Students' Perceptions and Attitudes Towards the Importance of Soft Skills Development in Learning and Career Development

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Abstract

This study aims to understand students' perceptions and attitudes in Vietnam about the importance of developing soft skills in their academic and professional life. Through in-depth interviews with 15 students from 9 universities in Hanoi. The research results show that university students in Vietnam generally understand and appreciate the importance of soft skills for personal development, career advancement and meeting society's expectations. Students recognize the competitive advantage that soft skills bring to the job market and express motivation to develop these skills, including career aspirations and personal development goals. However, the study also identifies various barriers and challenges that prevent them from acquiring and applying soft skills. Based on the results of the study, a number of recommendations are made to support the holistic development of students, equipping them with the necessary soft skills for academic and career success.

Keywords: Soft skills, career development, students, Vietnam.


Introduction

Soft skills are essential personal attributes and interpersonal abilities that help individuals effectively navigate their academic, professional, and personal lives (Wats & Wats, 2009). In today's highly globalized and competitive world, the importance of soft skills is increasingly recognized (Schulz, 2008). In the context of Vietnam, with rapid economic growth and integration into the global market, the demand for a skilled and adaptable workforce is increasingly evident. Soft skills are increasingly recognized as crucial for Vietnamese students' future academic and career success.

Traditionally, Vietnam's education system has mainly focused on academic knowledge and technical skills with little emphasis on developing soft skills. However, as the job market evolves and employers value more well-rounded applicants, the need to incorporate soft skills training into university curricula is increasing.
Therefore, understanding the perception and attitude of Vietnamese students towards soft skills is essential for many reasons. First, it provides insight into how students recognize and evaluate the importance of soft skills in their academic and professional lives. By testing their awareness and understanding of soft skills, educators and policymakers can design more targeted interventions to promote their development. Second, understanding Vietnamese students' attitudes towards soft skills helps determine their motivation for developing these skills. Motivation plays a key role in motivating individuals to actively acquire and apply soft skills. By understanding students' motivations, educational institutions can design more engaging and effective learning experiences that promote students' soft skills development. Finally, a review of the barriers and challenges faced by Vietnamese students in acquiring and applying soft skills sheds light on the contextual factors hindering their development. Identifying these barriers can guide the design of strategies and interventions to overcome them, ultimately improving the effectiveness of soft skills training programs.

The main objective of this study is to understand the perceptions and attitudes of Vietnamese students towards the importance of soft skills development in their academic and professional lives. To address this goal, the study will seek answers to the following research questions: (i) How do Vietnamese students perceive and appreciate soft skills in academic and professional life? (iii) What is the attitude and motivation of Vietnamese students towards soft skills development? (iii) What are the barriers and challenges that Vietnamese students face in acquiring and applying soft skills?

By answering the above questions, this study aims to provide valuable insights into the perceptions, attitudes, motivations and challenges related to soft skills development of Vietnamese students. These findings will inform educational institutions, policymakers, and educators on how to better integrate and promote soft skills in Vietnam's higher education system, ultimately enhancing the academic and career success of Vietnamese students.

Theoretical Basis and Literature Review

Theoretical Basis

Concept of soft skills

Soft skills, also known as communication skills, non-technical skills, or transferable skills, include a range of personal attributes, behaviors, and abilities that enable individuals to interact effectively with others, adapt to changing circumstances, and navigate different social and professional contexts (Kechagias, 2011; Marin-Zapata et al., 2022). While technical skills are specific to a specific field or occupation, soft skills are more general and can be applied across multiple domains (Deming, 2017). Definitions and concepts of soft skills vary across studies, but common factors include communication skills, teamwork, problem-solving, critical thinking, creativity, adaptability, leadership, emotional intelligence, and cultural competence (Dean, 2017). These skills are generally classified into three broad dimensions: personal qualities (e.g., self-awareness, resilience), interpersonal skills (e.g., communication, teamwork), and cognitive skills (e.g., critical thinking, problem-solving).
The importance of soft skills in learning and career development

Soft skills play an important role in academic and career success, complementing and enhancing technical expertise. Research has consistently shown that individuals with strong soft skills tend to do better academically, secure easier jobs, and advance in their careers (Schulz, 2008).

In an academic context, soft skills contribute to effective learning, communication, and collaboration. Students with developed soft skills demonstrate better study habits, time management, and self-regulation, resulting in improved learning outcomes (Dixon et al., 2010). These skills also facilitate effective interaction with peers and teachers, facilitating collaborative learning, constructive feedback, and a positive classroom environment.

