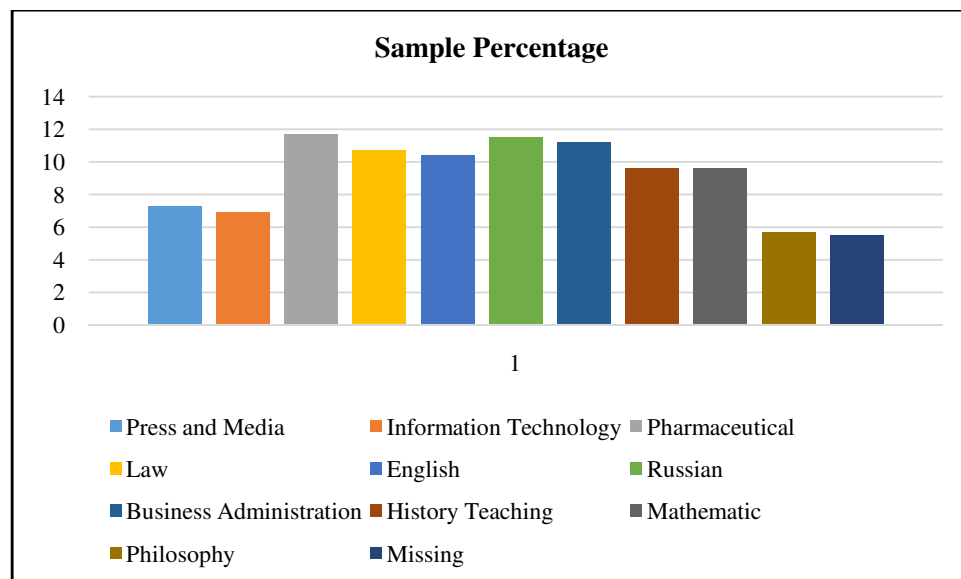


Figure 1: Statistics of sample

It can be concluded that the sample is representative of the total population. Therefore, generalized statements can be implied to specified solutions. Some personal information of graduates such as year of birth, gender, year of graduation and level of degree are presented in table 1.

Variables		Frequency	Percentage (%)
Year of birth	1977 onwards	12	1,3
	1978 - 1982	28	3,0
	1983 - 1987	201	21,6
	1988 - 1992	658	70,4
	Missing	35	3,7
Gender	Male	322	34,5
	Female	588	63,0
	Missing	24	2,5
Level of degree	Pass	47	5,0
	Fair	509	54,5
	Good	320	34,3
	Excellent	42	4,5
	Missing	16	1,7
Year of graduation	1999 onwards	10	1,1
	2000 – 2004	23	2,5
	2005 – 2009	182	19,5
	2010 – 2014	680	72,8
	Missing	39	4,1

Table 1: Sample's features

The table has indicated that:

- In terms of the “year of birth” variable, 70,4% of graduates were born between 1988 and 1992 while more than 25% were born in 1987 onwards.
- In terms of the “gender” variable, 63% of graduates were female while 34,5% were male.
- The “level of graduation” variable demonstrated a fair distribution, with the majority of graduates finishing the course with a fair level of degree. In detail, 54,5% is fair, 38,8% is good and excellent.
- In terms of the “year of graduation” variable, 72,8% graduates finished the course between 2010 and 2014.

In summary, the study sample is representative of the population and can be generalized. There is also fair distribution of majors whereas there is an imbalance among personal features. Most of participants are females born between 1988 and 1992, and they graduated within five years. Also, more than 90% of participants graduated with a fair level of degree. Therefore, graduates with good results will provide actual and valuable feedbacks.

