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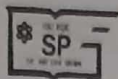
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ISSUES IN SOFT SKILLS DEVELOPMENT FOR VIETNAMESE STUDENTS IN CURRENT UNDERGRADUATE PROGRAMS

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ABSTRACT

The article focuses on theoretical and practical issues in soft skills development for students using the references from models that integrate professional skills, attributes and soft skills into their programs in modern higher education. The article also promotes ten soft skills that should be considered in designing programs for Vietnamese undergraduate students contemporarily.

Keywords: undergraduate program, soft skills, student.

TÓM TẮT

Vấn đề phát triển kỹ năng mềm cho sinh viên trong chương trình đào tạo đại học hiện nay

Bài viết đề cập các khía cạnh lí luận và thực tiễn của vấn đề phát triển kỹ năng mềm cho sinh viên trên cơ sở tham khảo các mô hình phát triển chương trình tích hợp kỹ năng - phẩm chất chuyên môn và kỹ năng mềm trong chương trình giáo dục đại học hiện đại trên thế giới. Đồng thời, bài báo cũng đề xuất 10 kỹ năng mềm cần quan tâm phát triển cho sinh viên trong chương trình đào tạo đại học ở nước ta hiện nay.

Từ khóa: chương trình đào tạo đại học, kỹ năng mềm, sinh viên.

1. Introduction

Students are the young, potential human resources and the key elements to Vietnam economic development in the future. Under the increasing pressure of market-economy and competition from foreign private companies, Vietnamese students are required to develop soft skills through education therefore they can be ready when facing obstacles in real life or entering the labor market.

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In this article, we focus on presenting theoretical and practical issues in developing skills for undergraduate students using the references from higher education models that integrate both professional skills, attributes and soft skills into their programs. On the basis of reviewing the literature in the field, we also suggest a list of soft skills that might be used as guidance for reforming and developing current undergraduate programs.

2. Literature review and recommendation for a soft skills framework for Vietnamese undergraduate students

2.1. In the world

Since 1970s and 1980s of the 20th century, authors and researchers have defined the term "skill" in many different ways. However, there are two significant approaches to define this term. The first approach considers skill referred to technical aspects of behaviors while the second approach considers the term referred to behavioral competences. According to Phan (2004), these two approaches can be integrated into one holistic approach which realizes that skill is both technical aspect of behavior (or the know-how aspect of behavior) and competencies of human.

Skill can also be classified into two types which are hard skill and soft skill. According to Melih (2014), hard skills are specific skills that can be achieved from formal education and mostly applied in workplace. Meanwhile, soft skill defined as skills which are often difficult to realize, possibly developed through informal education and applied in both daily life and workplace.

In the last 20 years, soft skill has become a prominent term in both academic field and public uses. The term becomes familiar with the public through many self-help and self-improvement books. There is also a large number of researches attempting to define and classify soft skills. For instance, in the article "Important soft skills for university in 21st-Century", Sejzi, Aris and Yuh (2013) define that soft skill is the concept related to a mixture of positive elements belonging to an individual which plays a critical role in developing relationships, improving job efficiency and contributing to the society. It is often considered as a combination of skills that define how we interact with others. A model of 21st-century skills established in 2002 by the Assessment and Teaching of 21st-Century Skills organization of Melbourne University has a widespread impact. The idea and model of 21st century skills have been applied in Australia, Finland, Portugal, Singapore, United Kingdom, United States under the supports of multinational enterprises such as Cisco, Intel and Microsoft (Asia Society, 2012; Suto, 2013).

2.2. *In Vietnam*

The idea of soft skill and relevant terms have become popular since the period of 2003. The Student Assistance Center first establish the platform and published the report “Essential Social Skills for students” in 2009. The report provides a guide for young people to prepare themselves in the new era of integration and development. Since then, the interests in the term has reflected the growing concern towards the development of soft skills so that the young generation of Vietnam can be ready for opportunities and challenges of the 21st century. Although the intention of developing soft skills for students have become popular, there are not sufficient researches relating to this topic in Vietnam that can be used as the platform for developing undergraduate programs to integrate both hard skills and soft skills.

2.3. *Proposing a soft skills framework for undergraduate programs in Vietnam*

Based on the model established by the University of Melbourne-based and Cisco-Intel- and Microsoft-funded Assessment and Teaching of 21st Century Skills consortium, we promote a framework of soft skills that can be classified into four categories: (1) Ways of thinking, (2) Ways of working, (3) Tools for working, (4) Living in the world. These four categories thereby can be specified into a list of ten essential skills (cited by Suto, 2013, p.7):

(1) Ways of thinking

- Creativity and innovation
- Critical thinking, problem solving, decision-making
- Learning to learn, metacognition.