In the professional field, soft skills are highly appreciated by employers because they contribute to improving work productivity, teamwork and customer satisfaction (Hung, 2022). Strong communication and interpersonal skills enable effective collaboration and relationship building, while problem-solving and critical thinking skills help employees overcome complex challenges and make informed decisions. Leadership skills, adaptability, and resilience are also important for career advancement and success in a dynamic work environment.

Moreover, soft skills have a significant impact on employability and employment prospects. Employers often prioritize candidates with well-developed soft skills because they demonstrate potential for growth, flexibility, and effective integration into a diverse work environment (Kyllonen, 2013). In fact, many studies have highlighted that soft skills are often considered more important than technical skills in the recruitment process.

The importance of soft skills is further underscored by the changing nature of the workforce and the globalized economy. As automation and artificial intelligence continue to reshape job roles, soft skills such as creativity, emotional intelligence, and complex problem-solving are becoming increasingly valuable, as they are less likely to be automated and necessary for innovation, adaptability, and dealing with complex human problems.

The influence of culture on perceptions and attitudes towards soft skills

Perceptions and attitudes toward soft skills are influenced by cultural factors, as cultural values, norms, and expectations shape an individual's understanding of and emphasis on different skills and behaviors. Cultural context plays an important role in determining which soft skills are considered important and how they are assessed (Hung, 2023).

In the Vietnamese cultural context, certain values and beliefs can influence perceptions and attitudes toward soft skills (Pham, 2022). For example, collectivist values, which prioritize harmony and collaboration within the group, may lead to a greater emphasis on teamwork and interpersonal communication skills. Respect for authority and hierarchical structure can shape attitudes toward leadership and communication skills. In addition, cultural values associated with diligence, perseverance, and compliance can impact attitudes toward self-motivation and adaptability.

Understanding the effects of culture on the perception of soft skills is critical to effectively promote their development. By recognizing the cultural context, educators and policymakers can align interventions and initiatives with cultural values and
expectations, ensuring better acceptance and integration of soft skills training in the Vietnamese higher education system.

Literature Review

An overview of world studies on students' perceptions and attitudes towards the importance of soft skills development in learning and career development, including some of the following studies:

Ndlovu (2022) conducted research at a historically disadvantaged university in Johannesburg, South Africa. Research shows that university students in South Africa have different levels of awareness and attitudes about the importance of soft skills. While some students recognize the value of soft skills, others lack awareness and limit access to soft skills development opportunities. The study proposes to implement mentoring programs, provide career counseling and guidance services, and create partnerships with industries and organizations to provide internships or work opportunities to support South African university students to develop soft skills.

Tanaka (2024) conducted research at a private university in Tokyo, Japan to explore the perceptions and attitudes of university students in Japan towards soft skills development. Research results show that university students in Japan have a moderate awareness of the importance of soft skills in academic and professional life. They acknowledged the need to develop better soft skills to improve their employability but expressed concern about limited resources and support. The study recommends establishing career development centers, providing mentoring programs, and integrating soft skills training into the curriculum to support Japanese university students in developing soft skills.

Johnson (2020) conducted a study to understand students' attitudes and motivations towards developing soft skills in the UK. Research results show that students in the UK generally have a positive attitude towards developing soft skills. They recognize the importance of soft skills for personal growth, employability and success in the workplace. The motivation for soft skills development is driven by the desire for career advancement, personal development, and recognition of the growing importance of soft skills in today's job market. The research proposes to integrate soft skills development into the curriculum in many industries, organize seminars and talks on soft skills, and create practical application and experiential learning opportunities to improve students' motivation and engagement with soft skills development.

In addition, Sharma (2018) explores students' attitudes and motivations towards soft skills development at private universities in India. The research results highlight that students in India have different attitudes towards developing soft skills. While some students recognize the importance of soft skills, others consider them less important than technical skills. The motivation to develop soft skills is influenced by factors such as cultural values, career aspirations and exposure to industry needs. The study also recommends raising awareness of the importance of soft skills through targeted campaigns, incorporating soft skills modules into the curriculum, and providing internships or industry collaborations to enhance students' motivation and understanding of soft skills.

