
By Hang Thi Thu Truong BA, Med

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Faculty of Education and Arts
The University of Newcastle

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DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

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14 October 2016

Hang Thi Thu Truong
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Taking up a PhD has taught me more about the essence of interdependence in life than anything else could have taught me so far. No one who writes a doctoral thesis stands or thinks alone. I have come to learn that many things have to come together and are dependent on each other in order to accomplish something in life.

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ABSTRACT

Investing in human capital is one of the most relevant factors affecting the economic growth of a country, and one of the most important aspects of this investment is education. Thus in developing countries such as Vietnam it is imperative that the government supports policy priorities committed to strategies for creating a knowledgeable foundation for the development of a skilled and adaptable workforce capable of contributing to the goals of business competitiveness at the local and especially the global level. Within Vietnam's system of higher education, its schools of business do play a vital role in supporting the country's economic objectives. However, one of the major objectives in this thesis is to show that the crucial contribution which soft skills are capable of making to achieve maximal success within the business sector has to date not been adequately recognized by its business schools. This being so, the development of the business school curriculum in Vietnam has not been able to 'catch up', so to say, with the requirements of local and global business market. This being so, the central argument of my thesis is that in Vietnam there is a burgeoning need to provide students with comprehensive soft skills program designed to meet the national and global business standards increasingly exhibited within the current objectives of their potential employers. This being so, it is essential that the formal curriculum of Vietnam's Business schools be restructured to incorporate an up-to-date and effective coursework component for the delivery and development of business soft skills.

To fulfil the requirements of curriculum reform, the thesis focuses on three objectives. The first aim is to assess the status of soft skills proficiency...
possessed by tertiary business graduates, thereby revealing the presence and quality of any soft skills programs in Vietnamese business higher education institutions (BHEIs). The second purpose is two twofold: the first task is to make explicit the extent to which major Vietnamese stakeholders acknowledge and value the potential role which soft skill competencies can play in maximizing business success. Through that, the second concern is to determine which particular soft skills these stakeholders discern as best serving to improve Vietnam’s economic competitiveness within the national and global marketplace. The final aim of the study is devoted to identifying the most efficacious strategies for the development of soft skills programs in Vietnamese business schools.

A Sequential Exploratory Mixed-methods Approach was deployed in which in the first phase, semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted, with 15 business employers representing Vietnam’s reputedly largest business enterprises across Vietnam. In the second phase, a questionnaire was conducted with 577 business educators from three major universities of business, representing different regions of the country.

The study makes four main contributions: Firstly, this is the first comprehensive exploration and collation of the literature exploring the definition and importance of soft skills in the field of Business, thereby accumulating a legacy of valuable information for employer and educational stakeholders in Vietnam to better understand the status of soft skills in the local business workplace and global market. Secondly, the results of the study identified the 19 essential soft skills for success selected by Vietnamese business employers
which can be integrated into the formal business curriculum of business higher education institutions. This contribution also serves as a benchmark skill checklist for staff development and recruitment for employers. Thirdly, preferred approaches to soft skills development were identified by employers and business educators that are suitable for the current status of the country’s higher education system, culture and economy. Finally, the findings indicate that increased collaboration between educational institutions and business enterprises in the development of soft skills for Vietnamese business schools is more likely to result in accrued benefits to its economy. This has been achieved by focusing on the development of the specific soft skills needed to increase the employability of business graduates and upon a shared utilization of resources to enhance the effectiveness of soft skills training.

In summary, this study represents a comprehensive investigation of strategies for soft skills curriculum development which draws upon the contributions of relevant key stakeholders, namely, those Vietnamese business employers who are most likely to hire business school graduates, and the university educators of business who are responsible for their soft skills training in accord with the reformed curriculum of Vietnamese business schools. Thus, the study bridges the hiatus between the soft skills competencies required by Vietnamese employers on the one hand, and the adequate provision of soft skills development programs by soft skills educators in Vietnam's higher education business institutions. Findings from this study could be used productively to inform and shape the nature of the curriculum reforms and pedagogic interventions that need to be undertaken collaboratively by
knowledgeable staff from both tertiary business universities and business employment organisations
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BHEIs  Business Higher Education Institutions
BHES  Business Higher Education System
FDI   Foreign Direct Investment
HES   Higher Education System
HEIs  Higher Education Institutes
MOET  Ministry of Education and Training
SMEs  Small and Medium Enterprises
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Vietnam has been one of the best performing economies in the world over the last decade (Nguyen et al., 2008; The World Bank, 2016). The process of Vietnam’s integration into the world economic market, along with the country’s advancements in industrialization and modernization, have increased demands to improve and augment the productivity of the work force. This being so, Vietnam, now at a crucial stage of its expansionary economic development, assimilated 425,000 tertiary graduates into its workforce during the 2014-2015 academic year (TalkVietnam, n.d., para.5). The country is also faced with a momentous challenge to provide highly qualified personnel for the emerging modern sectors of the economy. A particularly serious problem is that the country’s higher education institutions (HEIs) are presently unable to equip the students with the appropriate skills and knowledge needed to meet the demands of rapidly increasing economic development. Although the number of tertiary graduates has increased rapidly over recent years, there exists a widening gap between the types of skills and level of expertise required by the business sector on the one hand, and the absence of those same skills and general low aptitude of business school graduates. This disparity has
exacerbated the current and acute dissatisfaction felt by employers when trying to recruit appropriately trained graduates. This has meant jobs remain unfilled and in parallel to this a tide of rising unemployment (Tran, 2006; Tran, 2013). As a result, the number of university graduates unable to find a job has been increasing exponentially in Vietnam and now accounts for one fifth of the country’s unemployment (General Statistics Office, 2014). Pham (2013) found that two thirds of potential Vietnamese employees lack work-ready competencies, and the level of the work readiness of the remaining one third is abysmal. Thus, a limitation in skills is considered to be one of the biggest barriers preventing Vietnamese graduates smoothly transitioning from university to the workplace (Tran, 2006; Tran & Swierczek, 2009). Interestingly, the skills gap is not so much a deficiency in the technical or 'hard skills'. Rather, it is claimed that one of the main reasons for the ill-prepared university graduates is that their 'soft skills', or what might be called 'people skills' are weak or totally absent (Pham, 2008; Tran & Swierczek, 2009). Many new Economics and Business graduates cannot take up their positions after their recruitment because their soft skills competency is far below what business employers expect. It is 'soft skill incompetence', not 'hard skills inadequacy' that paradoxically jeopardizes business growth and has created such a significant challenge for business development.

The cause of the problem is that the development of the soft skills curriculum in Vietnamese Business Higher Education Institutions (BHEIs) in Vietnam has not kept pace with the changing needs of the economy (Dennis & Phan, 2005). BHEIs have failed to pay sufficient attention to equipping their
students with the requisite level of soft skill competency. Given the growing awareness of employers regarding the quintessential role played by soft skills in business success and in economic developmental, the government of Vietnam has decided to initiate and implement one of three "breakthrough areas" in the Socio-Economic Development Strategies 2011-2020 by redirecting human resources towards the development of new working skills, particularly, the 'soft skills' necessary to facilitate the rapid growth of modern industry and business innovation (The World Bank, 2011; British Council, 2012). Curriculum development in the business school sector is now acknowledged by the government as a vital ingredient for improving the overall quality of higher education. Cognisant of the increasing importance of curriculum development, the government of Vietnam issued a document in 2004 (No.1269/CP-KG), which assigned to leading HEIs the task of designing advanced curricular innovations. The concept of 'advanced curricular innovations' refers to the development of new curriculum directions which are properly designed to reflect the curriculum reforms currently in place at the most prestigious universities in the world. The new models of Vietnamese curriculum development are meant to include important aspects of the subject content, teaching methods, and organisational training and management processes of the world's leading universities (Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training, 2008, p.3)

The burden of the present thesis will focus on a particular aspect of this curriculum development as it relates to ascertaining the extent to which the acquisition of soft skills of a certain kind can make a significant difference to the success of business interactions. Specifically, the study undertaken here will critically examine the two salient foundational elements of soft skills resources
with the aim of defining the paramount role they play in the development of innovative curriculum reform which targets the most effective strategies for the integration of soft skills into the tertiary business school curriculum. This introductory chapter describes the fundamental elements that give rise to the research questions that define this doctoral research. The chapter elucidates the place of soft skills education in Vietnamese BIEIs and outlines the research problem.

**Background to the Study**

**Demographic Data**

Vietnam is a small agricultural country located easternmost on the Indochina Peninsula in South East Asia. It covers a total area of approximately 331,212 square km. It has the third largest population in South East Asia and is ranked the thirteenth largest population in the world with an estimated 95 million people in 2016 (Vietnam Population, n.d., para.1). Seventy percent of the population lives in rural areas, while another 30% live in the two largest urban cities in the country, virtually most of which live in the two largest cities, Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City (General Statistic Office, 2012b).

The official language of Vietnam is Vietnamese which is spoken by 86% of Vietnam's population. Vietnam is a country which has a reasonably wide diversity of religions, though the statistics show that about 85% of Vietnamese are Buddhists (Pham, 2008). The Socialist Republic of Vietnam is a single-party state, the founding and ruling political party is the Communist Party of Vietnam. This single party maintains government and has centralized
control over the state, military and media. Vietnam’s strengths are considered to be its large market for goods and services, the effective functioning of its labor market, and its high female labor force participation rate. Moreover, Vietnam is well known for its global competitiveness based on its natural resources and a workforce with proficient in the hard skills (World Economic Forum, 2007).

Economy

Political and economic reforms known as ‘Doi Moi’ (‘Doi Moi’ means reform and renovation), which were launched in 1986, have transformed Vietnam from one of the poorest countries in the world to the one of the best performing economies in the world over the last decade (Skaif, 2011) with an annual growth rate of 5.3 percent – faster than any other Asian economy apart from China (British Council, 2012).

The World Bank further stated, “Vietnam’s poverty reduction and economic growth achievement in the last 15 years is one of the most spectacular success stories in economic development” (Skaif, 2011). Doi Moi had a significant and immediate impact on the economy that involved privatizing agriculture. This was the time when property rights were also being introduced, while price controls and controls on foreign trade were being eased as Vietnam was re-engageing with the international economy (Glewwe, Agrawal, & Dollar, 2004). One remarkable change in the economy after Doi Moi was the development of a multi-sector economy. Before Doi Moi, there were only two economic sectors in Vietnam, namely the state economic sector and the
cooperative economic sector. With an additional four sectors added after the reform, the multi-sector economy allowed and encouraged private and foreign investment organizations to develop their business in Vietnam (Nguyen, 2006).

Vietnam has experienced strong growth in both its private sectors and foreign direct investment enterprises. With its annual average Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth rate of 7.5%, since 2006 the economy clearly enjoyed a relatively high growth rate compared to other developing countries (Ministry of Planning and Investment, 2006). Along with the growth in GDP, there has also been a significant change in the structure of the economy. With more and more private and foreign direct investment enterprises the country is now characterized by an increasing number of small and medium enterprises (SMEs), with 87% of enterprises employing less than 50 employees and 57% of enterprises employing less than 10 employees (General Statistics Office, 2008). “According to the Spring 2011 report, the number of Vietnamese SMEs in 2011 was nearing 400,000, which represents 97-99% of the number of businesses of the country, employed 77% of the workforce and accounted for 80% of the retail market” (Business in Asia, n.d., para. 3). However, in the period of 2011-2015, the statistics showed that the total number of newly established enterprises, of which the majority was SMEs, declined significantly and steadily from 83,600 in 2010 to 77,500 in 2011 and 69,800 in 2012. There was a positive financial indicator in 2013 when the number bounced back to 76,900 enterprises, but this number still remained below 2009 and 2010 figures. One main of the reasons for the decline was that SMEs were facing barriers and problems in the quality of resources, including human resources (Phan, 2015).
The recent and constantly-evolving pressure on Vietnam’s productivity has served to foster its integration into the world economic market. Vietnam has steered its economic transition from a command economy into a ‘regulated market economy’. This being so, Vietnam’s ongoing expansion in trade and recent economic growth has attracted massive foreign investment and has opened up many opportunities in international business apart from its local business affiliations. Against the backdrop of globalization and the internationalization of business that is driven by the ‘information revolution’, knowledge and innovation are now defined by new rules of engagement. This being so, it is clear that a world-class workforce such as Vietnam’s, coupled with the right balance of skills is axiomatic to enhance its competitive advantage (Passaris, 2006).

It is out of this new business context that Vietnam has generated a growing need to prepare its graduates with the relevant range of skills required. There has been a particular demand for ‘industry ready’ graduates with a broader range of high-level and adaptable skills. Nevertheless, there are those who have described Vietnam’s economy as having become adversely affected by “burdensome governmental regulation”, “weak auditing and reporting standards”, a “low university enrolment rate” and “the [poor] quality of its education system” (Harman, et al., 2010 p.1). One of the biggest challenges currently being faced by Vietnam is that the country’s labor force has not adequately caught up with the speed of economic development. Therefore, this problem has given rise to the pressing issue of unemployment, deriving in large part from the underemployment of university graduates who suffer an alleged shortage of the specific skills now required for success in the
global marketplace (Asian Development Bank, 2008). Economic development requires a skilled, creative and flexible workforce that can adapt to changes in economic activity, technology and direction. However, in the light of poor performance in the workplace by new graduates, it has been widely assumed that most graduates from Vietnamese universities do not possess the capacity to meet the level of soft skills competency now required by the business sector (Asian Development Bank, 2008; Ketels et al., 2010; Nguyen & Robinson, 2010).

This explains, in part, why the pace of economic growth in Vietnam has slowed since 2010, from a 10-year average of seven percent growth to barely five percent only two to three years later, 2012-2013. The magnitude of this GNP decline illustrates just how volatile the patterns underlying business success are, and exhibits the extent to which skills deficiencies can exacerbate the vulnerability of endeavors to sustain even the most recent gains (USAID from the American People – Vietnam, n.d.). It is becoming increasingly apparent that employers from several different sectors of the business community seem to be dissatisfied with the level of workplace preparedness of recent graduates, especially in regard to them having the soft skill competencies required to maximize business success (Jaschik, 2015; Jinman, 2005). Moreover, a report by the Ho Chi Minh City Department of Labor, Invalids, and Social Affairs (quoted in Le & Truong, 2005, p. 29) points out that: ‘Only about one third of the companies in operation are satisfied with the qualifications of their new recruits’. Even university graduates, who are considered the most skillful and knowledgeable new entrants into the workforce, are described as lacking the knowledge and soft skills employers
require (Nguyen & Robinson, 2010; Pham, 2008). The shortage of skilled workers, the lack of work-related competencies in graduates, and the high level of unemployment among graduates signify the mismatch between employer needs and university responsiveness (Oliver, 2002, Institute of International Education, 2004). This being so, it is suggested that business enterprises should invest more in their human resource management policies and practices, and cooperate more closely and collaboratively with the higher education sector to close this gap (Le & Truong, 2005; Nguyen & Robinson, 2010; Trinh, 2008).

Tertiary Education

There are two types of higher education institutions in Vietnam, namely college and university. Universities provide both undergraduate and postgraduate programs. Undergraduate programs, depending on specific areas of study, take four to six years for upper secondary school leavers, and one to two years for those having completed related college programs. Universities aim to provide students with consolidated professional knowledge relevant to their general discipline, along with practical skills for individual specific careers. Graduates from undergraduate programs are awarded Bachelor Degrees (Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training, 2006).

Enrolment at the tertiary level has grown dramatically in Vietnam over the last decade, with the national gross enrolment ratio (college enrolment as a percentage of the total college-age population) rising from 10 percent in 2000 to 16 percent in 2005, and 25 percent in 2013 (World Education News
and Reviews, 2014). Given the dramatic rise in the population of tertiary students, it is unsurprising that the number of universities in Vietnam has also been growing rapidly to accommodate them. Vietnam has 234 universities (World Education News and Reviews, 2014). This being so, the system of higher education is facing a plethora of challenges in responding to the employment needs of Vietnam’s growing economy, especially as the country seeks to shift its emphasis away from a focus on low-wage manufacturing towards a much more lucrative consolidation of modern industry and global business innovation.