(2) Ways of working

- Communication
- Collaboration (teamwork).

(3) Tools for working

- Information literacy (includes research on sources, evidence, biases, etc.)
- ICT literacy.

(4) Living in the world

- Citizenship - local and global
- Life and career
- Personal and social responsibility - including cultural awareness and competence.

Compared to other frameworks, this framework includes both personal, interpersonal and social global aspect of competences which might further benefits the current approach of Vietnam higher education in a globalized and internationalized world.

3. Issues in developing soft skills for Vietnamese students in undergraduate programs

The quality of Vietnam human capital ranks 11st out of 12 Asian countries in a report published by World Bank (cited by Thanh, 2016) while the competitiveness of Vietnam economy ranks 73rd out of 133 countries. Additionally, the labor productivity of Vietnam belongs to the low-ranking group in Asian countries (15 times lower than Singapore, 11 times lower than Japan and 10 times lower than South Korea). The labor productivity of Vietnam only equals one-fifth of Malaysia's and two-fifths of Thailand's.

There are a large number of issues related to this situation, however, the prominent cause possibly is the lack of essential soft skills. As Ong et al (2014) cited from a report of Vietnam Institute for Education Research, up to 83% percent of students who already graduated are considered as lacking soft skills; 37% of students are not able to find jobs because they do not possess the necessary skills. According to an investigation conducted by Ministry of Labour-Invalids and Social Affairs, among the students who complete their undergraduate programs each year, more than 13% of them need to be re-educated or attain additional skills training courses; nearly 40% of students need additional supports at workplaces and 41% of them need a long period of time to adapt to new environments.

From our point of view, the root cause of these issues is the process of establishing, implementing and evaluating the soft skills development programs (Lu, 2016). In order to organize these soft skill development programs successfully, universities should embrace a systematic and comprehensive strategy. A recent approach in reforming higher education by identifying learning outcomes which are consistent with social demands has been applied in Vietnam technical and non-technical programs. This approach is the CDIO model with its name standing for a process of four phases: Conceive, Design, Implement and Operate (Ho & Doan, 2009). The model is a response to new requirements of employers and stakeholders for students in the new era. Students nowadays are not only required to have knowledge of their professions but also a range of soft skills that can be applied in situations requiring decision-making and problem-solving. The model indeed has been implemented in more than 50 universities and 25 countries.

The model of CDIO includes 12 standards which are shown in the figure below:

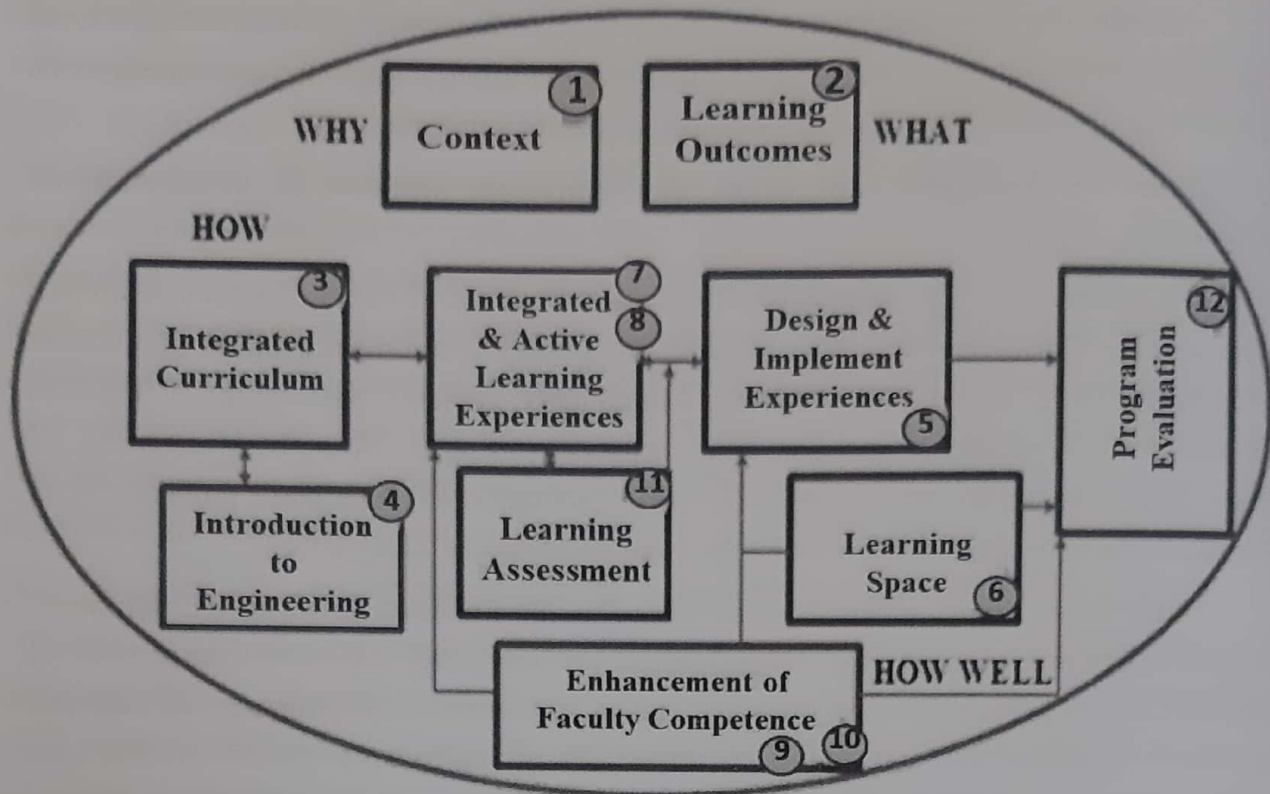


Figure 1. Twelve Standards of CDIO (Ho & Doan, 2009)

Based on the above figure, the twelve standards of CDIO can be classified into five major groups:

- (1) Curriculum: Standard 1,2,3,4
- (2) Teacher competences: Standard 9,10
- (3) Teaching and learning methods: Standard 5,7,8
- (4) Classroom/Labs environment: Standard 6
- (5) Assessment tools: Standard 11,12.

Among these groups, the Curriculum group (includes standard 1,2,3,4) is the foundation for designing and implementing programs which can achieve the ultimate goal of the CDIO model: student can conduct the process of conceiving, designing, implementing and operating in real-life situations. To achieve this goal, the undergraduate programs should focus on four main learning areas which are: (1) Professional knowledge, (2) Personal and professional skills and attributes, (3) Communication and Team-work skills and (4) Implementing skills in professional and social contexts. From these four areas of learning outcomes, it can be seen that nearly 50% of the outcomes relating to soft skills development. This example once again reflects the importance of soft skills as critical outcomes for higher education in contemporary times.

On the basis of literature review and experiences of educational practices, we indicate a number of issues that should be carefully considered in developing soft skills for undergraduate students. These issues can be categorized into four groups which are:

- (1) Selecting the soft skills
- (2) Lecturer competences and teaching strategies to develop soft skills
- (3) Establishing environment for experiential activities
- (4) Evaluation and assessments for soft skills development.

3.1. Groundwork for selecting the essential soft skills

It is necessary to consult the stakeholders such as the professional faculties, students, alumni, employers and policymakers on issues related to developing soft skills. However, the most important actors are employers and students. A combination of results from consulting employers on their demand and students on their needs, attributes of each major (the feature 1 of CDIO), the goals and objectives of the universities and the learning outcomes (feature 2 of CDIO) should become the basis for selecting essential soft skills for any program.

3.2. Lecturer competences and teaching strategies to develop soft skills

Indeed, most of lecturers have not been trained to change their mindsets from teaching knowledge to developing skills or gain necessary competences for developing these skills. Thus, the key solution is organizing training programs, workshops led by experts on the field to provide lecturers with sufficient knowledge, skills and competences so that they can redesign their teaching strategies for developing soft skills. Competences of lecturers and their teaching strategies are the key elements that should be carefully considered during establishing and implementing soft skills development programs.

There are soft skills that lecturers themselves must achieved before helping their students including: communication skill, critical thinking and problem-solving skill, teamwork skill, information management and life-learning skill, entrepreneurship skill, ethic and professional moral, leadership skill (Ngang et al, 2004). Specifically, for (1) *communication skill*, lecturers should be able to communicate fluently in both Vietnamese and English while expressing their thoughts in written and oral forms. Lectures should also be active listeners who can provide their students with appropriate responses. Confidence in using technology to enrich the lectures is also an important element of this skill. Lecturers are also expected to have (2) *critical thinking and problem-solving skill* to think and act in a critical and creative manner while analyzing complex situations and providing alternative solutions. Lecturers should possess (3) *teamwork skill* which help them