3. Results

3.1. General Feedbacks on Quality of Programs

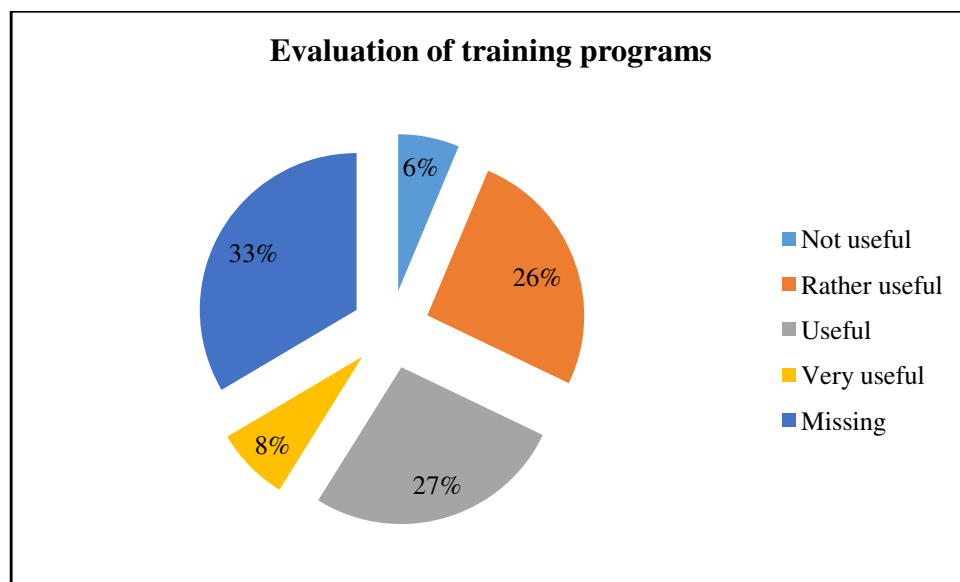


Figure 2: General evaluation of training programs

Figure 2 indicates that the knowledge and skills developed at universities is very useful for current work opportunities for graduates (with more than 60% of graduates in agreement).

Surveying for the need of additional training courses: the results show that 209/631 alumni think that they do not need any additional training courses after graduation, while 418/619 alumni say “yes” for additional training courses in: (1) professional knowledge and skills, (2) information technology, (3) foreign languages. This figure is supported by the fact that employers pay for their employees (i.e. the graduates) to attend additional courses that will enhance their work competence, as presented in Figure 3.

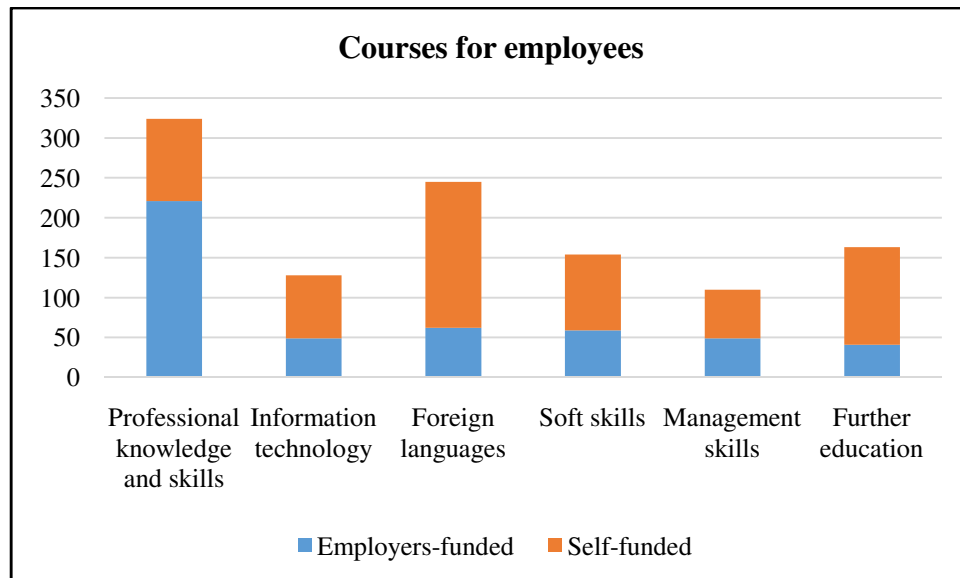


Figure 3: Courses for employees (employer funded and self-funded)

Figures in Figure 3 indicate that most employers pay for their staff to attend courses that will improve their professional knowledge and skills. 221/324 graduates studied additional courses that were funded by their employer while the remaining 103 graduates attended additional training courses at their own expense. In contrast, 75% self-funded courses in foreign languages as opposed to 25% who were employer funded. In terms of courses that enhance information technology and soft skills including managerial skills, there is an equal ratio between courses funded by companies and self-funded. In terms of pursuing post-graduation, 122/163 (75%) of graduates think that they should pursue further education at their own expense unlike the 25% who think they should be employer funded.

These results suggest that employers pay for their employees to attend additional training courses because they require and value a higher level of professional knowledge and skills from their employees. Further the results indicate that training institutions have not met the demand of the program’s curriculums relating to professional knowledge and skills. This requires related educators such as experts, program developers, managers, leaders from faculties who integrate expertise knowledge and skills into the program to satisfy the need of employers.