The Role of the Ministry of Education and Training

As stated, universities are controlled by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET). The Ministry regulates all strategic development and policies of the institutions. The Ministry also monitors administrative matters such as teacher and student recruitment, development in the areas of pedagogic training such as curriculum development, assessment and testing schemes, and teaching methods (Dang, 2009). Regarding considerations of curriculum reform, MOET prescribes the curriculum framework for all undergraduate courses, including ‘content structure, number of subjects, duration of training, time between studying and practicing’ (Hayden, 2005, p. 9). The ‘Education Law’, as it is sometimes called, also reinforces the centrist nature of managing the curriculum framework by ensuring that MOET has responsibility for ‘the compilation and approval of syllabi for common use by colleges or universities (Education Law number 38/2005/QH11). This means that if a university wants to open or develop a new training program or short course, they have first to
get the approval from MOET and their Line Ministries. Institutions do not have much choice about selecting the content of courses in their own institutions let alone determining how the courses are taught. Alongside the curriculum, MOET also has control over the most important decisions of each institution, including course approvals and registration, number of staff, and the specific numbers of students admitted. Even the Chancellor of each institution is designated by MOET (The Southeast Asian Ministry of Education Organization, 2007).

Curriculum

As the higher education system in Vietnam continues to grow steadily, there has emerged a variety of more modern institutions equipped with the newest technology and strategies for hard skills training. Nonetheless, the biggest weakness is the system’s failure to create human resource capacities in soft skills development to meet the demands required to realize industrialization and modernization, while also satisfying the requirements for international integration (Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training, 2005b). When all is said, any progress on the updating of soft skill subjects in the curriculum of tertiary business institutions has not been on par with the more sophisticated needs of Vietnam’s economy (Tran, 2010; Tran & Swierczek, 2009; Nguyen, 2009; Nguyen, 2009; Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training, 2008a; Le & Truong, 2005). The current curriculum framework, according to Tran & Swierczek (2009), is too theory-oriented, and according to Stephen et al. (2006) and Vu (2008), it is too heavily laden with subjects which students are required to take, primarily to accumulate the
compulsory credit points they need in order to graduate (Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training, 2010). Vu (2008) compares the curriculum framework of North-Western University, USA with the one provided by MOET (i.e., the curriculum template every public university in Vietnam is required to follow) and concludes that the curriculum design of the Vietnamese university contains twice the content of the American one. Vietnamese higher education institutions, however, have not given sufficient attention to incorporating essential business skills and other employer needs into their curriculum objectives (Tran & Swierczek, 2009). This problem exists partly because of the lack of collaboration between educational institutions, on the one hand, and the ideological and bureaucratic state centric governance system underpinning business and industry goals in education (Vietnam Competitiveness Report, 2010).

Teaching Staff

In comparison to Business Schools in other countries, higher education in Vietnam does not seem to have prepared itself well enough for the advent of global commercialization, especially in terms of its teaching staff. There is a deficiency in quality and quantity among teaching staff (Nguyen, 2009), despite the fact that the number of enrolments is increasing. The ratio of teachers to students is very high 30:1 (Tran, 2013). According to the statistics provided by MOET, in 2012, there were more than 84,000 university lecturers, both full time and casual staff, employed in the higher education system (HES) with more than 2,2 million enrolled students (Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training, 2012). It is suggested that with the continued growth in
enrolment numbers, these high ratios will continue to rise. Although the qualification level of higher education lecturers is also increasing, the staff are still considered as having insufficient qualifications to do justice to the higher education subjects they are supposed to teach (Ketels et al., 2010; Powell & Lindsay, 2010) More than 50% of tertiary education staff in Vietnam have only undergraduate qualifications (Tran, 2013).

Teaching and Learning Activities

The teaching methods employed in the HES have been criticized as remaining decidedly traditional, dominated by rote learning methodologies such as straightforward memorization and the reproduction of information provided in the lecture format (Tran, 2013). The main behavioral expectation of students in many Vietnamese universities is still to sit quietly in classes, taking notes on whatever the teacher says. The students are then expected to master this material at home, so they can reproduce the information verbatim during examinations (Dapice et al., 2008; Stephen et al., 2006; Vu et al., 2007; and Vu, 2008). The rigid, inflexible, theory-focused curriculum (Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training, 2006) along with its exams, are designed in very traditional ways, with the aim of rechecking the knowledge teachers have provided to students by referencing the textbooks from which the teachers took the information (Vu, 2009), thereby encouraging teachers and students to preserve their traditional teaching and learning styles (Tran, 2013). This teaching and learning style does not encourage individuals to develop creativity, flexibility or cultivate critical reflection. As a consequence, the capacity of newly graduating students to think independently and adapt to the changes required
by ever-changing developments in the workplace is significantly diminished (Dapice et al., 2008).

**Business Undergraduate/Tertiary Education**

The system of higher education, in which the schools of Business play an important role in supporting the country’s economic objectives, are also expected to provide a qualified indigenous labor force to accommodate the needs of a modern business society hoping to advance modernization and further enhance the successful industrialization of the country (Christopher, 2009; Truong, 2006; Tran, 2006). Despite this orientation, only a small number of business universities have been established in Vietnam, with only eight universities of Business amongst 234 universities (World Education News and Reviews, 2014). The two largest universities of Business are the National Economics University in Hanoi and the University of Economics in Ho Chi Minh City, located within the two busiest cities in Vietnam. Other universities are focused on a range of different disciplines, such as natural science, and within these are included Schools of Business. For this study, the Universities of Business will be the focus. The length of a tertiary Business program is four years, requiring 124 to 125 credits (including 10 credits of placement and graduation). To enter this program, students need to finish high school, or its equivalent, and pass the university entrance exam.
Soft Skills Education in Business Programs

Although soft skills are often considered in the global literature as playing an integral role in business success (Lisbon Council, 2007; Prinianaki, 2004), soft skills education remains neglected in the curriculum objectives of Vietnamese business schools. Lamentably, the design of the Vietnamese business curriculum remains deprived of the market-orientation required to be truly competitive. The Vietnamese educational system predominantly focuses on the burden of inculcating the technical skills required for an industrial society (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2007) while the academic orientation of soft skills development remains an obscure disciplinary area in Vietnamese universities (Tran & Swierczek, 2009).

A few business programs cover soft skills as a general subject, but this represents only a minuscule three credits in the syllabus. In some educational institutions, soft skills are integrated into the curriculum as optional credits (Vietnamnet, 2012). Although all educational institutions are under MOET’s management of specific curriculum content, schools of Business are allowed to teach their own version of soft skills which are resourced by an individual or group of individuals in each school and are then approved by MOET. There are a few popular programs relating to ‘soft skills’ currently taught in these schools. These subjects include: Philosophy, Management Psychology, Leadership Arts, Communication Arts, Negotiation Arts, Business Administration, Human Resources Administration, Selling Administration, and Marketing. These skills are regarded by these institutions as necessary for their own students. Furthermore, professional soft skills are sometimes taught in certain business
training centers as short-term courses. Since these units are normally costly, they do not attract many students who do not have the money to attend. However, it is also reported that training for soft skills has become popular in the form of extra-curricular activities and seminars in some Vietnamese universities (ELearning, n.d.).

Although there are different modalities of soft skills training, however, there is still no comprehensive program format that makes it possible to ensure graduates develop soft skills effectively during their degree. While it has been claimed that methods of soft skills instruction have recently been improved by introducing classroom technologies, such as the internet and projectors, designed to increase teacher-student interaction, these methods have not shown themselves to improve the development of student creativity, intellectual imagination and initiative. Even within these contexts, the traditional teaching methods of lecturing to pass on knowledge from the lecturers to students still dominate. Within this approach, there is very little chance for students to engage in soft skills practice. Thus, after leaving the class, many students forget the material they were just been taught (Tran, 2013). Such methods even adversely affect the teachers themselves, as their highly regimented informational approach minimizes their own capacity for creativity and interesting forms of interactional instruction with their students.

Sourcing soft skills lecturers is a major problem within Vietnam's higher education business institutions. There are no professional lecturers with expertise in the field of soft skills. Those who are teaching soft skills in HEIs are lecturers in relevant disciplines, staff whose work relates to students and union
members (Retrac, 2012). Most teachers of soft skills have little, if any, experience in the workplace and they have had few opportunities to pragmatically develop soft skills scenarios. They normally secure a teaching job in the university straight after graduation, having been trained in another discipline. Lamentably, they are nevertheless put in charge of teaching soft skills. This being so, it suggests that both the level of their soft skills expertise and their capacity to effectively teach soft skill competencies to students are manifestly deficient.

The cultural conservatism of Confucian heritage shapes students’ learning style (Tran, 2013). This learning style is claimed to be passive and is no longer appropriate, particularly as university students increasingly need to develop soft skills for the workplace. Within their culture, Vietnamese people are often very ‘closed’ in regards to their interactions with each other. They are self-consciousness and worry about what others think which often makes them reluctant to engage in the kind of conversational exchanges that characterize soft skill development among students. Most of Vietnamese students are very sensitive to peer group perceptions of them, and their capacity for openness is largely controlled by what they think others will say about them. Worried about the observations and comments of others, they are reluctant to show their soft skill capacities, especially in the contexts of team-work and communication.

Research Problem

As indicated above, while the Vietnamese economy needs to have a reservoir of skilled labor, the HES does not provide sufficient human
resources who are adequately equipped with the appropriate soft skills that the economy demands. The gap between what industry needs and the human resources requisite to supply those needs has grown progressively wider. In essence, the demands of the economy have expanded, while the quality of education with respect to specialist training has failed to keep up with the pace of change. All eyes look towards the business higher education sector to provide a sufficient pool of students adequately trained with the skill competencies which business requires.

A considerable scholarly literature has accumulated establishing that soft skills play an integral role in achieving the goals of business (Half, 2016; Laud & Johnson, 2012; Vu et al., 2011; Fotopoulos & Psomas, 2008; Spencer & Spencer, 2003; Ganzel, 2001). It is clear that enough evidence-based research exists to show that to compete effectively within the global economic market, the efficacy of ‘hard skills’ mediation and deployment requires that the people who make use of them must also possess a high level of competency in ‘soft skills’. Regrettably, the investigation conducted by the Institution for Education Research in Ho Chi Minh University of Pedagogy, indicated that 72% of higher degree students in Vietnam remain deficient in soft skill competencies, which in turn, led to an increased number of graduates missing out on jobs (50% in 2008 and 64% in 2011). Statistics drawn from this study also revealed that 50% of higher education graduates had to be retrained at work because they relied solely upon their technical skills and failed to maximize their overall performance due to their deficiency in soft skills (Giao Duc Vietnam, 2012; Tran, 2010; Vallely & Wilkinson, 2008). Clearly, the shortage of skilled workers, coupled with the lack of work-related
competencies in graduates and the high level of unemployment among graduates, signifies the mismatch between employer needs and university responsiveness (Oliver, 2002).

According to ELearning (n.d. para.4), Ms Emanuela Gropello, an expert in economics of the Department of Human Development in East Asia and the Pacific indicates that the higher education system in Vietnam is approaching a new level of consciousness in its development. However, its system is also still influenced by past Soviet approaches in that the curriculum and the course content remain highly theory-oriented and are not pertinent to the current demands of the business workplace (Tran & Swierczek, 2009). Moreover, there is a shortage of qualified higher education teaching staff (General Statistics Office, 2012a) and this negatively affects the quality of education. The inherited infrastructure of most universities is antiquated, and as suggested earlier, teaching methods have remained traditional, focusing on transmitting knowledge from the teacher directly into the head of the student (Dapice et al., 2008; Stephen et al., 2006; Vu et al., 2007; and Vu, 2008). Universities of business have not been able to 'catch up', so to say, with the burgeoning need for a comprehensive soft skills program designed to equip the students to deliver the national and global business objectives held by their potential employers (Tran, 2006, Truong & Metzger, 2007; Tran, 2010; Tran & Swierczek, 2009; Nguyen, 2009; Nguyen, 2009; Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training, 2008a; Le & Truong, 2005). Research also indicates that numerous shortcomings exist in the system, most of which have not been addressed. The study aims to show that unless these pedagogic limitations are transcended, the likely success of universities in Vietnam
carrying out their tasks is very unlikely (Montague, 2013; The World Bank, 2008; Tran & Swierczek, 2009; Tran, 2010). From this it follows that that there is now a desperate need to reform the tertiary education curriculum in general and the Business tertiary education curriculum in particular, with the aim of developing a comprehensive pedagogy for soft skills training.

At this stage, the national education system, together with its various research institutions, is slowly becoming aware of this problem and efforts are supposed to be initiated to address the need for soft skills development in the country (Nguyen, 2009). More recently, the Vietnamese government and MOET have issued instructions that universities will soon have to shoulder the responsibility to ‘equip’ students with soft skills before graduation (Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training, 2008b). In a national workforce strategy report in 2010, studies which focused on the type of soft skills and competencies required for future growth were considered as imperative (Vietnam Competitive Report, 2010). Nonetheless, there is still no comprehensive infusion of soft skills curriculum into tertiary educational institutions.

This being so, it is of paramount importance to carry out a revision of current Business School curricula to incorporate human resource programs which can serve to foster the development of soft skills. Only with a better understanding of the importance of soft skills, and an insightful comprehension of what soft skills business and industry demands from business graduates, can Vietnam advance the ambitious economic journey on which it intends to embark. It is also now palpably clear that educational
institutions should adequately prepare the forthcoming generation of graduates with an employment portfolio which reflects a more comprehensive and balanced measure of hard and soft skills than was previously recognized. The burden of articulating the strategies for development in soft skills pedagogy which can be effectively integrated into the tertiary curriculum will be addressed by my study and needs to be implemented into the curriculum of Business higher education institutions. Within this context, the benefits to be gained from the collaboration of education and the business sector in search of a comprehensive soft skills curriculum in Vietnamese Business schools should be carefully teased out.

**Rationale of the study**

Considerable research evidence has accumulated from studies conducted by Laud & Johnson (2012), Osman, Girardi and Paull (2012) and Mitchell, Skinner and White (2010) which shows that the career success of individuals, especially in the business field worldwide, mainly depends on the level of ‘employee proficiency’ in soft skills. Even though Business schools in the Western World have been addressing this issue since early 2000s, Vietnam's Business Schools remain perilously behind the Western World in recognizing the salient importance of soft skills in Business, and a large hiatus has emerged as a result of the demand for soft skills from the Business sector, and the inability of the academic sector to prepare new graduates with the skills business needs. This gap is serving as a serious impediment to the growth of the Vietnamese economy. Philosophical reflection on the growing body of scholarly research establishes that soft skill competencies and interaction have
become an imperative part of business success. It is clear that the requisite measure of curriculum reform and reconceptualization of the essential role played by soft skills in tertiary business areas of education, has at last set the framework within which the neglected development of business soft skills in Vietnam can be rectified.

The Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training has produced a key report on Vietnamese higher education, focused on a ten-year reform of the education and training system from 1986-1996 (Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training, 1997). The Report confirmed that there is a weak relationship between universities and the business sector, indicating that a long-standing 'communication hiatus' between educational providers and the business recipients they service, has yet to be bridged. One consequence of this deficiency is the poor performance of tertiary students in general and business tertiary students in particular, once they get employed, in as much as they are not adequately equipped with the pertinent array of soft skills demanded in current business environments.

To rectify this problem, this study will enhance a goal-oriented collaboration between tertiary institutions and a representative body of business leaders who can, with authority, help to articulate the competencies which graduating students require in order to achieve success in business. This helps universities to adequately equip their students who will be the prospective labor force for the country, with the appropriate skills required for business success. In addition, the collaboration between universities and business could in turn help to improve the way in which Vietnamese universities develop their soft
skills training and pedagogic activities. Universities do not have enough qualified teaching staff (General Statistics Office, 2012a) who are good at both theory and practice. Teaching and training methods are traditionally theory-oriented (Tran & Swierczek, 2009; Dapice et al., 2008) while the substance of a good soft skills training program involves creating authentic chances for practicing their skills in real workplace environments (Howard, 2007). The level of Vietnamese funding for education is very low, so it is difficult for universities on their own to provide the best soft skills teaching environment and to provide a well-equipped infrastructure to serve their students. Thus, the cooperation of universities and business is beneficial for generating sound strategies for soft skills development. This includes a combined resource of soft skills training staff who possess significant competency in soft skills theory and praxis. Business educators, along with those who have a rich experience in the workplace, should network for contacts that encourage student practice-placements in the workplace which are not costly. This collaboration also provides a rationale for inviting business employers and business educators to participate in the research, with the aim of identifying essential foundations for the creation of an effective curriculum reform.