successfully cooperate with others including their colleagues and students by respecting their different background, thoughts and attitudes. (4) *Information management and life-learning skill* is so essential for teaching and learning so that lecturers are able to utilize information from various sources, accept new ideas and self-regulate their learning. Lecturers should embrace (5) *entrepreneurship skill* by practicing to identify opportunities, take risks and prepare plans for self-employment. (6) *Ethic and professional moral* requires lecturers to understand the moral standards, the effects of economy and social-cultural environment to make decisions in relevant professional situations which maintaining their responsibility toward society. (7) *Leadership skill* is also important for lecturers while establishing projects related to their works. They need to gain sufficient knowledge on leadership and management from theories and from experiences of a leader and a group member.

The seven above skills should be carefully considered while preparing lecturers for skills development programs. Besides, there are other obstacles that lecturers need to overcome while implementing skills development programs such as: limited classroom space, limited time for delivering the content, alternative teaching strategies and negative attitudes of students.

Teaching approaches and strategies are also important building blocks for skills development programs. The approach in teaching and developing skills should integrate both generic approach and the specialized approach (Kechagias, 2011). The generic approach emphasizes that soft skills are general skills which could be taught separately and then transferred in any situation. Meanwhile, the specialized approach indicates that skills can not be separated from the specific contexts. These two approaches lead to a key consideration: Should soft skills be taught as an independent subject (the generic approach) or should they be taught as internal part of other subjects which related to specific contexts and situations (the specialized approach)?

In our opinions, soft skills should be integrated into the professional programs because it might enhance the interrelations among subjects and improve the motivation of students. However, some soft skills which are related to most subjects such as communication skills, team-work and learning skills can be taught as separated courses. Students should complete these courses as the foundation before joining other professional courses.

3.3. Learning environment and experiential activities

According to EC-Council (2013), there are four models of classroom arrangement that might contribute to a positive learning environment for students as presented below.

