**THE IMPORTANCE OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES AND SOFT SKILLS IN GRADUATES’ EMPLOYABILITY AND COMPETENCE - A CASE STUDY**

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper aims to conduct a case study on the role of foreign languages and soft skills in graduates’ employability and competence, intending to present a typical perspective on this matter in higher education institutions. The case study was conducted by giving questionnaires to 120 graduates of the Department of Russian Linguistics and Literature at University of Social Sciences and Humanities – Vietnam National University of Hochiminh City. Data were obtained at the period 2019-2020 to analyze a total of 10 questions related to the topic. Results show that although graduates do not use Russian much during work, a large number of them can use both English and Russian while working in foreign companies and are flexible in using many other languages. One of the main issues associated with competence development and graduate employability is related to the mismatch between university graduates’ majors and their work fields. The survey shows that factors affecting graduates’ employability are: personal capability, which is the key factor for job opportunities, followed by soft skills and specialized knowledge. According to the survey, the two most important soft skills are communication and teamwork. Findings indicate that higher education institutions should be concerned with changing the academic programs to enhance foreign languages and soft skills for development of graduates’ employability and competence.

**Keywords:** Foreign language; soft skill; employability; competence.

**I. INTRODUCTION**

Nowadays, universities are often criticized for not giving graduates the real contexts related to their professional practice. For that reason, it is obvious that one of the central issues that drive the mission of universities is graduates’ employability [1]. Thus, higher education institutions and universities have made much effort to meet these identified challenges.

Effective strategies that can be adopted to enhance graduates’ employability - namely launching services for career guidance; reinforcing employability through curricula (e.g., internship courses) and extracurricular activities (e.g., volunteering activities); encouraging networking that enables the students to experience real contexts in the labor market (e.g., mentoring programs, job fairs, mock job interviews); training students’ personal skills (e.g., foreign languages, soft skills, IT skills). In other words, these solutions allow universities to develop an institutional narrative based on employability [2]. Additionally, these are initiatives that intend to adequately prepare the graduates for their career practice, which is a subject towards uncertainty and constant change in the labor market[3].

Currently, the Department of Russian Linguistics and Literature at University of Social Sciences and Humanities – Vietnam National University of Hochiminh City (DRLL, USSH-VNU-HCM) is the place educating students to specialize in the Russian language. At present, the number of students studying at this department is approximately 250. Most of them come from Hochiminh City, Binh Thuan, Khanh Hoa, which are mainly economically developed provinces and cities, especially from popular beach cities like Phan Thiet, Nha Trang. This can be understood because the demand for jobs related to Russian in these cities is relatively higher than in other provinces in Central and South of Vietnam.

In order to improve the quality and competitiveness of graduates, from the school year 1998-1999, the department has launched a new program teaching Russian and English in parallel for students. Graduates will receive Bachelor's degree in Russian Linguistics and Literature and Associate degree of English Linguistics and Literature. The objective is to train bachelors in the Russian language capable of using Russian proficiency at level C1 and English at level B2.

**II. METHODOLOGY**

**A. The scope of the study and data collection methods**

The case study was conducted by giving questionnaires to 120 graduates of DRLL, USSH-VNU HCM. Data were obtained at the period 2019-2020 to analyze a total of 10 questions related to the topic. The procedure of collecting data consists of three basic steps. Firstly, the authors designed the questionnaire using Google Online Survey. Secondly, we sent this questionnaire to respondents via email and other social media such as Facebook or Messenger and collected all the responses sent back. Thirdly, we used Google Survey tool to automatically aggregate and analyze responses and we exported the results to a spreadsheet.
Among 120 respondents receiving our request to answer the survey, 118 respondents sent back their answers. It is hoped that with a limited scale of data collection, the study still can provide a general description of how foreign languages and soft skills play their role in graduates’ employability and competence.

**B. Data analysis methods**

Quantitative methods are mainly used to identify the proportions of choices. After that, qualitative methods are employed to analyze the data collected. Methods of classification, description, and analysis are also used to find answers to the questionnaire being sent to the targeted group.

**III. DATA ANALYSIS**

Aiming to have a vivid overview of the employment status of graduates who studied at DRLL, USSH-VNU-HCM, a survey was conducted with a questionnaire including 10 questions sent to 120 graduates. The survey firstly revolves main issues that are the respondents’ employment situation (field of work, the economic sectors in which they are working, their income, their difficulties at work, etc…). Secondly, we want to clarify the essential criteria at work of this group (foreign languages, soft skills, the knowledge that they need to be equipped to work better, etc…).

In question 1: “To which business sector does your most recent job belong” the survey shows that there are 37 people working in the field of Economy – Trade, accounting for 31.4 %, which is the highest choice among 118 respondents to this question. It shows a tendency that graduates often choose jobs in the business field, probably because there is a high demand for jobs in this field. Taking the second place is the jobs in the field of Tourism - Hospitality with 27 people choosing to work in this field, accounting for 22.9 %. The number of people who work as translators is surprisingly the smallest at 6.5 %.