**Focus of the Study**

It is the burden of this thesis to show that despite the impressive gains made by the Vietnamese economy in recent years, the current downward trend is a sign that the traditional approach to business is no longer adequate to sustain the growth pattern previously enjoyed. There are many reasons for the immanent economic crisis confronting Vietnam, and I make no pretense that the
problem I have addressed here is the only, or even the most important, factor in the downward spiral of Vietnam's Gross National Product (GNP). However, the global nature of economic development has made clear that the deficiency in Vietnam's 'soft skills' competencies in the business arena has made it increasingly difficult to compete in the global marketplace where the paramount importance of soft skills to achieve success in business is acknowledged and addressed. My objective is to show that the need has arisen for Vietnamese economic leaders to liaise with educational leaders to articulate new directions for resolving the burgeoning crisis associated with the excessive focus on the hard skill approach taken within Vietnam's economic infrastructure (Hung & Chen, 2010).

Despite the paucity of research relating to the deficiency of soft skills in Vietnam's business world, research is emerging that addresses this problem. The study by Truong (2006) examines the quality of graduates from business master programmes in Vietnam. His finding suggests that there are 19 soft skill variables which could be used to help both academic and business leaders to improve the performance quality of new graduates coming from these programmes. Another study conducted by Tran and Swierczek (2009) provides 31 important skills with which students in higher education should be equipped. This study also identified the factors that appeared to impact on skills development in higher education. However, both of these research studies are quantitative, and the list of skills they use in their questionnaires are constructed from the basic integration of previous research studies in general, and from a western perspective, not easily generalizable. None of these studies was conducted in Vietnam. This being so, the lists of skills provided do not
necessarily capture the distinctive features of the Vietnamese sociocultural and economic contexts. The concept of ‘employability’ is context dependent (Beckett & Mulcahy, 2006) and the demand on graduate quality keeps changing over time in the context of changing business environments and amongst different countries (Truong & Metzger, 2009). There is a need to contextualize the list of soft skills in specific business fields and in specific countries. Moreover, a recent study by Tran (2013) explores Vietnamese students, graduates and some employers’ understanding about the employability assets in the workplace. The study considers the ways in which students and graduates deploy and present their employability assets in the employment market, identifying some of the relevant socio-cultural factors. However, as helpful as this information is, the research undertaken refers to the spread of employability skills in general, not to Vietnamese situational exemplars.

It is clear that no research studies have to date been undertaken to identify and prioritize the array of sociocultural entrenched values which underpin the relevance of soft skills within the Vietnamese business field. Although the literature shows that there remain many deficiencies in soft skills pedagogy in the Vietnamese higher education system, previous research has not focused on how to resolve these difficulties in order to effectively improve soft skills for learners. Also, there has not to date been any list of essential soft skills in the field of business that has been developed in Vietnam.
Aims of the Study

There are three aims in the study. The first is to assess the status of soft skills proficiency possessed by recent undergraduate and business graduates, thereby revealing the quality of soft skills education in Vietnamese BHEIs. This outcome will help determine whether there is a mismatch between what is required by employers and what universities provide for ascertaining the right start for the prospective progress of soft skills education development.

Identifying which soft skills are most important is the first foundational step for structuring a curriculum renovation. The second aim was to identify those essential soft skills which will equip undergraduate business students for maximize their business employment success. The aim was also to make explicit the extent the role of soft skill competencies could potentially play in the business workplace, and the degree to which undergraduate soft skills business curriculum reform is necessary.

Soft skills education is new in Vietnam. This being so, there exist many deficiencies in soft skills education within the Vietnamese BHEIs. Identifying foundational elements for better soft skills education is imperative. Thus the third aim of the study is devoted to discovering the strategies for soft skills development in Vietnamese Business schools.
Research Questions

1. What is the status of soft skills education in Vietnam?

   a - To what extent do major employers in Vietnam regard the quality of soft skills competency to be adequate among recently graduated tertiary business students?

   b - To what extent do educators of BHEIs in Vietnam regard the pedagogic provision of soft skills as being sufficient?

2. Which soft skills are regarded as the most important in the business workplace?

   a - Which soft skills do major employers in Vietnam identify as being the most important in the business workplace environment?

   b - Which soft skills do educators from BHEIs in Vietnam identify as being the most important for business tertiary graduates?

3. What are the preferred strategies for soft skills development for tertiary business students?

   a - What preferred strategies for soft skills development do major employers in Vietnam perceive as most effective in the higher education business context?
b - What preferred strategies for soft skills development do educators from BHEIs in Vietnam perceive as being most effective for teaching tertiary business students?

4. Are there any significant differences between the respective perceptions of Vietnamese educators and employers concerning the development of soft skills in tertiary business institutions?

   a - Are there any significant differences between the educators and the employers regarding their perceptions of the importance of specific soft skills in the Business School curriculum?

   b - Are there any significant differences between the educators and the employers regarding their perceptions of the development strategies for soft skills development in business tertiary students?

**Significance of the Study**

A serendipitous result of the study is that the information gathered can be utilised on a partial basis for the reform and development of a more pertinent tertiary business education curriculum in Vietnam which attributes an epistemological status to soft skills. This approach is innovative, and it has to date been neglected in the literature. It is possible to foreshadow the foundations of an epistemology for the reconceptualization of soft skills not simply in terms of the conventional discourse concerning their utilitarian contribution to business success, as important as we recognise that aspect of their role to be. The proposal is rather that there is a much richer
epistemological role which they play in terms of what I call their "preconditioned functionality" for the successful development and deployment of hard skills in the context of business and all human relationships. This facilitates the development of curriculum units and programs which specifically address the needs of employers and perspectives of educators.

The study thus represents a highly pragmatic initiative which takes a bold step forward to invite an informed dialogue between employers and tertiary institutions, with the common goal of advancing Vietnam's economic position globally. With a deeper understanding of employers and educators’ perceptions of the essential role played by soft skills in business success, it becomes easier to create curriculum units and programs which specifically address the demands of business workplaces. Instead of identifying skills in general fields as done in previous studies, this study focuses on identifying the specific soft skills which are necessary in the Business field for undergraduate Business students. Given this result, the first significant contribution is to provide educational leaders and educational policy makers with a list of the key instruments of reasonably distinct sets of business relevant soft skills that should be promoted and integrated into the formal Business curriculum. The second contribution is serving Business employers from different backgrounds with a skill checklist for staff development and recruitment.

Alongside with the list of soft skills, the findings of the study serve educational leaders. Educational policy makers need to liaise with appropriate governmental bodies to jointly develop innovative approaches to soft skills development that are suitable to the current status of the country’s education
system, culture and economy. Moreover, such collaboration can reveal more detail about the subtle deficiencies in soft skills training and education in current Business higher education institutions. As such, innovative methods can be evaluated on the grounds of their contextual relevance in the other fields.

Given that there has been little connection between the higher education system and industry within Vietnam (Fatseas, 2010; Pham, 2008), my study will make positive suggestions about the benefits of creating a more comprehensive perspective deriving from the different stakeholders now working together. The benefits of the collaboration between educational institutions and business enterprises in soft skills educational development for Business higher education students should not be underestimated. A regular conversation between educators and employers to develop an evidence-based model for the integration of soft skills into the curriculum is necessary if we are to satisfactorily equip students with the soft skills competencies they need to be successful at work. The mutual supports of business and education in soft skills training and education could also save a lot of money and enhance the effectiveness of training.

Within this context of collaborative contribution, the findings of the proposed research on soft skills in Vietnam also promises to provide an interesting pertinence which is likely to be equally important in improving business success in a number of developing countries. It is thus to be hoped that the position advanced here on the essential role which soft skills play in the business arena globally can thus be adapted to the special socio-cultural circumstances of other developing countries.
The Structure and Organisation of the Thesis

The thesis contains seven chapters as shown in Figure 1.1. The logical connections between each chapter are summarised.
Figure 1.1: The Structure of the Thesis

Chapter 1: Introduction

- Background to the study
- Research problem
- Aims of the study
- Significance of the study

Chapter 2: Literature review

- Importance of soft skills
- Curriculum development
- Educator-employer collaboration
- Strategies for soft skills development

Chapter 3: Methodology

- Qualitative
  - Interviews with employers
- Quantitative
  - Questionnaire for educators

Chapter 4: Qualitative Findings

Chapter 5: Quantitative Findings

Chapter 6: Discussion

Chapter 7: Conclusion
Chapter One, is intended to serve as an introduction to my research study. The problem of the potential crisis in the Vietnamese economy is brought to bold relief, and I show how one way of helping to minimise the problem is through improving the quality of the education currently being provided to tertiary graduate students in business. I argue that business graduates are not adequately equipped with the new range of skills the national and global business markets demand of them. I identify three main objectives to build this argument, and the focus of my research problem is to determine what subjects are missing from the business curriculum in the context of teaching and learning in higher education business institutions in Vietnam. The purpose of the first chapter is to outline the aims of the research, to define the research questions, and to point out the potential significance of the research.

Chapter Two presents a critical literature review. The review begins with a brief discussion on the concept of soft skills. Next, the importance of soft skills in the business workplace and in business education are discussed. The review will then explore the need for curriculum renovation for soft skills development. Following this, the significance of the collaboration between employers and educators in reforming the curriculum for soft skills enhancement will be indicated. The final section discusses the tasks/elements in curriculum reform of which the two main ones are how to identify the skills to be taught and how to train soft skills in Business higher education institutions.

Chapter Three describes the research design and the process of obtaining the data required to answer the research questions, beginning with an explanation of the rationale for undertaking a sequential exploratory mixed
methods design. It also outlines the details of the sampling strategies and research instruments, explains the validation processes, and concludes with the overviews of the data analysis of Phase One and Phase Two.

Chapter Four and Chapter Five report the analysis and outcomes of the two aspects of the fieldwork. Chapter Four focuses on the qualitative results from the interviews with Business employers on the perception of specific soft skills importance in business success, the status of business graduates’ soft skills capacity and the strategies for soft skills development in business schools. Chapter Five concentrates on the findings from business educators’ responses to the status of soft skills education in Business schools, the importance of specific soft skills and the strategies for soft skills development.

Chapter Six provides a discussion of the research findings reported in the previous two chapters and is structured around the research questions. It also focuses on the similarity and dissimilarity of the response from employers and educators, that is, to answer the last research question.

Chapter Seven is a discussion of the contribution of this research to existing knowledge and practice. The chapter concludes with the key findings, the key outcomes, the limitation and suggestions for future research.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has introduced the background information relevant to the current study. It has provided an overview of the thesis and justified the aims of the research study. The next chapter will focus on a critical review of the
literature in the areas of the roles of soft skills in business and curriculum reform for soft skills development.
CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter provides the background to, and thus part of the justification for the doctoral study in which I am engaged. The objective is to present a critical and comprehensive review of a growing literature relevant to the importance of soft skills development for business tertiary students. Four relevant strands of literature are included in this study. The first strand sets the definition of soft skills in the business context. The second strand pertains to the importance of soft skills as a significant factor in achieving career success in business, while also extending critically reflective discussion about the importance of soft skills education. The third strand analyses the deficiencies in soft skills education within the Vietnamese business higher education system, thereby providing the rationale and impetus to develop soft skills programs designed to raise the level of soft skill competencies for business tertiary students. The final strand elaborates a range of potential strategies for the introduction of soft skills development among business tertiary students. In particular, strategies such as curriculum design, instructional methods, instructional labor sources and the adverse effects on the efficacy of soft skills deployment caused by excessive reliance upon computetechnological mediation are explored within the workplace environment.
Definition of Soft Skills

The understanding of what should be recognized as a soft skill is still a disciplinary facet of an inchoate contextual discourse, and thus varies widely from one economic context to another. Nevertheless, there is emerging within the scholarly literature, a more precise account of the concept of soft skills which reflects a certain degree of confluence and coherence amongst the sundry definitional perspectives proffered.

As defined by Perrault (2004), the concept of “soft skills” is intended to emphasize an individual's personal qualities, attributes, and communication skills which enable that person to inform and shape productively the rudimentary ideas of others into transparent and pragmatic scenarios. For example, we submit that one dimension of personal development which can be represented as a soft skill capacity which sets a person apart from other individuals who may have similar technical skills and experience is the level of personalized commitment to a specific task exhibited by that person, thereby in turn augmenting the efficacy of their interpersonal business discourses, generally. According to Meenu and Kumar (2009) ‘soft skills’ should be considered as ‘transferable skills’ that complement ‘hard skills’ or ‘academic skills’, and which thus more effectively consolidate the technical requirements of a particular job. In principle, it could be said that soft skills exist in a symbiotic relationship with hard skills. In essence they should complement each other and when they do, soft skills can transform technical skills into ‘intellectual capital’ (Jackson, 2009, p30), thereby facilitating the effective and efficient application of hard skills in workplace settings (Kantrowitz, 2005; Klaus et al., 2007).
In a more comprehensive context, the Head and Heart Guide (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2010) described soft skills as experientially acquired 'self and people-related' behaviors that complement the use of ‘hard skills’ and technical knowledge/skills in the workplace. The aim is to ensure that the balance between hard and soft skills will enable individuals to navigate successfully the requirements, challenges and current opportunities of their job role in pursuit of more personal, team or organizationally oriented goals. James and James (2004) express a similar opinion on “soft skills”, urging that these skills signal a new heuristic model of human resource development which describes a set of social interaction abilities or talents that can be deployed by an individual to ‘ground’ and consolidate abstract forms of technical discourse into purposive and readily comprehensible action scenarios.

In addition, soft skills are referred to as 'employability skills', displayed by people who have developed an array of interaction skills which allow for enhanced levels of amicable personal interchange. Such soft skills have been shown to be transferrable within many different job contexts (Cleary, Flynn & Thomasson, 2006). This permutation of the soft skills concept refers to the cultivation of “people-related skills” and “personal interaction skills” (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2010), which in more relaxed settings, have come to be described rhetorically as “21st-century skills” (Gewertz, 2007). This being so, soft skills encompass the character traits that monitor how well a person interacts amicably with others. These personal interaction skills become so engrained that they tend to become a defining characteristic of one’s personality. Hard skills can be learned and perfected over time, whereas soft skills are more difficult to acquire, as they involve a process of personal
transformation. That is to say, their very acquisition is synonymous with self-transformation and personal development. I am myself changed in the process of nurturing them, and thus experience a personal metamorphosis into a person who is more considerate and empathetic, and more aware of how to make other people feel good about themselves. In contrast to hard skills, soft skills have been depicted as more experience-based rather than rule-based, more people-oriented rather than technically oriented, less specialized and more transferable, with interpersonal outcomes which are less predictable (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2010).

The idea of what constitutes the category of soft skills has expanded into a broader and more multifaceted concept, capturing its various senses in a variety of adjectival terms such as ‘soft’, ‘generic’, ‘core’, ‘transferable’, ‘social’, ‘employability’ and ‘personal effectiveness’ (Sanguinetti et al., 2004). In this context, soft skills figure as descriptors which in the past have not been considered as skills at all. We have observed above that a number of researchers equate interpersonal skills with soft skills. However, interpersonal skills are only one facet of soft skills. In addition to interpersonal skills, soft skills include personal qualities and career attributes (James & James, 2004; Perreault, 2004). It is to be admitted that the boundaries are not rigid and delimited. Personal attributes might also include aspects of one’s personality, such as amenability, time management prowess, and organizational skills (Parsons, 2008). Career attributes can include communication, teamwork, leadership, and customer service (James & James, 2004). In essence, soft skills have come to comprise a class made up of a combination of interpersonal (people) skills and personal (career) attributes.
In business, soft skills may thus characterize a dimension of various career attributes possessed by an individual. Such skills can serve "to integrate fragments of technological discourse into a unified field code of behavioral praxis" (Laura, 2010).

In the career context, soft skills assist in enabling individuals to more efficiently manage the requirements, challenges and arising opportunities related to their job role (Hayes, 2002; Perrault 2004). They can also serve to enhance the performance levels of individuals or teams (Whetten et al., 2000) support the goals of the individual, team or organization (Martin et al., 2008); and facilitate, support and enhance effective leadership and management behaviors.

In summary, the concept of soft skills is mercurial, and to some extent an abstract or multifaceted concept which represents a compendium of several components, drawn from the category of skills which facilitate general interpersonal exchange on the one hand, and the category of personal interaction skills which facilitate career success on the other. The combination of both these categories of skills, habits and practices, adeptly assist in maximizing the success of one’s work and personal goals. I submit that the professional development of soft skills involves improving the corpus of these skills, and then ensuring an integration of the right mix of these components into formidable skills sets, which in different circumstances of interchange are eventually transformed into competencies. My comprehensive analysis of the literature shows that there is no consensus as to how soft skills should be defined unequivocally, but a confluence of purposive meaning emerges as
these skills are expressed in practice. Although the concept of soft skills has not yet, and may never be defined monolithically, there exists an emerging conceptual confluence of ‘family resemblance’ that can be derived from the overlapping descriptive categories to which I have eluded in the present section. The confluence which generates from the overlap in the use of soft skills is sufficient to give a coherent and lucid sense to their pragmatic use and pedagogic application.