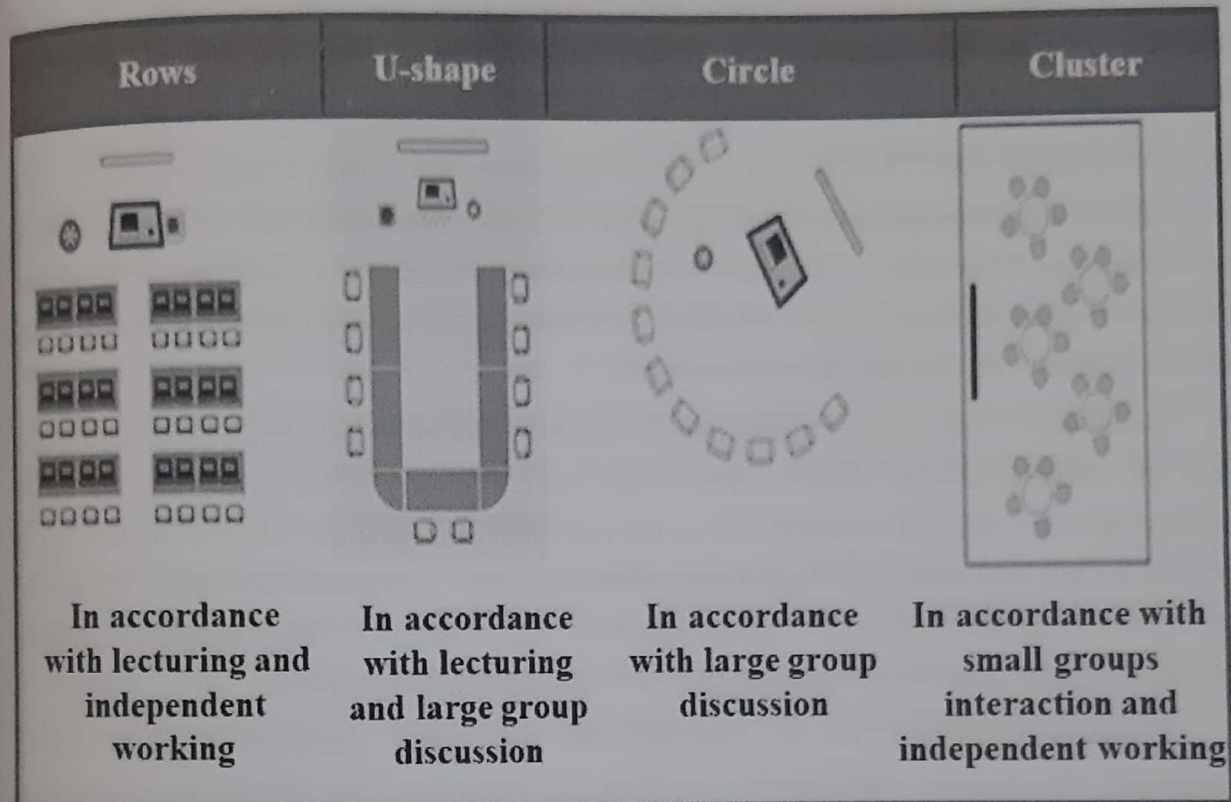


Figure 2. Four models of classroom arrangement for developing skills (EC-Council, 2013)

Among four models of arrangement, the cluster model would be the most appropriate for developing soft skills because it enhance the interactions among students within groups and enable alternative teaching strategies for developing skills.

EC- Council (2013) also indicates three types of experiential activities that should be embedded in learning environment for developing skills which are:

(1) *Interactions during teaching*: Lecturers should provide students with opportunities to experience, act, review and reflect their skills and competences. The level of difficulty should also be increased during the learning process. This approach requires lecturers to possess necessary skills, strong expertise and careful preparations. However, even being carefully prepared, the activities can not be exactly identical to real-life and work-place experiences.

(2) *Use teaching assistant who has experiences in work-place* to help students develop soft skills that related to real-life situations. This approach is similar to on-the-job training which is effective in helping students achieve job-related skills and competences.

However, in reality, it is not easy to persuade companies to provide opportunities and staff for this type of activities.

(3) *Simulation*: This approach brings real-life situations into teaching and learning process. It requires lecturers to effectively manage time and other resources to ensure students have appropriate environment for developing skills. This depends much on the current resources of the universities and the cooperation with other stakeholders.

3.4. *Testing and Assessment*

Firstly, it is important that learning goals and outcomes are clearly communicated at the beginning of the courses therefore students can understand the expectations for them. These learning outcomes can be identified in terms of knowledge, skills or attitudes that students must achieve at the end of the courses.

Moreover, to accurately assess competences of students, especially in terms of soft skills, the universities and lecturers should also build positive learning environment where students can feel safe and comfortable to express their thoughts and accept challenges. If students do not feel comfortable in interactions with their peers and lecturers, they might not provide accurate feedback and performances. Therefore, it is not possible to identify their level of understanding, especially using the formative assessments.

Assessments indeed can be classified into two types: summative and formative assessment. Summative assessments focusing on evaluating the results are conducted through tests using right or wrong, matching questions, multiple choices questions, short-answer questions or essay, problem-solving and simulation questions. Meanwhile, formative assessments emphasizing the process of learning rather than the results which include group work, presentation and self-evaluation. The choice between summative and formative assessments depends much on the learning outcomes, time and other resources of the courses.

In terms of quality assessments, it is necessary that stakeholders including employers, alumni, students, lecturers and curriculum developers all together involve in the process. A complete portfolio for evaluating skill development programs include five elements: competence of students; competence of lecturers; satisfaction of students with the courses, learning environments and lecturers; satisfaction of lecturers with curriculum, teaching environment and students; suggestions and recommendations for adjusting the curriculum or learning materials. The portfolio then should be sent to students, lecturers, employers (if they have involvements in the courses), curriculum developers and curriculum managers. These feedbacks are foundations for decision-making and continuous improvement (EC-Council, 2013)

4. Conclusion

4.1. While hard skills are important for students to enter the labor market, soft skills are keys to their success in workplaces. Yet, our students seem not to possess sufficient soft skills for their future jobs. Therefore, skills development integrated in current undergraduate programs is noteworthy issue to achieve the goals of reforming our higher education basically and comprehensively using competence-based approach.

4.2. There are a great number of researches identifying and classifying soft skills. Among those researches, the "Essential skills 21st century" model developed by the Assessment and Teaching of 21 Century Skills organization of Melbourne University is a prominent one. It has been applied in many countries such as Australia, Finland, Portuguese, Singapore, England, United States, etc. In Vietnam, some organization and universities have implemented the model in teaching and learning such as TGM training center, British Council and FPT University. However, the topic still needs further considerations for research and wide-spread implementation.

4.3. Soft skills development in higher education requires a comprehensive model built on scientific foundation for developing curriculum, implementing teaching, evaluation and assessment. The CDIO model might be an effective, research-based approach for successfully integrating soft skills development into current undergraduate programs./.

♦ **Conflict of Interest:** Authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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