Moreover, the results also indicate that according to alumni, in order to find a job easily, the department, the faculty and the university must implement some solutions to improve the quality of training programs via the following prioritized solutions:

- (1) The program is adjusted and updated to meet the demand of the labor market
- (2) Employers are involved in the programs development
- (3) Students should be equipped with soft skills to meet society’s requirements
- (4) The universities should cooperate with employers in organizing a work information day
- (5) The time of internship should be increased
- (6) Students’ personal qualities should be enhanced to satisfy the need of the labor market
- (7) Others: providing tutors; laboratory buildings; advancing background knowledge; encouraging actively self-study; increasing the amount of practical experience

Additionally, some argue that the university, faculty and department should provide extra tutorial sessions, build laboratories, increase the background knowledge of students, enhance self-study skills, and increase the time for practical performance. These results are in line with feedbacks from existing students.

In brief, in order to find solutions that will improve the quality of training programs at VNU-HN, we have designed a survey study of graduates from 10 different majors. The findings highlight that all of the 9 suggested solutions are evaluated to be feasible with more than 55% of graduates believing that these solutions should be applied if the set goals are to be achieved. The first priority solution to be implemented is “increasing the time for practical performance” agreed upon by 70% of participants. This figure is supported by the above surveyed results in regards to time allowed for theoretical and practical study in each subject. 68% of participants ranked “developing the supplementary courses of soft skills to satisfy the needs of society” as the second most important solution. According to alumni and existing students, these two solutions should be implemented to improve the quality of all majors and training programs.

3.2. Evaluation by Majors' Characteristics

The following table indicates the useful knowledge and skills for current jobs as highlighted by 62% of alumni with majors in: (1) Information Technology; (2) Russian Linguistics; (3) Law. In contrast, graduates with majors in (1) Philosophy (45,5%); (2) Chemistry (63%); (3) Teacher training of History (65%); (4) Communication and Media (70%) consider provided knowledge and skills to be of less use. It is predicted that faculty and department should take these ideas into consideration to timely adjust and enhance the quality of their training programs.

Training major	Very useful		Useful		Rather useful		Not useful	
	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%
1. Journal and Communication	8	12,5	28	43,8	23	35,9	5	7,8
2. Information Technology	3	4,8	21	33,3	27	42,9	12	19,0
3. Chemistry	2	5,4	17	45,9	15	40,5	3	8,1
4. Law	9	11,7	41	53,2	20	26,0	7	9,1
5. English	0	0,0	19	24,1	54	68,4	6	7,6
6. Russian	2	2,9	22	31,9	34	49,3	11	15,9
7. Business Administration	18	20,5	37	42,0	27	30,7	6	6,8
8. History Teaching	4	11,4	15	42,9	14	40,0	2	5,7
9. Mathematics	4	8,2	27	55,1	11	22,4	7	14,3
10. Philosophy	6	18,2	9	27,3	13	39,4	5	15,2
11. Missing	3	11,1	5	18,5	12	44,4	7	25,9
Total	59	9,5	241	38,8	250	40,3	71	11,4

Table 2: Statistics of usefulness of programs for current jobs as alumni's opinions

Figure 4 presents statistics of courses that students attended to increase the opportunities of finding an employment. As clearly seen from the graph, students with majors in the areas of Law, English and Mathematics took supplementary courses of professional knowledge and skills; soft skills; foreign languages; ability of exploring and using information technology.

This result highlights a major challenge of new graduates. That is a lack of practical work experience which prevents them from demonstrating their abilities to their potential employers. Therefore, how can graduates acquire the skills necessary to persuade potential employers to hire them? In reality, it is critical that graduates have the opportunity to demonstrate their competence, knowledge and skills, including those acquired at university, to the job interviewers if they are to be offered employment. However, the key to success is the soft skills which enable graduates to compete and demonstrate that they are deserving of the job.