The Importance of Soft Skills

The Importance of Soft Skills in Business Career Success

Considerable research in the 21st century has now accumulated to show that soft skills are far more important to education, business and professional settings than has previously been recognized. For example, it has been shown that soft skills abilities do make a difference to successful negotiations and efficiency in the business world (Workforce, 1999). Moreover, business soft skills have been shown to feature as an important factor in helping 'hard skill' workers to improve their own levels of expertise, by virtue of the fact that their being able to interact effectively with other expert co-workers increases the likelihood that professional ideas will be shared, rather than protected and withheld (Hawkins & Winter, 2006).

According to some studies, soft skills account for as much as 70% to 85% of an individual’s success, whereas hard skills or technical knowledge contribute only for the remaining 15% to 30% (Hommerichhousen, 2002; Klaus, 2010; Watts & Watts, 2008). However, there are other views by Pittenger, Miller
& Mott (2004) and Nealy (2005) showing that employers and recruiters clearly consider that the soft skill traits of their recruits represent a critical factor every bit as important as is the possession of hard skills. In addition, the results of the study taken by Pritchard (2013) again confirms the two above points that 75% of employers surveyed agreed that soft skills were as important as, or more important than, technical skills in securing entry-level employment and also suggests that some soft skills are better predictors of adult success (salaries, graduation rates, home ownership) than technical skills.

Soft skills are so important that some employers identify them as “the number one differentiator” for job applicants in all types of industries. Soft skills are becoming increasingly regarded as being of paramount importance to achieving success in all types of occupations (Wilhelm, 2004; Sutton, 2002). In a survey of four metropolitan areas in different regions of the US – Atlanta, Boston, Detroit, and Los Angeles, an economist at Michigan State University, Harry Holzer (sited in Conrad & Leigh, 1999), found that more than 50% of entry level jobs require social and interpersonal skills. Other economists at the University of Massachusetts conducted a study which established that 86% of employers nationwide include the soft skills of candidates among their most important hiring criteria (Conrad & Leigh, 1999). Similarly, it has been shown that employees who do not have excellent soft skills do not in general experience success in both obtaining and sustaining employment (Blaszczynski & Green, 2012). Glenn (2008) has alluded to studies which show that hiring individuals who possess soft skills will statistically improve the chances that the employing organization will retain and even improve its high-performing competitive edge. Hemby and Crew (2005) observed that when the economy is
employers are understandably very selective and discriminating in their hiring procedures. Although the study reveals that the best and brightest employers will be sought, it also shows that within that group of candidates, the largest constituent is made up of those with a strong foundation of soft skills. From these studies, the evidence makes clear that job candidates who possessed soft skills, along with their technical competencies, emerge as the preferred applicants for job placement by employers (The World Bank, 2008).

Many studies have emphasized the importance of soft skills in business when discussing job competency. Scholars such as Spencer and Spencer (2003) have confirmed that high quality performance is not only determined by better technical skills, but also by employees personalizing the quality of their interrelationships with the purchaser. Similarly, Buhler (2001) and Ganzel (2001) proffer that business soft skills are the key in determining the priority to be given to the actual tasks being performed, increasing the employee’s capacity to make effective and informed leadership decisions which help others to adapt to challenges in the workplace. Brown (2003) and Byham and Moyer (2005) agree that the combination of knowledge/wisdom and hard skills comprise the visible foundation of soft skills competency. Brown (2003) also includes soft skill creativity and interpersonal skills as vital elements of soft skill competency.

Prinianaki (2004) argues convincingly that it is business soft skills which count most when it comes to ensuring the growth of the organization. Also, Hunt and Baruch (2003) emphasize that it is of monumental importance that employers are cognizant of the value of soft skills by acting in leadership ways
that encourage and protect them. The value of employee soft skills should thus be regarded as assets which represent the keys to success within the business organization for its lifetime. Many companies in the western worldwide have realized the growing need to invest significantly in soft skills training in order to groom their employees to present themselves in a more professional manner and to improve their interactional levels of performance. The Eastern world, though still not yet fully awakened, has also become more aware of the integral role played by soft skills for success in the business world. Moreover, it is argued that profits significantly improve when employees undergo higher levels of soft skills training, partly as a consequence of increased levels of job satisfaction, better communications and work commitment (Keep & Mayhew, 2011). Reinforcing this position is a study by Fotopoulos and Psomas (2008) which confirmed that soft skill elements are essential to achieve total quality management in business today; stating that improvement in quality control and the consolidation of the company’s market position are mostly influenced by adopting soft skills which serve to enhance the framework of instrumental praxis, sustaining hard skills competencies.

Economic success in the global market place depends crucially on the effective use of foundational skill-assets such as communication, amiability, and interpersonal negotiation skills which act as a vital resource for achieving competitive advantages in global trading (Lisbon Council, 2007). It is also predicted that success in economic competitiveness and national well-being depends on having a workforce which is able to respond to compounded challenges which depend crucially on employee acquisition of soft skills. Being trained in soft skill practices serves to augment their levels of adaptability,
problem-solving, communication skills, and even the motivational disposition which employees gain for client loyalty and the values of management (Payne, 2000).

It submits that the success of a country’s economic and social development plans will depend on those involved possessing a range of soft skills which are pertinent to particular contexts of negotiation. A high quality work force with the right balance of hard and soft skills is axiomatic in the business policy arena to ensure a far more empathetic arena within which the ongoing competitiveness of employees, firms, co-operations and national economies eventuate (Grugulis, 2003; The Work Foundation, 2008).

The Importance of Soft Skills in Business Education

Nowadays, employers are more concerned about graduates’ soft skills capacities, such that these skills have become more important in the recruitment process than the graduates’ degree performances (Harvey, 2000). Basically, employers seek a graduate who is equipped with interactive, personal (Harvey, 2000) and generic skills (Hager et al., 2002). This finding has also been supported by Purcell et al. (2002) who have revealed that for some employers, a degree may now not represent anything more than a minimum requirement of entry to the workforce, in addition to other evidence of suitability.

Amongst many business researchers and educators, soft skills are gaining greater recognition of their potential importance, especially in the field of business education (Laud & Johnson, 2012; Osman, Girardi & Paull, 2012; Mitchell, Skinner & White, 2010). It is argued by Laura (2010) that ‘soft skills
encourage forms of empathetically motivated interaction with the aim of building bonds of trust and relationships of loyalty with colleagues and customers’ (Cited in Truong & Laura, 2015). Soft skills interaction of this kind is now being recognized as the foundation upon which the edifice of long-lasting successful business relationships can be built. Hard skills are admittedly the foundation of certain aspects of technological production, but to achieve long-term success, even in this area, requires that employees with these technical skills are able to get on amicably and civilly with each other. Thus, it is the balance between the acquisition of hard skills and soft skills that allows for a sufficient level of personalisation to be formed within business relationships thereby cultivating deep and trusting relationships. Kauffeld, Grote and Frieling (2003) propose that hard and soft skills together constitute the unifying dimension of professional competence which allows an individual to achieve a goal-oriented and situational directedness, with regard to working tasks, and that the best indicator for the assurance of predictably higher success outcomes will depend on the level of harmonic integration of hard and soft skills. Human resource programs can be developed to ensure that the soft skills selected complement the hard skills which are associated with the acquisition of technical knowledge. When this balance is mediated effectively, the training programs designed to reflect these values will provide a strategic framework of praxis by way of which professional objectives can felicitously be achieved (Laura, 2010). Thus, by better understanding the extent to which the techniques deployed to enhance cooperative collegiality are personalised, the balance between soft and hard skills is more likely to be brought to fruition.
“No longer can educators place a predominant emphasis on the 'hard skills', which relate to the clearly defined and more technical requirements of the job; there must be equal weight given to 'soft skills' as they represent necessary complementarities to acquiring and maintaining employment” (Blaszczynski & Green, 2012, p. 31). Moreover, according to Schulz (2008), soft skills are now perceived in the US to be an imperative component in any educational program which aims to foster competencies which lead to the provision of a balanced life-style for its students, both during and after college. Also, it has been shown that soft skills help university students to develop self-esteem, confidence and a prudential level of assertiveness that is crucial in having the determination to complete their program of studies, perform well during job interviews, and to become successful business leaders (Jamison, 2010). In the UK, the Dearing Inquiry (Dearing, 1997) reported a shift in the priorities in higher education with some evidence showing an increase in demand to include soft skills into schools, colleges and universities curricula (Dunne & Rawlins, 2000; Keep & Mayhew, 1999). Similar trends occurred in Europe where much effort has been exerted throughout the European Union (EU) and in other European countries in attempts to enhance the competitiveness of European industry and commerce (Curtis & McKenzie, 2001). The Key Competencies framework defined by the Mayer Committee in 1992 was a landmark for soft skills development in Australia (Mayer, 1992). Thus, it is evident that the role played by soft skills in personal and career success is of salient importance.

However, Vietnam has not yet paid adequate attention to the place of soft skills in the business arenas. The report of the Vietnamese Ministry of Education on “Summary and Evaluation on the ten-year Reform of Education
and Training (1986-1996)” (1998) emphasised that there is a very weak relationship between universities and business sectors, which means that the graduates cannot meet the demands of the society in the new competitive business environment. Since the Vietnamese economy is in a transitional stage, business sectors are desperately in need of procuring staff possessing soft skills who are able to examine issues in detail and to explain thoroughly the situations encountered, thus ‘critical thinking’ is a very important factor (Truong & Metzger, 2007). Moreover, Vietnam is in the stage of global economics integration which requires an indigenous labour force who are equipped with both hard skill knowledge and soft skills capacities. Studies have shown that people with this balanced amalgam of skills will be more likely to perform their tasks more effectively at national and international comparative business working environments. This being so, it is clear that soft skills programs must be developed and taught in Vietnam, especially in business education courses which can then be reframed within the purview of new goals designated towards making them readily available (Gordon, 2011; Blaszczynski & Green, 2012).

In summary, the quite considerable accumulation of studies around the globe which show the many benefits of systematically integrating soft skills into all business disciplines needs determinately to be addressed in the Vietnamese context (Bowers & Metcalf, 2012; Osman, Girardi & Paull, 2012). To create and nurture top notch successful business professionals, it will be imperative to develop training programs in business schools which are devoted to the cultivation and fine-tuning of soft skills specifically designed to maximize the success of their business negotiations. This being so, a new and positive emphasis on soft skill educational processes is essential if Vietnam intends to
establish and preserve a secure foundation for competitive business interactions. Closing skill gaps directly impacts, I submit, upon improved productivity, employment, and enterprise creation and management. These proactive initiatives should be reflected in government, corporate and educational policies that encourage the development of such courses in Vietnamese business institutions. The importance of identifying, developing, and publicising the specific soft skills that will be most needed in Vietnam to support its increasingly expeditious future business development needs to be addressed immediately.

Curriculum Reform for Soft Skills Development

A Need for Curriculum Reform

Curriculum is the primary vehicle for assuring that the quality of professional preparation for those who enter the workforce in Vietnam and that they are properly equipped with skills they need for business success. It has become a rhetorical commonplace to describe the current situation for globally-based higher education institutions as one which requires rapid adaptation in response to the demands of a global knowledge economy (Puymbroeck et al., 2010). However, business schools and colleges worldwide, but particularly in Vietnam, are often criticised for not creating and delivering curriculum programs which respond effectively to the needs of its students, graduates, and the business community (Bodewig et al., 2014). Given the strong evidence from much of the current research on soft skills, it is clear that the traditional approach to business education used by most universities and colleges in
Vietnam does not provide sufficient soft skills training to their business students to maximize the likelihood of their success. (Bailey, Sass, Swiercz, Seal, & Kayes, 2005). In comparison to the western commitment to soft skills education, Vietnam lags behind in the satisfactory preparation of business students for the competitive national and international commercial environments in which they are likely to find themselves, if they were to become employed (Bovinet, 2000; Jauch et al., 2000; Olian et al., 2002; Porter & McKibben, 1988). While it is to be conceded that Vietnamese businesses are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of soft skills for the success of business students, both in gaining employment and working effectively in the commercial world, tertiary educators have been slow to produce the soft skills developmental programs needed, and to undertake the innovative curriculum reform necessary to implement them so students are able to procure these skills (Wilhelm, 2002). Yucelt (1998) has persuasively contended that part of the blame lies with business schools for choosing to continue teaching courses in their 'comfort zone', instead of revitalizing their programs with the soft skills competencies that business firms are looking for in graduate employees. Some academics and many employers complain that college graduation requirements, based primarily on getting passing grades on academic courses, fail to produce graduates that have the balance in the hard and soft skill competencies needed to succeed in the workplace (Oblinger, et. al. 1998). The recognition of this deficiency has come to be referred to as a “skills gap,” and is described as a hiatus that separates the scholarly approach to business education from an academic but more practical approach to business education which focuses in the development of a balance in hard and soft skill competencies. This, in turn, provides graduates
with improved opportunities for employment and effective job performance, especially among young people just entering the workforce (Smith, 2002).

In response to increased global competition and the expansion of the world economy, businesses are seeking workers who are well-prepared and grounded in soft skills (Caudrin, 1999; Solomon, 1999; Himmesbach, 1999). Globally, many universities are in this regard also subject to national initiatives and are responding to perceptions of the changes required by a new global economy in education (Pegg, 2013). According to David (2010), as the job market for business graduates becomes more competitive, business programs must be developed which include creative and innovative ways to provide their students with a competitive edge. In response to the need to develop soft skills among business graduates, several well-known US business schools have developed programs and courses to teach leadership and other “soft skills” to business graduates. Research findings derived from many international studies suggest strongly that higher education institutions should target improvements in soft skills programs, or at least the inclusion of soft skills training into existing business units. Integrated soft skill training programs serve to provide ‘specific personality development components’ pertaining to openness and extroversion in the business curriculum which are critical to effective business interaction in the workplace and in business negotiations (Daud et al., 2011).

In the Vietnamese system of higher education, the schools of business play an important role in supporting the country’s economic objectives, as they are the key providers of qualified indigenous manpower for a modern business society facilitating modernisation and further industrialisation of the country
(Christopher, 2009; Truong, 2006; Tran, 2006). However, Vietnam is facing a key challenge in terms of skill deficiency that serves as an impediment to quality and standard of human resource competence to maintain growth in the context of economic progress. There exists a mismatch between the needs of employers and the educational provision of soft skills, thereby making it difficult for educational institutions to catch up with the development of the Vietnamese economy (Tran & Swierczek, 2009; Tran, 2012).

The academic orientation of soft skills development is still an obscure disciplinary area in Vietnamese universities and is far behind compared to business educational performance internationally (Tran & Swierczek, 2009). As is strongly evident, educational researchers have recently examined the curriculum of some of the major Schools of Business in Vietnam and identified a number of deficiencies, one of which is the overemphasis on theory, without linking it adequately to actual workplace practice, and soft skills needs (Tran, 2012; Stephen et al., 2006). Although soft skills are perceived as an imperative element in Vietnamese business success, they are not included in the formal curriculum in many business schools (Robles, 2012; Truong & Laura, 2012; The World Bank, 2011). The research findings of Tran (2013), based on interviews with students, graduates and employers, reinforce the views of Stephen et al. (2006) who revealed that the university curriculum, in Vietnam in particular, does not afford adequate soft skills development programs for students. There is a lack of focus on soft skills, both in the curriculum and in the ways in which teaching, learning and assessment are conducted at university. The study also revealed that the soft skills of graduates are generally weak and cannot meet
the demands of the workplace, a shortcoming that has been blamed directly on the university sector in Vietnam.

The demand for soft skills has escalated significantly in Vietnam due to a combination of inter-industry and employment changes, along with capital accumulation and growing evidence which demonstrates the importance of a soft skills-based infrastructure to manage the rapid and effective response patterns required to meet the sometimes capricious dynamics of market volatility (The World Bank, 2008). The Vietnamese Government, the national education system, together with its various research institutions, are slowly becoming aware of this problem, and efforts have recently been made to achieve strategic breakthroughs in developing quality human resources through comprehensive reform and renovation of the national education system (Nguyen, 2009). In response to globalisation, new trade arrangements, developments in information technology, and the need to overcome the soft skill deficiencies of the Vietnamese education system as indicated above and in Chapter 1, the Vietnamese educational system has now embarked on major reforms. Their aim is to reform the curriculums of modern higher education systems, such that they can support economic and social development and facilitate enhanced international trade and communications. Therefore, one of the main reform agendas proposed by Pham (2010) is the renewal, restructuring and internationalisation of the higher education curriculum; and the development of a more internationally integrated higher education system. This is a huge mission for Vietnam, and will require trebling the gross enrolment rate by 2020; involving an estimated enrolment increase to 4.5 million students by 2020 (Harman et al., 2010). Harman recommended that Vietnam should
restructure higher education in an attempt to provide for much larger student enrolments and greater student diversity, new curricula and improved teaching methods, with an enhanced role to be played by university research, with stronger links to business and industry. Also, given the current stage of the Vietnamese global economic integration, in accord with the Socio-Economic Development Strategy (SEDS) 2011-2020, the curriculum reform is implicitly an incentive to implement one of the three "breakthrough areas": promoting human resources/skills development (The World Bank, 2011; British Council, 2012).