![Business sectors](chart1.png)

**Chart 1. Business sectors in which graduates are working**

In question 2 about graduates’ starting income at the time of graduation and current income, the findings show that 71 people (accounting for nearly 60 %) choose their starting income below 300 USD, whereas only 44 people have starting income from 300-600 USD, accounting for 12 % and a slightly small number of 8 % respondents have starting income over 600 USD.

![Starting income](chart2.png)

**Chart 2. Starting income after graduation**
In chart 3, the results show that graduates’ income has made a big change compared to their starting income at the time when they just graduated. The survey shows a surprisingly high total number of 50 respondents having income above 800 USD, accounting for the highest proportion of 41.67%, while in chart 2 showing their starting income, the number of people with income above 800 USD takes the lowest percentage.

**Question 3**: What are the factors that create your current job opportunity?

In chart 4, we find that graduates often get job opportunities thanks to their personal capability with 95 out of 118 people choosing this option which is the highest number. Soft skills and specialized knowledge take the second and third positions (37.5% and 35% respectively). This shows that the 3 most important factors helping graduates find a job are: personal capability, soft skills, and specialized knowledge. Surprisingly, the number of people choosing soft skills is even 2.5% higher than specialized knowledge.

**Question 4**: What foreign languages do you use at work?

In chart 5, we can see the distribution of foreign languages used at work.
The survey results show that after graduation, most graduates mainly use the English language with 107 out of 118 respondents, accounting for 90.7%. Meanwhile, Russian language accounts for 33.9% of the total. It shows that although the main major of respondents is Russian, they tend to use more English at work rather than Russian. Figures in chart 5 also show a proportion of 11% graduates who can use other languages in their work.

**Question 5:** What foreign language skills do you use in your job?

![Foreign language skills used at work](chart)

For this question, the majority of respondents choose to use all 4 skills (listening-speaking-reading-writing) in their work with 82 people choosing this answer, accounting for 68.3%. The lowest answer is using no foreign languages (accounting for 7.5%). This shows that all foreign language skills are equally important. However, listening and speaking skills were used slightly more than reading and writing skills (15% compared to 9.2%).

**Question 6:** What proportion of specialized knowledge did you apply at work?

![Proportion of specialized knowledge applied at work](chart)

Chart 7 shows that 50 out of 118 respondents (accounting for 42%) think that the amount of specialized knowledge earned in university only meets less than 40% for their current job. 39.5% of them say that the amount of knowledge can meet from 40% to 70% of job requirements. Only 18.5% of graduates think that 70% of the proportion of knowledge can be applied in their work. This shows that the majority of graduates work in the wrong field, leading to the lack of specialized knowledge in their job performance.

**Question 7:** What are the difficulties in the working environment that you face?

Among 118 answers, the most popular difficulty at work is working in unmatched fields (59 responses, accounting for 50%). Lack of working experience and lack of knowledge and skills are two other difficulties in their work after graduation (56 answers, accounting for 47.5% and 54 answers, accounting for 45 answers, respectively). The results show that most graduates have to struggle to work in the wrong field with their majors. Even this fact shows their dynamic and active performance, it is better to find a job with the right major so the knowledge they learned will not fade away over time.
Question 8: In order to meet the job requirement, which professional qualifications or diplomas did you develop by yourself?

The results for question 8 are as follows: 37 graduates choosing HR (accounting for 31.9 %), and 35 choosing to foster other language skills (accounting for 30.2 %). Hospitality is a lesser choice with 13 people (accounting for 11.2 %). From this, it can be concluded that skills related to the office professions are often selected more than the remaining skills.

Question 9: What soft skills are essential for students to easily get a job?

According to the survey, the most vital skill for students is communication skill with 110/118 respondents to this question, accounting for 91.7 %. The second most important skill is teamwork with 85 out of 118 respondents to this question. Public speaking skill is considered to be equally important when 81 people chose out of 118 respondents to answer this question. There are also other skills such as text editing skills, problem solving skills, and learning skills that are also selected by graduates, even though the number of choices is not so high.
**Question 10:** What knowledge and skills should students foster on their own before graduation?

The chart above proves that in order to compete for job opportunities, professional qualifications and soft skills are two most important factors supporting employees in job-seeking process. Of which, professional qualifications account for the highest percentage (74.8% with 89 people choosing) and the second highest is soft skills accounting for 72.3% with 86 people. These are two highly influential elements to help employees grasp their job opportunities. In addition, the chart also shows that improving specialized knowledge through the internet, online courses (accounting for 53.8%) also plays a key role in job searching.

**IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS**

Chart 1 shows the most popular fields of work are Economy – Trade (accounting for 31.4%) and 22.9% for Tourism – Hospitality. From these facts and figures, it can be concluded that jobs that require communication skills and foreign language skills are quite suitable for the targeted group. Tourism – Hospitality also requires flexibility, dynamism and creativity of graduates. Therefore, the choice of this field of work can be inferred to the flexibility and creativity of the targeted group. The smallest proportion of 6.5% for translation jobs can be inferred that the demand for this job is probably not high as machine translation becomes more and more popular and easy to obtain with higher accuracy and speed.