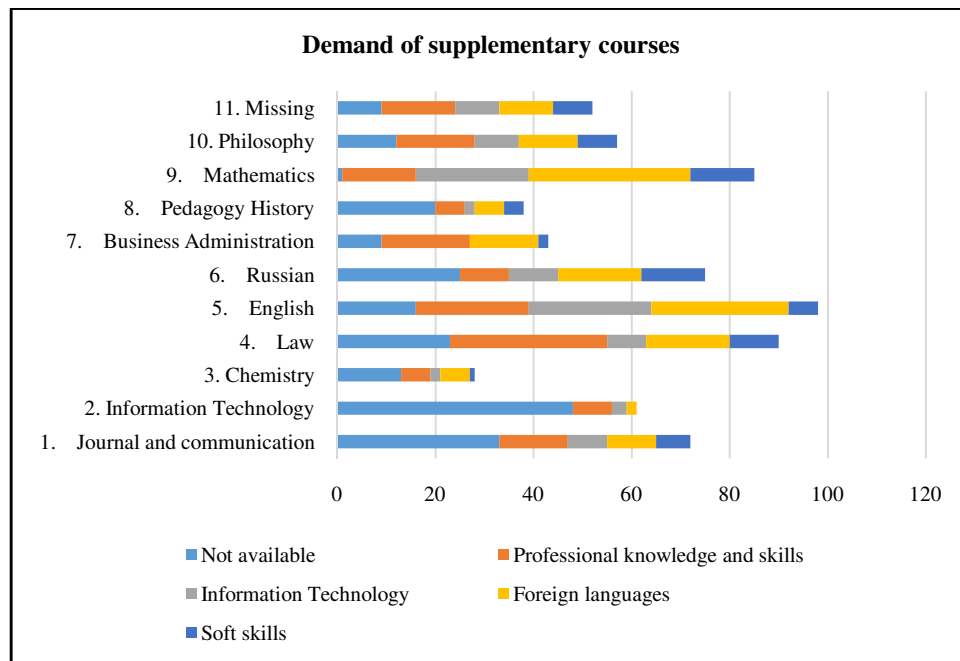


Figure 4: Statistics of courses that graduates took to seek employment

4. Solutions and Suggestions

Of the suggested solutions, graduates paid more attention to additional skill development courses to enhance their competences after graduating. Ranked second is the need to learn about employment demand and program adjustment. Further, solutions offered by current students (in order of priority) included:

- (1) Attending courses of soft skills
- (2) Improving their competencies in information technology and foreign languages
- (3) Earning practical experience via part time jobs
- (4) Actively seeking employment with career orientation
- (5) Preparing effective job portfolios
- (6) Actively asking for internship as part of their major
- (7) Clearly identifying career goals
- (8) Self-assessing own competencies
- (9) Maintaining a positive study attitude
- (10) Displaying confidence in interviews and presenting well (including dress)
- (11) Being equipped with good expertise knowledge
- (12) Being proficient in several foreign languages
- (13) Consistently pursuing work opportunities

Suggestions for the training programs include:

- (1) Developing students' creativity towards reality experience
- (2) Cooperating with employers to share recruitment requirements with final year students
- (3) Conducting more opportunities for practical experience
- (4) Introducing employers to students
- (5) Creating more extracurricular activities for students
- (6) Reducing the quantity and adjusting requirements of compulsory units
- (7) Organizing meetings with alumni to share experience
- (8) Improving the quality of extracurricular activities

Graduates have also proposed that employers should create more opportunities for students to earn experience and office skills, specifically in the proficient use of the photocopier, printer and scanner. The university should also develop courses with 'double' majors and emphasize the quality, rather than the quantity so that graduates can meet job requirements.

4.2. Proposed solutions

In order to improve the training quality, the university, faculty and department should assist students to acquire knowledge and professional skills and aid students in utilizing their own abilities, with a focus on the following, if they are to meet the high demand set by employers.

- (1) Ability to adapt: This is considered a necessary skill that students require to satisfy employers and to be flexible at work because of various and changing job requirements. In addition to report writing and documenting skills, employees are required to have good memory and note-taking skills. The important thing is that students must successfully adapt to new requirements even in difficult situations.
- (2) Being modest and patient: Employers always support, enable and prefer individuals who are dynamic, flexible and active as opposed to passive individuals. This is also a skill graduates should practice more and more to shape good habits and behaviors.
- (3) Keeping updated with professional news and knowledge at university: Potential employers are not impressed by students who did not pay attention or develop the social knowledge at university. Recruiters are impressed when graduates can demonstrate a wide array of information related to their career. Further, graduates who can report the most up to date news about company businesses via email or summarize a long report or paper in a logical and efficient way are also considered impressive candidates for the job. It is advised that employees should read a plethora of professional documents (journals) to foster their knowledge. Employees could suggest useful professional magazines and websites to their managers and colleagues that help to widen their professional expertise.
- (4) Time management: Graduates felt that they must actively and willing take on all new tasks. They did not feel that rejecting any new tasks was appropriate as a new graduate. Thus, time management is a skill graduates should possess if they are to be efficient and successful in finding employment.
- (5) Presentation skills: A graduate may encounter difficulties in his working environment if he cannot communicate his ideas well. It is a fact that many graduates were not equipped with this skill making it difficult for them to introduce their companies on the phone or face to face with partners at meetings, conferences, etc. In order to be trained with this skill, students can join volunteer organizations that provide the opportunity to practice speaking in front of large groups. This will aid students to present their ideas at formal or informal meetings and "think of the key points that you want to communicate with listeners and speak them out".
- (6) Problem solving skills: Stressful conversations and negotiations are common within the work force and therefore problem solving skills are necessary. Graduates who possess this skill have the ability to focus on results rather than personal feelings. In some cases, staff have the opportunities to assess their colleagues' effectiveness even though those assessments are not taken into consideration. Graduates who are willing to listen to another's ideas rather than immediately objecting to it, increases the opportunity for their opinions to also be heard.
- (7) Written communication skills: Employers need their employees to write logical and scientific reports without any grammar mistakes or misspelling. Therefore, students must be well prepared and demonstrate superior written communication skills.
- (8) Information technologies: There are some jobs that require knowledge about programming language which may not be required by others. However, proficiency in some basic computer skills is necessary as graduates must possess these skills in both study and work.