Meanwhile, Zhang (2020) explores the barriers and challenges of acquiring and applying soft skills at several universities in Shanghai, China. The results of the study point to a number of barriers and challenges faced by undergraduate students in China in the acquisition and application of soft skills. Key barriers identified include an exam-
oriented education system that prioritizes learning outcomes over soft skills development, limited internship or practical experience opportunities, and cultural expectations that emphasize technical knowledge. Students also expressed concern about the lack of instruction and special training focused on soft skills. The study recommends modifying the education system to place more emphasis on soft skills development, promote collaboration and teamwork through group projects or extracurricular activities, establish partnerships with industries to provide internship opportunities, and provide workshops or courses dedicated to soft skills training.

Previous research has explored perceptions and attitudes towards soft skills in a variety of contexts, providing insights that can provide useful information for research on perceptions and attitudes of Vietnamese students. Studies conducted in different countries have shown that soft skills such as communication, problem solving and critical thinking are highly valued by employers. These studies have highlighted the growing need for employees with a combination of technical expertise and soft skills, emphasizing the importance of integrating soft skills development into the curriculum. Research conducted in other Asian countries, such as China and India, has indicated a growing recognition of the importance of soft skills. Studies in this context have highlighted the need for educational institutions to adapt teaching methods and assessment practices to promote the development of students' soft skills.

Although there is a growing body of research on perceptions and attitudes towards soft skills, understanding of these aspects especially in the Vietnamese context remains limited. Therefore, conducting a study on Vietnamese students' perceptions and attitudes towards soft skills will contribute to the existing theoretical basis by providing insights into cultural contexts that have not been previously studied. By reviewing previous studies on perceptions and attitudes toward soft skills in different contexts, this study aims to build on existing knowledge and identify potential similarities and differences in perceptions and attitudes toward soft skills among Vietnamese students.

Research Method

This study uses qualitative research methods to explore the views and perceptions of students in Vietnam on the importance of developing soft skills in their learning and career development. The sample in this study was selected through intentional sampling, focusing on 3rd and 4th year students. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with 15 students from 9 universities in Hanoi city, including: 8 students in the 3rd year, in the economic sector; 7 students in the 4th year, in the technical sector. The interviews were conducted between September 2023 and November 2023 on the basis of face-to-face and telephone interviews lasting from 30 minutes to 45 minutes each, the contents of which were recorded and transcribed for analysis. Data is analyzed using thematic analysis to identify key topics and samples emerging from interviews.

Research Results

Recognizing and Evaluating Soft Skills in Learning and Career Development of Students

The interview results show that most students in Vietnam recognize and value soft skills as an important factor for success in both research and career fields. They will
recognize the importance of soft skills in learning outcomes, teamwork, communication, and problem solving. Moreover, they will actively seek opportunities to develop and integrate soft skills into their college experience, understanding that these skills are essential for career advancement and future employability.

**Academic perspective**

In academic life, students in Vietnam will realize the importance of soft skills in improving their learning experience and learning outcomes. They will understand that soft skills, such as effective communication, critical thinking, and problem solving, are essential for participating in class discussions, collaborating with peers on group projects, and presenting ideas confidently. For example, a student may recognize the value of communication skills during a class presentation or group discussion. They will understand that being able to express their thoughts clearly and persuasively can contribute to better academic outcomes and foster positive relationships with teachers and classmates. In addition, critical thinking and problem-solving skills will be considered critical for analyzing complex learning tasks, conducting research, and approaching assignments with creative and analytical thinking.

**Professional perspective**

From a professional perspective, students in Vietnam will recognize the importance of soft skills in ensuring employment and success in the workplace. They will understand that technical knowledge alone is not enough to thrive in today's competitive job market. Soft skills such as teamwork, adaptability, leadership, and cultural competence are valued by employers and can differentiate them from other candidates. For example, a student may understand the importance of teamwork when practicing or participating in extracurricular activities. They will recognize that being able to collaborate effectively with colleagues from different backgrounds and contribute to team goals can lead to successful project outcomes and career development. Leadership skills can also be highly valued because they allow students to take initiative, guide groups, and demonstrate the ability to take on responsibilities.

**Integrating soft skills**

The majority of students believe that understanding the need to integrate soft skills into their academic and personal development is very important. They will realize that soft skills are not innate abilities but can be nurtured and developed through various opportunities such as workshops, seminars and participation in student organizations. For example, a student may actively seek leadership roles in student clubs or organizations to enhance his or her leadership skills. They will participate in workshops or training programs on effective communication or time management to improve their organizational and personal skills. In addition, students can participate in community service activities to develop empathy and cultural competence.