The figures in chart 2 and 3 show that after graduation, most of the respondents have relatively low salaries because they do not have working experience and are not well equipped with knowledge and working skills to immediately to meet employers’ requirements and adapt to the business environment. This leads to the fact that they have to accept a fairly low salary compared to the current salary level. However, after a certain working time, the graduates of DRLL, USSH-VNU-HCM have tried the best to show their abilities and make remarkable progress in their jobs in order to significantly improve their income. In addition, the total number of people with incomes from 400 to 800 USD also accounts for the highest number, up to 48 people, reaching 18.33%. From this fact, it can be inferred that if graduates are equipped with enough knowledge and skills to meet the job needs, they will achieve an attractive salary and a stable life, contributing to promoting their role and position.

In chart 4, we find that graduates often get job opportunities mostly thanks to their ability and competence. The figures also show the importance of training and fostering additional skills in the jobs. Surprisingly, the number of people choosing soft skills was even 3% higher than specialized knowledge. This proves that soft skills are slightly more important factors than specialized knowledge in job seeking. And most of graduates have to rely on their own talents and abilities to find a job.

In terms of using foreign languages at work, the results show graduates’ ability to flexibly use foreign languages since there is a number of 90.7% graduates using English, 33.9% using Russian, and 11% using other languages in their work. It also proves that graduates are not dependent on one language only but they have learned more than one language and flexibly use them to adapt to the requirement in their jobs. 68.3% of respondents choose to use all 4 skills (listening-speaking-reading-writing) in their work. This shows that all foreign language skills are equally important and need to practice regularly since they were students and must be continuously improved in the working process because they are extremely necessary in the jobs. And graduates put slightly more weight on interactive skills such as speaking and listening rather than on writing and reading skills. The main majors of the targeted group are firstly Russian and English secondly. However, 42.8% of them think that their knowledge is not enough to meet the
job requirements since they only can use 40% of the knowledge earned in university to apply in their work. This fact shows a big gap between the learning outcomes and society’s demand for graduates’ skills and knowledge. It leads to the point that graduates have to tackle many difficulties at work. The most popular difficulty at work (59 responses, accounting for 50%) is working in unmatched fields, followed by a lack of working experience and a lack of knowledge and skills. The results show that students not only need to participate the classes well during studying time but also need to equip with more other skills to cope with working in the wrong field. Higher education institutions and universities should need to take into consideration about launching more career orientation programs in order to help students in job-seeking and enhancing their employability and competence.

In order to tackle these difficulties at work, professional qualifications or diplomas are self-developed by graduates: 31.9% graduates choosing HR, 30.2% choosing to foster other language skills. From this, it can be concluded that skills related to the office professions are often selected more than the remaining skills. However, it is very important for students to further foster career support skills because the knowledge earned at university is not enough compared to the requirements of employers.

In terms of essential soft skills at work, the survey shows that communication skills are the most important factor in the working environment with 91.7% of the total choices. Thanks to this skill, graduate students can build relationships with colleagues to work together in the best way. This communication skill is also a fundamental factor to form public speaking skills and interview skills. The second most important skill that students need to enhance before graduation is teamwork skill. Taking the third position is presentation skill. When it comes to giving one’s own opinion or presenting projects or ideas, this is a skill that students after graduating need to have to impress their boss or partner. This skill requires confidence as well as communication practice. About the knowledge and skills need to be self-trained, professional skills account for the highest percentage (74.8% with 89 people choosing) and the second highest is soft skills accounting for 72.3% with 86 people, just approximately 2.5% lower. It means that graduates put equal weight on professional skills and soft skills in their employability. This shows that the necessity of fostering and enriching these skills during studying will greatly help employees much in their work after graduation.

V. CONCLUSION

The findings of this research show that employability and competence of graduates of DRLL, USSH-VNU-HCM is relatively positive. After graduation, most of them have stable jobs, and work in different fields and economic sectors. Their income level has improved and significantly increased, compared to the starting salary at the time of graduation. Although they do not use Russian much during work, a large number of them can use both English and Russian while working in foreign companies and are flexible in using many other languages. This finding shows the importance of foreign languages in graduates’ employability. They also apply specialized knowledge and soft skills into their work and achieve certain results in the working environment. From this perspective, this research shows the important role of university education to students. The survey shows that other factors affecting graduates’ employability are: personal capability, which is the key factor for job opportunities, followed by soft skills and specialized knowledge.

This research is hopefully a necessary reference for lecturers and educators to take into consideration their training programs, teaching methods, in order to better the learning platform to be more suitable to the needs of society and the output of the labor market in the future. The survey also shows that the amount of knowledge earned in university is insufficient to meet the requirements of employers in a competitive and ever-changing labor market due to economic integration and globalization. In general, the educational program has not met the desires of learners and employers, posing the urgent problem of considering reducing the amount of theoretical knowledge and increase practicality in universities. With the aims to learn about the employment status of graduates of RLD, USSH-VNU-HCM, this research has been carried out with great concern to bring an objective view for those who are interested in this issue: the students, the teachers, the university and leaders of all levels; thereby further promotes and monitors the educational quality, capacity and capability of graduates. From this outlook, they would become an active and dynamic workforce contributing to the socio-economic development of the country.

VI. REFERENCES