Collaboration of Educator and Employer

In Vietnam, not unlike many other countries there is an “expectation gap” between industry needs and academic preparation, as explained by Trauth et al. (1993). The soft skills mismatch is now becoming a burning issue in Vietnamese tertiary education (The World Bank 2008). Specifically, higher educational institutions (HEIs), particularly business educational institutions (BEIs) have not yet been able to provide programs which focus on the relevant soft skills. Nor have they been sufficiently 'au fait' with the nature of the right mix of soft skills required to meet the growing needs of the Vietnamese economy. This being so, there remains in Vietnam an infelicitous skills gap between the provision within higher education of efficient soft skills programs on the one hand, and the employers’ requirements for soft skills efficacy on the other (Pham, 2008). As observed earlier, despite the well-demonstrated demand for soft skills in the workplace, there is widespread agreement by recruiters and employers that many graduates remain deficient in this area. Recruiters have themselves recently called upon higher education to review and redevelop the
curriculums which unambiguously define the soft skills training that can be provided. (Tran, 2013).

Business has a long tradition of involvement in education (Szul, 2002). Assessment of the curriculum to meet workforce needs is an idea that higher education cannot do alone. Jones and Harrington (2002) suggested that collaboration is a vital step in the development of appropriate educational programmes in higher education. According to Phung (2008), strategic partnerships between employers and educators are one of the main factors which would positively contribute to the amelioration of workforce needs. Szul (2002) emphasises the importance of business and education partnership which enhances the quality and relevance of business education for tertiary students. Similar arguments have also been made earlier by Trauth et al. (1993) in which he strongly recommended the establishment of a strong linkage between higher educational institutions and business firms to close this skill gap. In the study, the collaborative partnership is considered to be a crucial factor for the effective development of curriculum, instructional methods, and instructional source for improving soft skills among higher students, but to date the liaison between these two bodies has not been consecrated.

**Understanding of the Collaboration in Education**

There are many different definitions of collaborative partnerships (see Huxham, 1996; Pratt et al., 1998;). In its simplest form, it is about working jointly together with at least one other person or group. However, the terms and conditions under which the agreement to work together are made can produce
very different results, and the nature of any pre-existing or developing overt or covert power relationships can also impact adversely on the relationship (Tett et al., 2001, 2003).

There are two prerequisites that come from definitions of partnership. Firstly, there is an identified ‘mutual benefit’ in the exchange (Tett et al., 2003, p. 39). This should be overtly stated in terms of the aims of the collaboration, but as we shall see later, the nature of the aims is all too often obscured. Secondly, there should be ‘a change in process, product or output’ (Tett et al., 2003, p. 39) as a result of the contributions made by the partners. There is, therefore, an underpinning assumption that collaborative partnership working is a good thing, and that it is a synergistic relationship where the total effect is greater than the sum of the parts. Szul (2002) clarifies the partnership nexus between business and the educational programs which are supposed to afford the expertise it needs. Szul also indicates that the nature of the partnership is changing; the most successful partnerships no longer concentrate on the proliferation of specific activities, but instead strive for sustainability and focus on areas related to the comparative changes in the workplace that are driving the burgeoning economy. Glenn (2001) states that partnerships are about strategic workforce development issues and the ability to leverage time, content, and resources to serve education reform.

The research of Rupavijetra (2010) suggested that the goal of 'cooperative education' in business will not be successful if it occurs only in the context of efforts being made by institutions of higher education. To be successful, it also needs the contribution and full collaboration from industrial
sectors, business organizations, employers, and strong support from the government as well. Cognizant of this fact, many of universities in the western world regularly conduct employers' needs surveys to identify the requirements and expectations which particular employers may have to accommodate workforce trends (Weligamage, 2009), but this is not yet happening in Vietnam. This is a process that I contend in this thesis should be recommended. Also, many western universities also conduct regular surveys with those business educators working on the development and articulation of effective soft skill sets (Andrews & Tyson, 2004; Bowers & Metcalf, 2008, Elmuti, Minnis, & Abebe, 2005, Tran, 2013), but again, this is not yet happening in Vietnam.

In the Western world, particularly in the US and Great Britain, the contribution of employers in the context of cooperative business curriculum development is significant. There is a growing recognition of the importance of promoting the needs of employers and workplace businesses in the higher education curriculum (Saunders & Machell, 2000). Employers normally give their comments on the particular skills they are looking for to their new employees, so universities can equip these skills, thus preparing their students for work readiness (Weligamag, 2009).

Harman et al., (2010) also endorsed this view on an enhanced role of university research with stronger links to business and industry and stronger effort to integrate employer needs into the curriculum (British Council, 2012; Tran & Swierczek, 2009). Tran (2013) has also emphasized the crucial place of universities to achieve these goals, especially in a collectivist culture like Vietnam: The absence of guidance and information relating to the employment
market in universities has been partly responsible for the impoverished level of preparation characteristic of university students with quite specific needs and facing transition into business workplaces. In such a dynamic culture, it is clear that without research-based information from universities on the role played by soft skills in filling these needs, students will continue to be unprepared for the jobs in which they find themselves. This being so, it is argued in many research studies that the regular conversation of educational institutes and business is very necessary to produce relevant and updated skills sets, along with the most efficacious of change delivery methodology to support the development of soft skills for the innovative programs more relevant to employers’ needs (Andrews & Tyson, 2004; Bowers & Metcalf, 2008; Doria, Rozanski, & Cohen, 2003; Elmuti, Minnis, & Abebe, 2005).

According to Barnett (2011), HEIs can potentially play a monumental part in ensuring that students are effectively trained in soft skills, thereby significantly impacting on the production of a highly skilled workforce. Nonetheless, to negotiate effectively towards this end, they need to be cognizant of workforce trends as exhibited by employers’ perceptions, in virtue of which adjustments can accordingly be made to the curriculum and its modalities of instruction. Barnett used a simple graphical model (see Figure 1) to depict the industry/education partnership concept such that the needs of the workplace are used as the catalyst for researchers to develop an educational response.
This model for curriculum modification in the four-year institution will also be vital to producing graduates who have obtained employability skills that more closely match those of potential employers. This Greater Educational Achievement Response System (GEARS) considers the needs of the workforce as the primary engine that is used to develop learner outcomes which will then generate the educational responses required. In essence, the identification of workforce needs represents the main “gear” that starts the wheels turning towards developing learning outcomes and creating an appropriate educational response to meet those outcomes.
Effective Development of the Collaboration of Educator and Employer

A recent study of Phung (2009) revealed that the collaborative relationship between universities and industry in Vietnam is virtually non-existent, due to the ignorance on the part of both parties as to the soft skills issue involved, and the fundamental lack of mutual understanding between industries and universities (Chinvorarat, 2001; Phung, 2009). Phung (2009) also emphasized that a decisive element in achieving success in such collaboration depends on making clear what benefits are for both sides (Win-Win). Other researchers of collaborative curriculum partnerships have found that one of the critical success factors is a clear articulation of the aims of each of the stakeholders and the convergence of those aims towards a common purpose (Field, 1995; Jones, 2000; Tett et al., 2001; Clegg & McNulty, 2002). The strategic aims are usually agreed and subscribed by all the partners and stated publicly in programme documentation. This clarity of purpose is important for securing commitment of the stakeholders to provide the resources necessary to undertake the required developments. In the collaboration between universities and industry, the benefits of universities are in the development of a better business curriculum, improved instructional methods and a more professional instructional labour source, thus leading to earning big payments drawn from the orders placed by industrial sectors. While industrial sectors also have explicit initial aims or benefits associated with the university supply of potential employees who can actually meet the demands of industry, maximising innovative approaches in business development, inventions and consultant services (Phung, 2009). The literature and findings of Lowden et al. (2011)
reveal that it is difficult for universities to secure employers’ engagement in education programmers, while their views on course design are often disregarded. Therefore, it is necessary for HEIs to recognise the situations in which partnerships can be sustained and to take responsibility for encouraging employers to contribute in ways which have an impact on course design. Also, it is important to acknowledge that HEIs may have to initiate and monitor these partnerships relationships.

As Trim (2001) has pointed out, the most successful partnerships occur where institutions have similar value systems. The participants in the partnerships need to be amenable to the strategy whereby the emergent aims are not necessarily stated explicitly at the outset, but are only revealed slowly as the project develops, and good relationships between the parties unfold. Without trust between the partners as this process happens, the cooperative project puts itself in jeopardy. The participants in the partnership need to be ready to recognize these emergent aims and work cooperatively to make them explicit. When all is said, it is clear that the universities of business in Vietnam should, with the utmost seriousness, acknowledge the need to collaborate with business sectors which are prepared to employ significant numbers of business graduates with soft skills competencies. Dr Tuan of MOET has reinforced the idea that university-industry links need to be made stronger, and has endorsed the idea that if this objective is to succeed, more cooperative research should be conducted to develop strategies that best assist the integration of employer soft skill needs into the business school curriculum (British Council, 2012; Tran & Swierczek, 2009).
Curriculum Reform

The educational system has an important role in the development of soft skills (Pritchard, 2013) and in the western world many colleges and universities have responded to the calls for curricular reform (Dvorak, 2007; Fisher, 2007), but it has proven to be challenging to find the most effective way to teach soft skills (Navarro, 2008; Pittenger, Miller, & Mott, 2004). In redesigning a curriculum, the perceptions of those who deliver the education are required and the expectations of those who are the beneficiaries of the educational outcomes must be taken into account (Phillips, Settoon & Phillips, 2008). The approach to curriculum development shapes the nature of student learning (Venville, Sheffield, Rennie & Wallace, 2008) monumentally. Decisions need to be made on which design to use; what to be taught; and the type of teaching methods and instructional strategies to be deployed.

Integrating Soft Skills into the Curriculum

Houghton and Proscio (2001) have pointed out that there are several approaches to assist in improving training programs for soft skills development. There is a common view that the most effective way to teach soft skills is to integrate them into the general curriculum and provide opportunities for experiential learning in a multidisciplinary setting (Cyphert, 2002; Elmuti, Minnis, & Abebe, 2005; Luse, 1999; Navarro, 2008). Another proposal is the integration of employability skills into the broader curriculum rather than developing one specific course to assist in increasing student soft skills levels (Glenn, 2007; Gray, Emerson, & MacKay, 2005). In addition, instead of developing an entirely
new curriculum, the teachers can also modify delivery of existing course content to include the skills employers need through real-world learning experiences such as private sector collaborations and guest speakers from the employers sector (Gray, Emerson & MacKay, 2005). Devadason et al. (2010) postulates that the most effective way of integrating soft skills is via a holistic approach designed to implement soft skills pedagogy within existing units which reach a wide range of students in higher education. The program envisaged is divided and enumerated as two models: the ‘Stand Alone’ model, and the ‘Embedded’ model.

The Stand Alone Subject Model

According to Chadha (2006), in the Stand-Alone or Bolting-on model, skills are developed independently of the core discipline, enabling the explicit development of students’ transferable skills. This model relies on an approach to Business School skills training by providing opportunities for students to develop soft skills through specific courses that are carefully planned for this purpose. The strategy is to make these special subjects available by offering them within the established structure of general university courses (such as English language, entrepreneurship, and economics), or as elective courses, such as public speaking, critical thinking, and history. Faculties can also offer stand-alone subjects which provide students with the opportunity to develop soft skills on a more focused and formal basis (Shakir, 2009). The courses in this category often form part of the overall requirements that make up the program. The number of specific units and credits in this category depends on the curriculum design and the requirements of the overall program.
The stand-alone subject model can also be initiated by encouraging students to sign-up for several additional units which can be accumulated to constitute a minor subject area. This is different from the initial program in which they may have been enrolled, as in the case, for example, of a student who might have been pursuing an engineering program, but is encouraged to take minor courses in management or mass communication, or in this case, soft skills. However, such an approach will usually require an increase in the number of credits and time spent for the particular program. In addition, according to Shakir (2009), if the subjects are elective in nature, students may decline to register for these subjects, as they may have their own preference. In such circumstances, it is the lecturers’ role to advise these students accordingly. Furthermore, as these subjects are perceived as non-core courses, students sometimes tend to pay less attention to elective units than they do to core subjects which form part of the course programs they are undertaking, and to which they choose to give priority. Moreover, some researchers such as Tait and Godfrey (1999) question whether ‘bolt-on’ units, otherwise referred to as ‘stand-alone’ programs have the capacity to ensure that the necessary soft skills are adequately covered and have competent teachers to offer them.

The Embedded Model

For the development of soft skills based on formal teaching and learning, it has been suggested that soft skills are best embedded in the curriculum within the general academic program, where the objectives, learning outcomes and teaching strategies associated with soft skill development are properly activated (Adnan et al. 2012). Pritchard (2013) supports this view and argues that soft
skills programs are most effective when they are woven through an entire training program and not relegated to stand-alone workshops. This model deploys the approach of embedding soft skill learning within the existing teaching and learning activities across the curriculum. It does not require the student to take special courses as in the stand alone subject model. Instead, the students are trained to master soft skills through various formal teaching and learning activities that are planned and carried out using specific strategies and methods. In this way, the content and learning outcomes designated for the respective courses are still effectively achieved and maintained. The learning outcomes related to soft skills will thus be integrated in such a way that the learning outcomes of the respective courses is preserved. This is thought to be one of the most practical ways of inculcating soft skills to students, as minimal or almost no changes need to be made to the current course structure (Shakir, 2009). There is good evidence to demonstrate that the 'soft skills integration strategy' provides various subject contexts within which soft skills choices can be grounded and more comprehensively informed. This being so, there is a strong incentive to adopt integrated soft skill delivery systems within different coursework programs within institutions of higher learning (Pachauri & Yadav, 2014).

Given the implementation of the embedded model for the inculcation of soft skills, the curriculum within which it is entwined can be elaborated and evaluated based on various outcomes, efficacious delivery techniques, and assessment methods. Each element of soft skills competency can be spelled out by reference to relevant learning outcomes, and then translated into the instructional plan for the semester. This is followed by implementing several
teaching and learning activities such as questioning, class discussion, brainstorming, team work, presentation, role play, and simulation, field work and site visits.

In general, the development of soft skills using the embedded model requires that the expertise of the lecturers be extended to incorporate various teaching strategies and methods that are entirely student-centred. It also involves active teaching and learning which encourages students to participate actively in the pedagogic process. Some of the appropriate strategies and methods that are practical include: (i) learning by questioning, (ii) cooperative learning, (iii) problem-based learning (PBL), (iv) e-learning. By embedding skills into the curriculum, it is possible to forge learning links and for students to develop a broad range of skills (Fieldhouse, 1998). However, since lecturers play a key role in the implementation and assessment aspect, lecturers should be creative in designing their teaching modules so as to integrate the relevant skills.

*Integrating soft skills into extra curriculum*

Soft skills can also be developed indirectly through support programs such as co-curricular activities. Activities such as these are non-academic in nature, but indirectly assist students in developing their personality and character. These programs allow the students to explore any of their areas of interest, and this is accomplished by enrolling them in co-curricular and extra-curricular activities that nurture and cultivate their interests and broaden the scope of their personas (Shakir, 2009). According to a study taken by World
Challenge (2015), extra-curricular activities potentially provide one of the most valuable modalities of learning, helping students to deepen their perception of the world and work experience options. Extra-curricular activities also offer students the chance to develop self-discipline and their sense of self-motivation, thereby augmenting the range of transferable skills that they can bring to the workplace. In turn their chances of securing employment are dramatically increased.