(9) Leaderships: Many companies recruited managers at multi or advanced levels, rather than intermediate level. Thus, graduates must be experienced with this skill if they wish to be successful in their future careers.

(10) Team working: Employers want to have staff who can work efficiently in groups. This requires staff who display team working characteristics including the ability to follow deadlines, a willingness to help other team members with project progress even when it is not their duty. Students may develop team work skills through part time jobs or extracurricular activities.

(11) Individually working: Employers also expect their staff to display initiative and work in an unsupervised situation. In conjunction with team work skills, the ability to work unsupervised and individually is also considered to be an essential criterion when applying for a job.

5. Conclusion

In modern society, graduates need to be qualified in terms of their career competencies and social skills as these skills are crucial in every sector of the labor force as well as create the graduates' confidence to successfully perform within the workforce. Qualifications are necessary requirements for students to be successful when applying for work. In order for graduates to meet the labor market's demand, VNU HN/ member universities, faculties and departments should focus on developing graduates' skills such as communication, problem solving, team working, listening and time management as well as updating their basic knowledge, outside of their specific professional knowledge.

It is a necessity that VNU HN design detailed strategies and plans to improve quality of training programs as well as issue guidance or policies for member universities to pay more attention to the quality of graduates:

- Developing and supplementing extracurricular courses with assigned lectures. Experts from local recruiting companies should be invited to talk and share some real social situations and working experience. This enables students to be acquainted with working styles and problem solving skills that invited speakers present. At the same time, career orientation talks should be organized as an additional channel for students to get ideas on successfully approaching work.
- Providing final year students with general knowledge and appropriate behaviors and working style within the real labor force, etc.
- Reviewing and adjusting the curriculum to facilitate the proper knowledge and skills required for work.
- Cooperating with invited experts to share their experience and shorten the gap between theory and practice because students have little opportunity to experience external working environments even during their internship period.
- Updating the curriculum periodically to keep up with national and international changes because out of date knowledge may hinder graduates from starting their first job. Students should be instructed to approach problems with a solution based mentality, providing appropriate knowledge and skills to solve the problem.

6. References

1. Elliot, K.M. and Shin, D. (2002), "Student satisfaction: an alternative approach to assessing this important concept", *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, Vol. 24 No. 2, pp. 197-209.
2. Hampton, G. M. (1993). Gap analysis of college student satisfaction as a measure of professional service quality. *Journal of Professional Services Marketing*, 9(1), 115-128.
3. Howard, G. S., & Maxwell, S. E. (1980). Correlation between student satisfaction and grades: A case of mistaken causation? *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 72(6), 810-820.
4. Mazirah Yusoff, Subang Jaya, Fraser McLeay and Helen Woodruffe-Burton, (2014), Dimensions driving business student satisfaction in higher education, Vol. 86, <http://www.emeraldinsight.com/0968-4883.htm>
5. M.M. Lai et al, (2015), Assessing antecedents and consequences of student satisfaction in higher education: evidence from Malaysia;, *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, 25:1, 45-69, DOI: 10.1080/08841241.2015.1042097
6. National Education Strategic Development Plan 2011-2020 of Vietnam (2012), Resolution No 711/ QĐ-TTg dated 13th June 2012 by Prime Minister of Social Republic of Vietnam.
7. National Resolution on Fundamental and Comprehensive Innovation of Education (2013), Resolution No 29-ND/TW dated 4th November 2013 by General Secretary of Social Republic of Vietnam.
8. Petruzzellis, L., & Romanazzi, S. (2010). Educational value: How students choose university: Evidence from an Italian University. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 24(2), 139-158.
9. Staley, D. J., & Trinkle, D. A. (2011). The changing landscape of higher education. *Educause Review*, 46(1), 16-32.