**Students' Attitudes and Motivations Towards the Development of Soft Skills**

Students in Vietnam generally have a positive attitude towards the development of soft skills, aware of their importance for personal development, career advancement and cultural expectations. Their motivation comes from being aware of the value of soft skills in the job market, personal aspirations, and the integration of soft skills into the educational environment. Specific attitudes and motivations may vary between individuals based on their career goals, personal experiences, and cultural influences. However, the interview process produces some of the following general results:
Recognize the importance

Students are generally aware of the importance of soft skills to their personal and professional development. They understand that possessing a variety of soft skills can enhance their competitiveness in the job market and contribute to their overall success. For example, one economics student said that effective communication skills are important for building professional relationships, networking and communicating ideas clearly to potential employers. They acknowledge that the ability to adapt to different work environments and collaborate with colleagues from different backgrounds is essential for career advancement.

Career aspirations

The career aspirations of students in Vietnam can significantly influence their motivation to develop soft skills. Many students look forward to working in multinational companies, starting their own businesses, or pursuing international opportunities. Such aspirations often require an emphasis on soft skills. For example, an entrepreneurial student recognizes the importance of skills such as leadership, creativity, and problem-solving to establish and manage his or her own business. They will be motivated to develop these skills through participation in start-up-related activities, attending seminars, or seeking mentorship opportunities.

Personal development and self-improvement

The students also have a strong motivation for personal development and self-improvement. They understand that developing soft skills not only enhances their employability but also contributes to their overall happiness and personal success. For example, some students find it motivating to develop organizational skills and time management to effectively balance academic responsibilities, part-time work, and extracurricular activities. They will recognize that these skills can reduce stress, increase productivity, and create a healthier work-life balance.

The influence of cultural expectations

Cultural expectations and social norms can form the attitudes and motivations of students in Vietnam towards the development of soft skills. Vietnamese society values respect for power, teamwork, and harmony, which can affect students' perceptions and motivation. For example, some students feel motivated to develop teamwork and collaboration skills due to the culture's emphasis on collectivism. They will recognize that being able to work in harmony with others and contribute to group goals aligns with society's expectations and can lead to positive social relationships.

Integration of soft skills into education

Students' attitudes and motivations towards soft skills development may also be affected by the integration of soft skills into the educational curriculum. When students are aware that their university actively encourages and supports the development of soft skills, they are more likely to be motivated and engaged in those activities. For example, if a university organizes seminars or courses on communication skills, leadership development, or problem solving, students may feel encouraged to participate and develop these skills more. They will feel the university is appreciating and investing in their holistic development, leading to increased motivation.

Barriers and Challenges

Students in Vietnam may face a number of barriers and challenges when it comes to acquiring and applying soft skills. These challenges can arise from a variety of factors,
including the education system, cultural influences, and personal circumstances. Below is a detailed analysis of the potential barriers and challenges that Vietnamese students may face:

**Traditional education system**

The traditional education system in Vietnam often prioritizes academic knowledge and technical skills over soft skills. Emphasis on rote learning and standardized exams may limit opportunities for students to develop and apply soft skills in a structured educational environment. For example, a student who excels academically but lacks opportunities to engage in critical thinking, problem solving, or teamwork may have difficulty applying these skills effectively in real-life situations. The focus on content-based exams can lead to limited access to experiential learning, hindering the development of practical soft skills.

**The integration of soft skills into the curriculum is limited**

The integration of soft skills into the formal curriculum is limited and may be a barrier for students in Vietnam. If universities do not explicitly incorporate soft skills development into their subjects and activities, students may not receive adequate instruction or opportunities to develop these skills. For example, a student may graduate without taking any courses or participating in activities specifically aimed at developing soft skills, such as communication, teamwork, or leadership. The lack of exposure opportunities and structured learning experiences can hinder their ability to effectively acquire and apply soft skills.

**Language barriers**

Language proficiency, especially English, can be a barrier for Vietnamese students in acquiring and applying soft skills. English is often seen as a lingua franca in many professional and international contexts, and the limited ability to use the language can hinder effective communication and cooperation. For example, a student with good technical skills but limited English proficiency may have difficulty actively participating in international conferences, participating in multicultural teamwork, or presenting their ideas effectively in front of a global audience. This language barrier has limited their opportunities for skill development and hindered their career prospects.