**Curriculum Integration and Concept-Based Curriculum**

Curriculum integration (Beane, 1997) and concept-based curriculum (Erickson, 2007) are transforming theory into practice. As the gap between theory and praxis diminishes, the easier it becomes for those who deliver soft skills instruction to 'give life' to the material they present. Beane (1997) describes 'curriculum integration' as a teaching model that enables students and teachers to identify areas of personal interest to pursue research problems and philosophical issues, where appropriate, without being restricted by conventional boundaries between subject-areas. In addition, curriculum integration encourages problem-solving, real-world application and enhanced social consciousness as part of the learning process, making it a more comprehensive way of educating and of learning (Lake, 1994). Howard (2007) emphasised the importance of designing curriculum to develop real-world, transferable workplace skills for students. He outlined opportunities for the incorporation of problem-based learning activities to help students think and reflect critically. As their conceptual and philosophical acumen improves, business students become better equipped to identify and implement key
concepts, a skill that many employers see as lacking in their applicants. A study by Martin et al. (2008) revealed that 'problem-based learning' helped students to more effectively develop their hard and soft skills within the context of problem frameworks which required the deployment of both skills. Similarly, Laura (2010) refers to problem-based learning as a modality of 'reflective engagement' on real life scenarios and problems, in turn developing strategies based on relevant theoretical and philosophical approaches. Laura argues that the relationship between hard and soft skills should not be regarded as an 'exclusive disjunction', such that the divide between them is determinate. On his view the idea that a skill is determinately hard or it is determinately soft over-simplifies the conceptual relationship between them to a point of distortion. Laura claims that the relationship between them is not so rigidly fixed, and thus they can be conceptually described as being located on at the alternate end points of continuum which, depending on the circumstances, can actually blur the boundary between hard and soft skills as if they were two sides of the same coin. Construing the distinction between the two skill sets less proscriptively, Laura urges, affords an opportunity to expand the imaginative horizons of 'reflective engagement' to free the mind to discern the different ways in which problems can be solved more readily by conceptualising their relationship as a form of complementarity. As this process of reflection unfolds, it encourages open-minded thinking and co-operative group behaviour, along with responsibility for individual learning and other employability skills.

Recommendations by Markes (2006) suggest that university/company partnerships need to address employer needs, and that the interaction between educational institutions and the business sector should seek to discover a
discourse of common terminologies which lead to the enhancement of employability skills through the success of their real-world application in the workplace and business negotiations. Adding real-world learning experiences to an existing curriculum which promote employability skills such as leadership, problem-solving, and communication (verbal and written) would be a good first step to addressing overall employee gaps and employer concerns (Barnett, 2011).

Mary and Metcalf (2008) explicates the extent to which the integration of soft skills into the business curriculum should be combined with experiential learning in the workplace which allows students to better understand and master the functional overlaps and ambiguities which often arise. Both hard and soft skills figure as significant components of current business practice, and provide students the opportunity to acquire these proficiencies to address the concerns of faculty and employers regarding the competency of business graduates. A concept-based curriculum is built around ‘big ideas’; concepts that are timeless, universal, abstract, and broad (Erickson, 2007). Additionally, it allows students to make meaning of the concepts through creating a bond between the factual and conceptual levels of thinking, thereby providing a deeper understanding of the relevance of the subtle relationships between theory and praxis (Erickson, 2007). The concept-based curriculum design is ‘reality-based;’ it cuts across disciplines, linking them together so that learning and teaching is holistic and reflects the real world. Research (Erickson, 2008, Tomlinson, 2007, Wiggins & McTighe, 2005) shows an increase in student learning when students:

- recognize pertinent informational sources, ideas, and concepts,
are able to apply strategies to process the information gathered, and
are engaged in the learning process.

Work Placement, Internship and Work-Based Learning

The literature and the findings of Lowden et al. (2011) have overwhelmingly highlighted the extent to which employers, students, graduates, and higher educational institution representatives value placements, internships and work-based learning. These real world work experience and internship opportunities have been shown to be particularly effective approaches to developing soft skill competencies of business graduates; It has been convincingly argued that such internship opportunities should be integrated into the Business School curriculum throughout the duration of the degree. Some higher education institution representatives believe that these programmes are especially valuable because they not only facilitate students access to work-based learning and similar opportunities, but also allow these experiences to be documented. Therefore, HEIs can be adaptive in order to promote employability/soft skills for their students by including appropriately integrated placements, internships and work-based learning opportunities of suitable duration into their courses. In addition, literature emphasises the importance of partnership collaboration between employers and HEIs which were seen as having a complementary role to play in developing graduate employability/soft skills. Moreover, internships were more likely to be used in management and business courses due to accreditation requirements by professional bodies (such as finance and accounting degrees), where practical skills and experience of a particular business were seen as key to achieving the required
competences for the award and the enhancement of employment opportunities. This being so, it is clear that BHEIs and employers should continue to promote and expand opportunities for students to access work-based learning.

UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) cites literature to support the usefulness of work placements and the fact that graduates who have done a placement or work-based learning have more success finding graduate level jobs (UK Commission for Employment and Skills, 2009a). For example, UKCES states that opportunities such as placements and internships not only seem to offer an effective modality of applied methodology for inculcating business students with enhanced awareness and soft skill competencies, but can also promote productive collaboration and partnerships between HEIs and employers, building greater understanding between these stakeholders. The importance of work placements and internships has been recognised by policymakers and supported by funding. Hoang (2012) adds that to produce well-rounded graduates, students should be able to develop and practice their skills not just in the university environment, but as observed earlier in industrial and workplace settings. A study conducted by Andrew and Higson (2008) reveals that formal work-based learning in a business environment is particularly valuable because it enhanced students’ learning experiences whilst providing them with opportunities to acquire work-related skills. Therefore, HEIs attempt to set in place a system for supporting students’ skills by using strategies such as apprenticeship, internship and finally, cooperative education programs, have been extremely valuable. I submit that It is vitally important for companies to offer more internship opportunities, as it well established that this is a highly effective way to make students aware of what employers are looking
for in graduates well before they graduate. Business students would thus be well-prepared by having already developed meaningful, real-world learning soft skill competencies prior to their graduating (Casner-Lotto & Barrington, 2006). Pinpetch and Baum (2009) have also argued that cooperative education continues to be recognised as an effective means of support while providing students with valuable hands-on learning opportunities. It is an instructional method that links classroom instruction and work by providing a measure of practical work experience that is relevant to the students’ career goals.

**Workplace Simulation in Classroom Settings**

Improving soft skills through workplace simulations in classroom settings is a creative and effective approach. It is often applied at the beginning of the course before the period of internships. According to Office of Disability Employment Policy (2010), there are three common methods for creating opportunities for experiential acquisition of soft skills. One is ‘interactive teaching’, by way of which instructors facilitate practical exercises that provide opportunities for students to experience vicariously in the classroom the nature of different business environments and then reflect on what they have learnt to integrate conceptually the theory and practice dimensions of hard and soft skill competencies. A system of spiraling teachable moments that progresses to increasingly more difficult soft-skill tasks reinforces the learning, while building the repertoire of skills. This approach requires skilled instructors and a well-designed curriculum, but has the disadvantage that the exercises, no matter how well designed, lack the authenticity of the real workplace.
The second method of Office of Disability Employment Policy for teaching soft skills experientially is to use a coach in a workplace setting. On-the-job training work experience, internships, and work-study programs are all examples of teaching both hard (technical) and soft skills in the workplace in a manner that achieves optimal authenticity. The disadvantage of this method is the difficulty of finding employers who will provide both opportunities and a qualified coach to assure that learning takes precedence over workplace productivity. The third method is to alter aspects of the classroom environment where general hard skills education is being taught to workforce entrants so that the classroom simulates the workplace as closely as possible and can stimulate discussion about the relevance of soft skills in such situations. This approach is thought by researchers (Fischer & Glenn, 2009) to provide an authentic context for teaching and practicing hard and soft skills that entails minimal costs and effort, affords the teacher control over the teaching agenda, and creates a classroom environment that benefits from the improved soft skills of its students. Programs which combine classroom theory with practical training is a common setting for teaching job-related skills throughout the US Department of Labor’s vast employment and training system. It is also believed to afford a productive setting for teaching soft skills competencies to high school students throughout the nation’s school systems. It is argued that this approach for teaching soft skills can be universally applied to have maximum impact on soft-skill deficits among our youth without new legislation, additional money, or new players. It just requires knowing how.
How much students gains from lessons also depend on who are teaching them. "Quality teachers are the single greatest determinant of student achievement: Knowing the subject matter, understanding how students learn, and practicing effective teaching methods translate into great student achievement" (Public Education Network, 2005, p. 3). Developing soft skills, or any skill for that matter, requires skilled knowledge, which is content knowledge gained primarily through instructor presentation and/or demonstration; guided practice, which is learning facilitated by the instructor; feedback, which is evaluative information about student performance; and continued guided practice, which modifies skill-building behavior and leads to soft skill refinement at a level acceptable in the workplace (Blaszcynski & Green, 2012). Given such criteria of qualified instructors, ‘Who are the best instructors in soft skills’ is a long time question.

According to Perreault (2004), business educators are in an excellent position to develop soft skills for students within business programs. Glenn (2003a) adds that business educators have a responsibility to create circumstances that will improve the interpersonal skills of students thereby producing employees that businesses are seeking. However, Deninis and Powell (2011) argued that those who train individuals in the hard or technical areas are different from those who train in the soft areas and are usually unfamiliar with the training methods of the other. Because they are inherently practical and real-world oriented (that is, their context is not the classroom), the soft skills and the softer intelligences are learned through personal experience,
exposure, practice, feedback and reflection (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2010). This being so, soft skills trainers have to add the real-life complexity in the application of soft skills (Deninis & Powell, 2011). Changing workplace environments and changing accreditation standards are forces that require educators to be able to assess the labor market skills requirements (Kilcoyne & Redmann, 2006). In Vietnam, business educators often take part in teaching after they graduate from university, without much working experience. This means that it is difficult for them to effectively act as soft skills trainers for the criteria of imparting real-working environment experience on their students. This reveals a hypothesis that employers are probably the best trainers of soft skills. Nevertheless, the survey on employers by Pritchard (2013) confirms that the responsibility of soft skills development fell to learners themselves. The study also suggests that most employers are willing to play only a limited advisory role in a case-by-case basis, as opposed to a trainer one. This being so, in order uncover the best solution as to who should train soft skills, there must be collaboration by HEIs and Businesses so that employers and educators can play equal roles to ensure suitable schedules in training soft skills for business students.

**Soft Skills Development under Computechnological Environment**

As is well known, technology or Computechnology, which has been increasingly developed, plays an important role in modernisation and industrialisation, especially as a key supporter in business development. Throughout history, advances in technology have improved man's lot—but not without a downside. While it is undeniable that many of these technological
innovations can greatly improve productivity and performance, misuse or overdependence on these resources can have a severe negative impact on business and education. This could be evidenced by the fact that technology may have negative points at some angles of soft skill development at school or in workplace, as suggested in what is called in the theory of ‘transformative subjugation’ (Laura & Cotton, 1999). The theory argues that the logical character of a technology is driven by an obsession with the power to transform the world of nature into increasingly synthesised and artificial environments which are inert, chemicalized, or highly fossilised, lifeless things. Spending a long time on working with modern technology mediums results in loneliness, depression, social isolation, a rise in uncivil behaviour and a loss of the sense of intrinsic’ value of life that effect on the development of soft skills such as communication, problem-solving, customer service etc. According to Smith, (2004) more technology leads to less human interaction, which can result in worker isolation, miscommunication and other problems if not handled thoughtfully. While technology will play a vital role in work place, retaining a personal approach toward the needs of the employees and customers is much more important in retaining the business. Laura and Cotton (1999) explained that when business is transacted, and information is searched using computechnology, people don’t find the need to speak to each other very much anymore. With today’s communication efficiencies, people hardly need to pick up telephone, and conversation face to face has become a rare entity. The net effect is that the quality of the communication suffers in the absence of in face-to-face interactions. Another downside to communication technology is that even as people communicate with more and more people using various
technologies, some people feel more isolated than connected. In business houses, conversation between colleagues mostly exists as interoffice communication through emails even though their seats are a few feet away with no hallway brainstorming and weekend reviews. These trends have its ill effects on interpersonal soft skills among students and managers.

New technology also has its impact on Higher education that has dramatically changed over the past decade, with a widening participation agenda and the rapid growth. In most E-learning environments, learning is solitary (Smith, 2004). Even with telephone or internet seminars, there is no real interaction or exchange of ideas or the chance of extended spontaneous question and answer sessions. Students often report feeling more overloaded in courses that use e-learning environments compared to traditional face-to-face courses that do not use online environments (Kushnir, 2009). There is no doubt that online environments contain vast amounts of information and stimuli; often some of which are irrelevant and distracting. In addition, Bennett (2006) agreed and added that the emergence of technology in the classroom has left little time for learning soft skills and basic business etiquette instruction.

**Conclusion**

Most research on reading supports the view that soft skills are essential in career success. Also, previous research reveals various arguing strategies for soft skills development in general areas. However, this research does not pay attention to business areas in specific type/level of students in specific countries. The chapter has provided the literature review of the study placing
the importance of soft skills in business area and soft skills development in Vietnamese business higher education in which there are many deficiencies in soft skills education, which in turn points to a lack attention in soft skills education.

From the literature, the following research questions were set up:

1. What is the status of soft skills education in Vietnam?
   a - To what extent do major employers in Vietnam regard the quality of soft skills competency to be adequate among recently graduated tertiary business students?
   b - To what extent do educators of BHEIs in Vietnam regard the pedagogic provision of soft skills as being sufficient?

2. Which soft skills are regarded as the most important in the business workplace?
   a - Which soft skills do major employers in Vietnam identify as being the most important in the business workplace environment?
   b - Which soft skills do educators from BHEIs in Vietnam identify as being the most important for business tertiary graduates?

3. What are the preferred strategies for soft skills development for tertiary business students?
a - What preferred strategies for soft skills development do major employers in Vietnam perceive as most effective in the higher education business context?

b - What preferred strategies for soft skills development do educators from BHEIs in Vietnam perceive as being most effective for teaching tertiary business students?

4. Are there any significant differences between the respective perceptions of Vietnamese educators and employers concerning the development of soft skills in tertiary business institutions?

a - Are there any significant differences between the educators and the employers regarding their perceptions of the importance of specific soft skills in the Business School curriculum?

b - Are there any significant differences between the educators and the employers regarding their perceptions of the development strategies for soft skills development in business tertiary students?

The next chapter details the methodological approach to the study.
CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

Introduction

This chapter examines and provides validation of the research design and methodology used for the study. The study has the overall aim of exploring the soft skill development of Business graduates, from the perspectives of employers and educators.

The chapter consists of three main sections. The first section discusses the research purpose, and details and justifies the research methodology and design employed. The subsequent sections provide an overview of the design and detail the techniques used for the collection and analysis of the data.

Research Purpose and Questions

As discussed in the previous chapters, soft skills are becoming increasingly important in the field of Business. Nonetheless, many insufficiencies remain in the provision of soft skills education in Vietnamese Business Higher Education Institutions (BHEIs). This being so, it is necessary to identify the status of soft skills education and the quality of recent business graduates in terms of soft skills competency. Once this task is accomplished,
the goal will be to identify and clarify which soft skills are essential for students and which of the methods available are best suited for soft skills development within BHEIs.

To put this more determinately the first aim of the study is to explore the extent to which the proficiency of soft skills among business graduates is adequate, and secondly, whether the soft skills education being provided at Vietnamese business higher education institutions (BHEIs) is reflective of the needs of the sector. The specific research questions followed:

1- What is the status of soft skills education in Vietnam?

   a- To what extent do major employers in Vietnam regard the quality of soft skills competency to be adequate among recently graduated tertiary business students?

   b- To what extent do educators of BHEIs in Vietnam regard the pedagogic provision of soft skills as being sufficient?

Given the mismatch of skills in Vietnam (Truong & Metzger, 2007), the second aim of the study is to explore the perceptions of business employers and faculty members about the most important soft skills to integrate into the formal business curriculum. The following research questions were developed:

2- Which soft skills are regarded as most the important in the business workplace?

   a- Which soft skills do major employers in Vietnam identify as being the most important in the business workplace environment?
b- Which soft skills do educators from BHEIs in Vietnam identify as being the most important for business tertiary graduates?

Soft skills education is an obscure discipline in Vietnam (Tran & Swierczek, 2009), and it has been made clear in Chapter 2 that there exist many deficiencies within the Vietnamese higher education system in terms of soft skills education. This situation highlights the need to explore whether the strategies for soft skills development deployed in Vietnamese Business Schools are adequate.

3 - What are the preferred strategies for soft skills development for tertiary business students?

a - What preferred strategies for soft skills development do major employers in Vietnam perceive as most effective in the higher education business context?

b - What preferred strategies for soft skills development do educators from BHEIs in Vietnam perceive as being most effective for teaching tertiary business students?