**Cultural influence and social expectations**

Cultural influence and social expectations in Vietnam also pose challenges for students in acquiring and applying soft skills. Traditional values, such as respect for authority and hierarchical structure can discourage students from expressing opinions, being proactive, or challenging existing norms. For example, a student who is hesitant to speak up in class discussions or express his ideas due to cultural norms may have difficulty developing effective communication and critical thinking skills. The fear of deviating from society's expectations can hinder their ability to participate and fully apply soft skills in their academic and professional environments.

**Limited exposure to practical experience**

Limited opportunities for practical experience, such as internships, industry collaborations, or community involvement are also barriers for Vietnamese students in acquiring and applying soft skills. Without practical exposure, students may struggle to connect theoretical knowledge to real-life contexts and develop the skills and confidence they need. For example, a student who does not have access to internship opportunities or an industry position may have difficulty applying concepts learned in
the classroom to real-life situations. This lack of experiential learning can limit their ability to develop skills such as problem solving, adaptability, and teamwork in a truly professional environment.

Conclusion and Recommendation

This study examines the perceptions and attitudes of Vietnamese students about the importance of soft skills development in their academic and professional lives. These findings highlight that Vietnamese university students generally recognize the importance of soft skills and their positive impact on personal development, career advancement, and societal expectations.

Research shows that Vietnamese students value soft skills because they understand the competitive advantage these skills bring to the job market. In addition, their motivation to develop soft skills also comes from career aspirations, personal development goals and the integration of soft skills into the educational environment.

However, the study also points out some barriers and challenges that Vietnamese university students face in acquiring and applying soft skills. These include a traditional education system that focuses on academic knowledge, limited integration of soft skills into the curriculum, language barriers, cultural influences, and limited exposure to real-world experience.

To help students overcome the barriers and challenges of acquiring and applying soft skills, some recommendations can be considered. These recommendations are intended to address the specific challenges identified above and create an environment that supports the development of soft skills.

Curriculum Innovation and Integration: Integrating soft skills development into formal curricula across disciplines. Create dedicated courses or modules that focus on communication, critical thinking, problem solving, leadership, and teamwork. Encourage interdisciplinary projects and assignments that require the application of soft skills in a real-world context. Provide opportunities for students to reflect on their soft skills development and evaluate their progress through self-assessment or feedback mechanisms.

Experiential learning opportunities: Establish partnerships with industries, organizations, and community stakeholders to provide students with internships, apprenticeships, and real-world projects. Encourage faculty to incorporate experiential learning components into their courses, such as case studies, simulations, and fieldwork. Support students to participate in community service initiatives to improve their communication skills, cultural competence, and empathy.

Language development support: Provide language training programs or workshops to improve students' English proficiency, which is important for effective communication and collaboration in a globalized work environment. Provide language support services, such as tutoring or conversation practice, to help students improve their language skills and confidence.

Promote soft skills through extracurricular activities: Encourage student organizations and clubs to focus on developing specific soft skills through their activities. For example, an argument club can enhance communication and critical thinking skills, while a leadership club can focus on leadership development and teamwork. Host workshops, seminars, or guest speakers that cover various soft skills.
and provide practical tips and strategies for developing these skills. Recognize and reward students' achievements in developing soft skills through certificates, awards, or badges to further promote participation.

**Promote a supportive and inclusive learning environment:** Promote classroom and campus cultures that encourage student engagement, open dialogue, and the expression of diverse perspectives. Provide training and professional development programs for lecturers to equip educators with the necessary skills and knowledge to facilitate the development of soft skills for students. Promote mentoring programs where final year students or alumni can mentor and support younger students in developing soft skills.

**Awareness raising and mindset change:** Conduct awareness campaigns among students, faculty, and parents to highlight the importance of soft skills and their role in academic and career success. Engage employers and industry professionals in discussion and collaboration to tailor the curriculum to the growing demands of the job market. Encourage change in cultural expectations and social norms to create an environment that values and promotes the development and application of soft skills.

By implementing these recommendations, Vietnamese students can overcome the barriers and challenges they face in acquiring and applying soft skills. Providing a comprehensive and supportive ecosystem for soft skills development will equip students with the capabilities they need to succeed in their future academic and career pursuits.

**References**