There is a paucity of comprehensive studies in Vietnam which focus on soft skills development, particularly in the area of Business which has been identified as a growth area for the nation’s prosperity. As outlined in the literature review, to gain programme viability, the perceptions of both business employers and business faculty members are needed to project a complete picture of the challenges faced in Vietnam to prepare graduates sufficiently with
skills for a globalised work force. Therefore, the following research question is aimed at establishing whether there is a gap in the provision of soft skills in particular business schools and whether business graduates are being adequately prepared for the skills needed to gain employment in the work place.

4. Are there any significant differences between the respective perceptions of Vietnamese educators and employers concerning the development of soft skills in tertiary business institutions?

   a - Are there any significant differences between the educators and the employers regarding their perceptions of the importance of specific soft skills in the Business School curriculum?

   b - Are there any significant differences between the educators and the employers regarding their perceptions of the development strategies for soft skills development in business tertiary students?

Research Methodology and Design

Project Design

This study was designed to examine the differing perspectives of stakeholders involved in the development of soft skills for Business graduates. Of interest was whether students were graduating from Business School with the soft skills required by employers. Of wider interest was how Educators could better prepare Business students for employment by identifying the necessary
soft skills that employers were seeking during recruitment or whether these skills were best learnt in the workplace.

A pragmatic approach was adopted as a framework for guiding the general philosophical ideas of the researcher. The research questions have palpably influenced the research design. This involved the identification of the problem and the development of an approach to understand and address it. According to Creswell (2009b), pragmatism is not committed to one specific method to address this problem. This notion was further supported by Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004), who suggest that taking a non-puristic or compatibilistic approach allows a researcher to mix and match the research design components offering the best chance to answer their research questions. The link between pragmatism and mixed methods is recognised by Morgan (2007) and Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003). Morgan describes the pragmatic approach as supportive of using qualitative and quantitative methods, and also supports the way in which this paradigm focuses on the methodological concerns instead of metaphysical concerns.

Teddlie and Tashakorrie (2003) offer two ways to combine the methods as follows: a) deciding on the priority of either the qualitative or quantitative methods and b) deciding on the sequence of the two methods and then determining the order of these complementary methods in the study, which could either be a preliminary phase or a follow-up phase sequence. A sequential approach would allow the researcher to examine the differing perspectives of the stakeholders in the study as the research questions about
soft skills status, identification of essential soft skills and the best strategies needed to develop soft skills in graduates were investigated.

Therefore, a sequential exploratory mixed methods design was adopted in the study to address the research questions, given the exploratory nature of the topic of soft skills development in Vietnam. The mixed methodology of the study drew on qualitative (interview) and quantitative (survey) approaches used to explore the complex issue. Creswell and Plano Clark (2007) explained that such a design is useful when “measures or instruments are not available, the variables are unknown, or there is no guiding framework or theory” (p.75). Since soft skills education is new in Vietnam (Tran & Swierczek, 2009), the researcher designed instruments guided by the literature and interviews with a small number of representative individuals with direct knowledge of the phenomena and then followed up with a quantitative phase, in this case a survey with a larger sample (Creswell, 2012). The purpose was for the quantitative data results to refine and extend the qualitative findings by testing out an instrument developed based on the literature and the qualitative findings. The initial qualitative exploration led to detailed, generalised results through the second quantitative phase (Creswell, 2012). Because the primary aim of the study focused on soft skills education, the findings from business educators were used to refine, define and test the findings from employers in order to generalise the final results. The findings from the quantitative phase were extrapolated to develop items for the survey. This enabled connected data from the sequential research process, where one form of data informed and supported the subsequent phase (Myers & Oetzel, 2003).
Creswell and Plano Clark (2007) describe the strengths of sequential exploratory mixed methods as straightforward to design, implement and report, and the inclusion of a quantitative element makes qualitative inclusion more acceptable to quantitative biased audiences. Hanson et al. (2005) indicate that such a design is ideal when the variables to be investigated are not known and where elaboration of findings is required. This method also allowed the researcher to identify measures grounded in the data obtained from the study participants. The researcher could also initially explore views by listening to participants rather than approach a topic with a predetermined set of variables (Hanson et al., 2005). Given the new topic in the study background, it was then reasonable for the researcher to use an initial interview to flexibly ground scoped information from employers’ views which was used as a frame for the instrument development in Phase Two.

The mixed methods study employed for the study, as illustrated in Figure 3.1, draws on a triangulation design to build towards accuracy and neutralisation of bias introduced by any particular source, individual or process of data collection, and contributes to a more holistic approach to complex research questions through careful treatment of all elements of the study (Creswell, 2012). The approach is sequenced with an initial emphasis on the qualitative phase, which explored the perceptions of the employers of tertiary Business students. These stakeholders were seen as an important group to talk to, as indicated in the literature, to confirm if there was a problem in the recruitment of Business graduates and whether the lack of soft skills was an identified issue to answer Research Questions 1a, 2a and 3a. This data was then utilised in the next quantitative phase which focused on the perceptions of
educators of tertiary Business students. Data collected in phase 1 was used to develop items based on soft skills identification and strategies to develop soft skills. This phase was designed to answer Research Questions 1b, 2b and 3b. The data from both these phases was then combined to answer Question 4, to further investigate the nexus between the perspectives of employers and educators in relation to the status, identification and development of soft skills.

*Figure 3.1. Methodology of Sequential Exploratory Mixed-Method*

Early in the study research questions and possible constructs were identified from existing literature. It was evident that there was a disconnect between the needs of employers and the skills of graduates given the low employment rates of graduates across Vietnam. The premise of this study was to explore the similarities and differences in the perceptions of the needs of both stakeholders in the development of soft skills in graduates. It was decided to interview a range of employers to ascertain their needs and perceptions of soft skills. This information would then be utilised to develop an instrument to survey.
educators in Business Schools. Given the proliferation of Business Schools across Vietnam, a few sites representative of the population would be identified.

A key outcome of this phase was to explore the preliminary elements for soft skills education development in terms of dependent variables and to select an appropriate tool to measure the evidential integrity of these variables. It was recognised that one or more dependent variables was possible, but the researcher maintained an open-mind and thus endeavoured to keep the data collection as flexible as possible during this exploratory phase of the process. Phase One was developed to explore the specific soft skills required of Business graduates for employment in the current work place and to determine whether employers perceived a gap in the development of soft skills within the curriculums in Vietnamese Business Schools. The findings of Phase One were used to develop a questionnaire in Phase Two of the study where a larger sampling, made up of educators at Business Schools, were surveyed for their perceptions of the extent to which the current soft skills curriculum is satisfactorily equipping graduates for the work place. The fourth question then draws together the analysis of the quantitative and qualitative phases, integrating both in order to answer the research question.

Validation

In the study, the sample of the qualitative phase is constituted by business employers who were not included in the quantitative phase, thereby avoiding any duplication of responses. The participants in the qualitative group served to provide information that could be assimilated as a facet of the
instrument associated with the quantitative phase. Creswell (2014) regards this as an effective way to gain validity in an exploratory sequential mixed-method study. Moreover, using a combination of data types and sources such as interview data from business employers and questionnaire survey data from business educators has served to provide a much richer and more comprehensive perspective than either of the two sources on their own. Nonetheless, those individuals who have had considerable experience as a business employer in commerce and industry were likely to be influenced in their interpretation of the early qualitative data being collected. However, according to Loosemore and Tan (2000), this experiential influence is more likely to enable a better comprehension of the qualitative data than it is to distort the data under investigation. One of the most likely causes of data distortion would then arise when the researcher and the participants come from distinctly different occupational groups. The expectation is that bias may occur only during the first phase of the research when qualitative data is collected. The quantitative phase is less disposed to facilitation of subjective interpretation. As alluded to earlier, more substantial validity could be secured as the sample in the qualitative phase was not included in the quantitative phase, thereby circumventing duplication of responses. As discussed by Creswell (2014), it is preferable to have the qualitative participants provide information for scale, instrument, or variable design, but not to have the same individuals completing the follow-up instruments.

However, there were some limitations of the method. For example, it required extensive data collection and the time for this process was long. Therefore, the interviews were undertaken by phone and the testing of pilot
instruments included only on a small number of respondents to check for understanding, particularly as the instruments were translated from English to Vietnamese.

**Qualitative Phase**

The qualitative phase was designed to explore initial information which was then used to develop the instrument for the quantitative phase. The aim of this phase was to identify the employers’ perceptions of recent business graduates’ soft skills. This refers to the specific soft skills which employers felt were required to achieve maximal efficacy in the business workplace. Once this identification had been determined, it was easier to conceptualise the best strategies to develop a soft skill curriculum for tertiary business students. Qualitative research is a useful tool with which to clarify the level of soft skill competency of recent tertiary business graduates. The measure of their performance reflects the status and potential quality of excellence that could be achieved by appropriate soft skill initiatives put forward by tertiary business schools across the country.

**Research Participant**

The researcher was concerned to deploy a purposeful and well-considered sampling strategy in selecting the participants for the study. In order to maximise the reliability of findings, the researcher selected 15 representative business organisations from a list of the top 500 business organisations throughout Vietnam in 2011 (Vietnamnet, 2011). The businesses were selected in terms of income, property, annual growth, volume of business, capital,
strength of manpower and speed of development. The respondents were selected from various types of business and industries, ranging from the automobile industry, real estate, mining and geology, textiles, power generation, electronics, food and beverages, agriculture, tourism, and financial consultancy.

With the onset of economic liberalisation and privatisation in Vietnam, there has been a tendency in opening up of more private companies recently (Baomoi, 2014). The researcher selected eight non-government-owned enterprises, four government-owned enterprises, and three foreign direct investment (FDI) which were representative of the sample. The researcher ensured that there was a spread of organisations across regions, thereby incorporating, the north, south and central regions of the country into the representative sample. Six business organizations were located in Ha Noi Capital and Ho Chi Minh City, which are the main economic centres of Vietnam, another nine organizations were located in the other small, medium and big cities as depicted in the map below (Figure 3.2). The sample was selected from a broad spectrum of companies, ranging from small business with around 100 employees (13%) to medium sized business with around 200-600 employees (33%) and large businesses, employing 2000 to 16,000 employees (53%). Of particular interest in this survey, these business organisations conducted annual recruitment, indicating that they would have an interest in and some understanding of the soft skills of new graduates.
The aim of this phase of the study was to uncover the employers' perception in terms of the skill demands for graduates in the contemporarily workplace. All respondents representing the selected organisations were in managerial positions, of which, 11 were in upper management and another four were in middle management. The breadth of managerial experience ranged from 2 years to 27 years. With respect to the level of their academic qualifications, 14 respondents held a Bachelor degree, and one had a Master
degree qualification. The majority of participants held degrees in Business, all of whom felt their degrees assisted them in providing valid perceptions of soft skills development in those businesses representing their area of expertise. The remaining four had degrees from various disciplines encompassing Civil Engineering, Labour Management, Accountancy, and Electrical Engineering (see Appendix H).

**Research Instrument**

In Phase One of the study, interviews were used as a research method for exploring each individual’s experiences, attitudes and values – information that cannot be observed or easily accommodated in a formal questionnaire (Silverman, 2011). This instrument also allowed the interviewer the opportunity to access a more comprehensive and detailed discussion (Rapley, 2004).

For ease of access, the researcher interviewed participants by telephone, thus significantly reducing the time and cost involved in having to travel across Vietnam to interview participants. This method also allowed greater flexibility in scheduling participants (Kvale, 2009; Fenig et al., 1993). The interview was recorded using a tape recorder attached to the telephone (Kvale, 2009). It was anticipated that the partial anonymity granted by using the telephone was very likely to increase the validity of the responses by reducing interview anxiety and embarrassment (Fenig et al., 1993). However, it is to be admitted that there is a drawback in use of this technique, in as much as the researcher’s lack of direct contact with the participants was likely to depersonalise the interchange and thus fail to reach the deeper level of ‘self-
revelation' that derives from feeling a sense of connectivity and trust (Laura, 2010). Creswell (2005 p.216) noted that phone-distancing can cause “limited communication that may affect the researcher’s ability to understand the interviewee's perceptions of the phenomenon”. All interviews were undertaken in Vietnamese and then recoded, transcribed and then translated into English.

For exploration of the central phenomenon of soft skills education, a new field of study in the country, a semi-structured interview with open-ended questions was deemed to be the most appropriate to elicit a range of perspectives about the subject area (Davies, 2007, p.29). A semi-structured interview allowed the researcher to give respondents a copy of the general questions in advance and to have a set of prompt questions to guide the discussion and a goal in terms of length of interview. Moreover, the interview process was flexible enough to allow interviewees to express their thoughts and ideas, and thus build upon and explore the participants’ responses to the prompt questions, or 'drill down' into issues raised during the conversation (Sandra & Jemina, 2013). They were given an opportunity to freely voice their personal experiences and were flexible so that the researcher could probe individual participants’ stories in more depth as particular areas emerged for each interviewee detail (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). The interviewer also varied the sequence in which questions were asked as necessary to provide a more valid explanation of the informant’s perceptions and constructions of reality (Kvale, 2009). Results obtained through semi-structured interviews can be compared among each other since all participants are required to express their views about the same general themes (Nohl, 2009).
However, according to Kvale (2009), a potential disadvantage is that sticking too closely to the outlined topics will prevent other important issues from being raised by the respondent. Moreover, while this format is systematic, it is still difficult to compare or analyse data because each interviewee may be responding to somewhat different questions. This was taken into account by the researcher in analysis of the data.

**Designing Open-Ended Questions and Semi-Structured Interview Schedule**

According to Matthew and Carole (2011), it is necessary to start with an outline of what you are seeking to investigate. The researcher drew up the list of key themes/topics. These were developed without fixed wording or fixed ordering of questions (Kvale, 2009). The key themes were (1) the status of graduates’ soft skills competency in the workplace, (2) the importance of specific soft skills, and (3) the strategies for soft skills development. Once a set of key themes were identified, the researcher then took each key theme one at a time and identified specific questions that allowed her to probe that theme in more detail. In the course of the interviews, the researcher followed the set of themes and sub-questions in a relatively structured fashion. However, the researcher kept the set of themes and sub-questions as an ‘aide-memoire’ to which she could return during the course of the interview but which does not dictate the order. An interview should be regarded as a conversation with a purpose (Burgess, 1984). The purpose is clarified in the act of setting out themes and sub-questions, even if these do not become a formal interview schedule.
Questions content (see Appendix D), a technique designed by Matthew and Carole (2011) is, composed of a number of different types of questions and is divided into two main parts. However, the order of the wording and questions were varied to some extent (Kvale, 2009). Due to the fact that the concept of “soft skills” is relatively new in the context of education and the business workplace in Vietnam, and there are thus various terms/names other than ‘soft skills. This being so, the definition of soft skills was introduced at the beginning of the interview protocol.

Part 1:

Demographic questions elicit factual data about the respondent. These questions are divided into two sections: the first one probes the respondent’s personal information such as the respondent’s role in the organisation, working experience in the current role, working experience in the other roles and highest qualification; and the second one seeks the business information such as mode of organisation, location of organisation, number of employees, number of new graduates employed each year, and type of position in highest demand.

Part 2:

Warm-up questions seek to establish trust and rapport with the respondent. The questions ask about the type of organisation, the working environment and a typical working day for a new graduate.

Core questions address three key themes of the research: (1) the
challenges of business graduates in the workplace regarding soft skills competency; (2) the specific soft skills that the employers in Vietnam perceive to be essential in the business workplace environment; and (3) the strategies for soft skills development that employers in Vietnam perceive effective in business higher education background. Prompts and probes seek to elicit additional information about a core question. For the core question (1), the prompting and probing questions focus on business graduates’ deficiency of specific soft skills and the typical problems encountered by a new business graduate. For the core question (2), the prompts and probes are about the respondent’s understanding concerning the concept of soft skills, the importance of soft skills in the business workplace, and the importance of specific soft skills perceived necessary in the global business context and Vietnamese business context. For the core question (3), the probing questions are about the collaboration of employers and educators in soft skills development, supports from organizations for soft skills development among their employees, source of soft skills, and methods/solutions for improving soft skills for learners. Clarifying questions, which asked different questions that approach the same theme from other angles, were also included to check the meaning of a response. These questions varied depending on different respondents and different contexts. The questions were mixed together.

Open-ended and flexible questions were developed to gain better access to the interviewee’s views, interpretation of events, understandings, experience and opinion (Byrne, 2004). With open-ended questions, in order to
achieve rich data, the key thing is ‘active listening’ in which the interviewer allows the interviewee the freedom to talk and ascribe meanings which bear in mind the broader aims of the project (Noaks & Wincup, 2004). The aim was gaining and maintaining trust and establishing rapport with respondents (Fontana & Frey, 2000).

Pilot

The researcher understands that good interview questions need creativity and insight, rather than mechanical translation of the research questions into an interview guide (Johnson & Weller, 2002). The researcher tried to anticipate how a particular question would work in practice. Then, the researcher used the interview guidelines to conduct pilot interviews with two employers to determine whether the questions worked as intended. The experience and feedback from the pilot interviews helped the researcher in undertaking any necessary revision before conducting the actual interviews for this research.

Data Collection Procedures

The project was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) of the University of Newcastle, Australia, on October 15, 2013 (Approval No H-2013-0267) (see Appendix A).

Over a period of four weeks, a total of 28 employers from the identified organizations were approached to participate in the study through a letter of participation (see Appendix E) and then by a phone call from the researcher. 15
employers who agreed to participate in the study were then emailed a copy of the Consent Form (see Appendix G) and interview questions (see Appendix C). The release form asked for the permission of respondents to store the data. If permission was not granted, transcripts were destroyed at the completion of the study as set out in the ethical considerations outlined in the section below. The list of participants and the forms were kept in a separate folder to the transcripts, and were destroyed at the completion of the study.

Participants understood that their participation in all sections of the study was voluntary and they were able to withdraw from the study at any stage they wished. There were no participants withdrawing from the study. Every effort was made to give feedback to participants who indicated on their Consent Form that they would like a copy of any research arising from the study to be sent to them to the email address specified.

On the day before being interviewed, the researcher contacted each participant to ensure the time of interview was correct and to gain rapport with the interviewee. A total of 15 telephone interviews were conducted with an average duration of 35 minutes. Interviews were undertaken in Vietnamese, the official language in Vietnam. Data from the interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder. After each interview, data was listened carefully and transcribed in details which captured features of talk such as emphasis, speed, tone of voice, timing and pauses for effectively interpreting data. In order to save the time and cost, data was transcribed into English by a legal professional transcribing service in Vietnam.
Data Analysis

The data collection and data analysis were done in a simultaneous process as recommended by Merriam (1988) and Marshall & Rossman (1989) (cited in Creswell, 2014) because by that way the researcher could keep experiencing to find the good way of using data. The data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using a manual approach. In reporting the data, efforts have been made to respect the anonymity and confidentiality of the respondents.

The researcher sought to identify and describe patterns and themes from the perspective of participants, and then attempted to understand and explain these patterns and themes (Agar, 1980 cited in Creswell, 2014). During the data analysis, the data was organized categorically, reviewed repeatedly, and coded for themes. Tape interviews were transcribed verbatim.

The following specific techniques and sequence of coding and analysing were taken in the study:

**Step 1:** Interviews were transcribed. Sensitivity such as the gap in the talk was recognized to probe what interviewees meant exactly (Rapley, 2001) as an analysis should be sensitive to how the talk is produced (Firth & Kitzinger, 1998 cited in Rapley, 2001).

**Step 2:** Read through all the data for obtaining general ideas, the tones of ideas, and the impression of overall depth, credibility, and use of the information.
Step 3: The data were simplified into three main parts using codes predetermined based on the literature, termed a ‘start list’ by Miles & Huberman (1994).

Step 4: The transcripts were then coded again to devise ‘in vivo’ codes from the words used by the informants in the interviews. In this way a ‘bottom up’ approach was also employed to derive nine categories from the content of the information. Data were coded or ‘tagged’ as described by Tesch (1990) by reducing and then sorting text segments into relevant categories and analyzed through the process of decontextualisation and recontextualisation. Due to the small number of interviews, this progress was done manually.

Step 4: Categories were retrieved and linked together to make ‘pathways’ through the data.

Step 5: Data were systematically explored for meaning, looking for patterns, themes, regularities as well as contrasts, paradoxes and irregularities, moving towards a generalization of the data.

Step 6: The data were used to expand, transform and reconceptualise the information, opening it up for further interrogation. The findings were compared with information gleaned from the literature.
Presentation of Results and Interpretation

The results were presented in descriptive and narrative form as addressed by Creswell (2014) from Miles and Huberman (1994) in the importance of creating a data display that narrative text has been the most frequent form of display for qualitative data. Thick description is the vehicle for communicating a holistic picture of the experience and perspectives of business employers.

Quantitative Phase

The quantitative phase of the study was to refine and extend the qualitative findings by testing out an instrument developed using the qualitative findings (Creswell, 2012). It consists of the collection and analysis of survey data. Within quantitative methods, the collection of such data is often referred to broadly as a descriptive research design (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). More specifically, it is referred to simply, as 'survey research'. Groves et al. (2004) describe survey research as "a systematic method for gathering information from (a sample of) entities for the purpose of constructing quantitative descriptors of the attributes of a larger population of which the entities are members" (p. 2).

The aim of this phase was to explore the educators’ perceptions of the status of business graduates’ workplace skills, the specific soft skills considered essential for tertiary business students, and the most effective strategies for soft skills curriculum development.
Research Participant

A sample is a set of respondents selected from a larger population for the purpose of a survey (Salant & Dilman, 1994). Groves, et al. (2004) describe the target population as a “set of units to be studied” (p.44) and the sampling frame as a “listing of all units in the target population” (p. 45). The target population for this study were educators who currently teach one or more business courses in three Vietnamese universities of Business and Economics. They make up three of eight universities in which the main disciplines relate to Business and Economics, amongst 234 universities. They belong to the three main university regions in Vietnam: Ha Noi Capital, Ho Chi Minh City and Thai Nguyen City. A site was selected in each of these regions for the study to ensure representation from metropolitan and regional types of universities. All educators who taught a business course in the selected sites were invited to participate in the study. This amounted to 786 respondents, including heads of faculties, heads of schools, and full-time teaching staff. Within this context there was a 73% respondent rate, with 577 educators agreeing to participate in the study. According to Gay (1992), a sample size for descriptive research should be at least 10 percent of the total population, while on the other hand Anderson and Bourke (2000) suggest as a rule of thumb that the sample size should be 10 times the number of items. As there were 60 items in the survey, the sample size for this study is acceptable.

In this study, contingency factors also needed to be taken into consideration. The survey sites were far away from each other and the researcher did not have financial and physical resources to go to the sites
regularly. Therefore, a multi-stage (Creswell, 2002; Scott & Usher, 1999) sampling procedure was adopted using a random sampling method. A random sampling method was selected as it was probable that the respondents would represent the given population (Creswell, 2002). The sample was identified and randomly selected from all faculties and schools of Site 1 and Site 2 by using a combination of criterion, stratified, cluster and multi-stage purposeful random sampling as outlined by Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2007). All populations in Site 3 was selected as the specific university is new and has only a small number of teaching staff. It is not necessary to study all possible cases in order to understand the phenomenon under consideration (Ary, et al., 2002). Thus, the sample was selected under the criterion that they must fully or partially participate in teaching for business students and be representative from every discipline. Because there are many different disciplines where the participants come from, the researcher categorized these disciplines into seven major groups and one sub-group, following the combination of the Decision No. 23/2004/QĐ-BGDĐT by Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training and Australian Standard Classification of Education (ASCED) in 2001. The major groups included main disciplines such as Banking, Finance and Related Fields, Economics, Accounting, Business and Management, Sales and Marketing, and International Business. The sub-group included the other general disciplines such as English, maths etc. The size of the sample selected depended on the size of schools or faculties.
Instrument Development

The questionnaire instrument was developed based upon the analysis of Phase One data, giving the researcher a guide to the perceptions of employers about soft skills which could be further explored in Phase Two. As Creswell et al. (2003) emphasise, it is important to allow the findings of the qualitative phase to inform the quantitative stage, with the necessary changes to the quantitative stage being made following analysis of the qualitative stage.

Survey questionnaires are recognised as an appropriate method of collecting data from a large number of research participants when the researcher is able to clearly articulate the information of interest and have appropriate measures of variables (Sekaran, 2003). McClelland (1994) also reports that survey questionnaires have a range of advantages including accessing a large and often geographically dispersed population, gathering of data via unobtrusive means, reducing the bias introduced when an interview is involved, and minimising time requirements when surveys are well-designed and as a result are self-explanatory. The sequential exploratory design of this research, as described previously, is well suited to the use of an instrument that has been developed or located as a result of a qualitative stage of study (Creswell, 2003).

Design of the survey questionnaires is critical to effective research and three issues have been highlighted as being important in this process. These are: question wording, categorization and coding of the variables, and general appearance (Sekaran, 2003). Each of these was considered in the development
of the survey questionnaire for Phase Two. The wording was specifically
developed based on wording and outcomes from Phase One. The
categorisation of variables was done prior to the instrument development by
careful planning of analysis around the research questions.

The survey instrument was developed by using the outcomes in Phase
One mainly, and the condensed angles from the literature of the study that
purposed to answer the research questions focusing on: (1) the status of soft
skills education in BHEIs and recent graduates’ soft skills competency; (2) the
importance of soft skills at the Business workplace; (3) the strategies for soft
skills development. Out of the items specifying demographic information, two
main scales – the importance of specific soft skills and the strategies for soft
skills development were enunciated from main codes in Phase One as follows
(see Appendix D). Due to the fact that the concept of ‘soft skills’ is relatively new
in the context of education in Vietnam and there are various terms/names rather
than ‘soft skills’, the definition of soft skills was introduced at the beginning of
the questionnaire.

Demographic information

Demographic Information consists of three parts. In the first part, general
information relating to each respondent was sought, including location,
gender, qualifications, speciality/discipline, and teaching experience. In the
second part, a series of items were developed to ascertain the perceptions
of academic staff on the role played by curriculum in developing soft skills in
Business students and their perception of the status of soft skills training in
their institution. The items included the following areas: the proportion of soft skills currently taught in relation to other curriculum areas, their experience in soft skills teaching, the effectiveness of the curriculum in preparing students to be skilled for workplace, and their views on how curriculum should be revised to further develop soft skills. Contingency questions were utilized to probe respondent understandings about soft skills. Asking these questions effectively avoids asking people questions that are not applicable to them. The last part sought the current learning environment which affects the quality of students’ soft skills development.

*The importance of soft skills*

A series of 19 specific soft skills, derived from the researcher’s Phase One interviews and the literature on soft skills, were presented to respondents. A 6-point Likert-scale was used to measure the level of agreement about the importance of each skill by selecting one response option of Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Somewhat Disagree, Somewhat Agree, Agree, and Strongly Agree. The skills were:

(1) Communication Skills: *ability to speak and listen to clients, colleagues, present in a group, and write;*

(2) Team-work skills: *ability to work effectively in order to achieve team goals;*

(3) Negotiation Skills: *ability to recognize patterns in detailed documents and scenarios to understand the ‘bigger’ picture;*
(4) Self-discipline Skills: *ability to be self-regulated, stress-tolerant, and work-balanced*;

(5) Critical Thinking Skills: *ability to recognize patterns in detailed documents and scenarios to understand the ‘bigger’ picture*;

(6) Responsibility Skills: *ability to get a job done and want to do well, and be accountable, reliable, resourceful, self-disciplined, conscientious, common sense*;

(7) Presentation Skills: *ability to adapt to various speaking situations, such as talking to a group, addressing a meeting or briefing a team. It is typically a demonstration or speech meant to inform, persuade, or build good will*;

(8) Time-management Skills: *ability to prioritize assignments and manager time effectively in a specified time frame*;

(9) Interpersonal Skills: *ability to be nice, personable, sense of humour, friendly, nurturing, empathetic, patient, warmth, sociability*;

(10) Problem Solving Skills: *ability to find effective solutions to problems by using rational and logical reasoning to reduce appropriate and well-reasoned conclusions, and by analysing facts and circumstances and asking the right questions to diagnose problems*;

(11) Leadership Skills: *ability to lead the others to develop and complement projects (e.g. allocate resources, obtain cooperation, monitor progress, ensure quality, anticipate complex issues and delegate as required)*;
(12) Professionalism Skills: ability to be businesslike, well-dressed, and poised;

(13) Customer Service Skills: ability to make customers happy without costing the company money;

(14) Marketing Skills: ability to create, communicate, deliver, and exchange offerings that have value for customers, clients, and partners at large;

(15) Flexibility Skills: ability to adapt and accept new things; willing to change; adjusts, and teachable;

(16) Positive Attitudes Skills: ability to be confident, optimistic, enthusiastic, encouraging, and happy;

(17) Networking Skills: ability to build internal and external relationships through strategic alliances;

(18) Marketing Research and Analysis Skills: ability to identify and define marketing opportunities and problems; generate, refine, and evaluate marketing actions; monitor marketing performance; and improve understanding of marketing as a process;

(19) Technological Competence Skills: ability to understand and integrate the use of technology to accomplish business objectives.
An open-ended question was added to allow respondents an opportunity to suggest other soft skills which they deemed as crucial for graduates entering the workplace.

**Strategies for Soft Skills Development**

This section comprised 23 items which ascertained the level of importance which specific strategies for soft skills development had on curriculum. A 6-point Likert-scale response was used, with the options of *Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Somewhat Disagree, Somewhat Agree, Agree,* and *Strongly Agree.* The items were loosely organised into four scales, which will be tested in the analysis section of the thesis.

The last question was an open-ended question which asked respondents to add comments about further strategies they regarded as crucial for developing soft skills effectively among tertiary business students.

**Scale Description**

In Phase Two, a 6-point Likert-type scale was employed to rate the respondents’ answer in the two main sections ‘soft skills’ and ‘strategies’ of the survey questionnaire. The Likert scale has become one of the most common scales used in survey design. Likert employed points in the measurement with several choices from 3 – 10 points. The preferred scale amongst many researchers is a 5-point scale (Gwinder, 2006). However, an even point number ensures respondents commit to their answer, rather than have an option to stay neutral which can be ambivalent. Therefore, to avoid respondents taking a
neutral stand or intermediate position, the researcher opted for a 6-point Likert scale for the survey questionnaire.

However, Likert scales are not able to inform us about the reliability and validity of the answers by respondents. Therefore, a pilot test is advisable (McCall, 2001).

**Pilot Study**

Gay (1992) and Verma & Mallick (1999) describe that a pilot study is needed to test the instruments, techniques and research design. It is a trial process for the main study. Therefore, a pilot study was intended in this phase for two primary purposes. These were (1) to validate and refine the research instrument and (2) to evaluate the research plan.

To specifically address the usability of the questionnaire, a non-random sampling of respondents who were knowledgeable, but not necessarily eligible sample members, were surveyed to test the questionnaire and provide feedback about whether the questions and response categories were clear. The questionnaire sampling was also intended to indicate the time it took them to complete the questionnaire. This pretesting sample consisted of 5 lecturers from each site.

As a part of this pretesting, participants (n=15) were asked the following questions regarding instrument usability derived from Fink (2003):

(a) Are instructions for completing the survey clearly written?
(b) Which, if any, of the questions are confusing?

(c) Do you understand how to indicate your responses?

(d) Are the response choices mutually exclusive?

(e) Are the response choices exhaustive?

(f) Do you feel that your privacy has been respected and protected?

(g) Do you have any suggestions regarding the addition or deletion of questions, clarification of instructions, or improvements in questionnaire format?

Participants were also asked to indicate how long it took them to complete the survey. All of the participants indicated that (a) the directions were clearly written, (b) none of the questions were confusing (c) they understood how to indicate their responses, and (d) they felt that their privacy had been protected. Many of the respondents indicated that not all of the response choices were mutually exclusive and exhaustive. This was to be expected, since the response choices were not meant to encompass the widest array of possible responses, but rather the responses found only within the qualitative data sets. Most of the respondents indicated that the survey took between 5-15 minutes to complete. This process allowed an evaluation of the overall research plan, along with the testing of the research procedures used, including data gathering and data collation.
Data Collection Procedure

Prior to the commencement of the study, the project was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) of the University of Newcastle, Australia, on January 21, 2014 (Approval No H-2013-0267) (see Appendix B). In addition, approval to conduct the study was obtained from the president of each institution. General information was obtained about each site through contact with the appropriate administrative unit. All information gathered in this way was publicly available, and so did not require ethics approval.

Once approval was obtained, the researcher then contacted the Deans of Schools or Faculties about the best opportunity to disseminate the written surveys, such as weekly or monthly meetings of the schools or faculties. At all three sites, Deans arranged an extra 40-minute time period to distribute the questionnaires to their staff and the scheduling of these meetings was set up following the regulations of each specific school or faculty. At the scheduled meeting, before completing the questionnaire, the staff were informed that their participation was voluntary. The Deans returned the questionnaires to the researcher at the completion of the meeting. The researcher was not present at the meeting.

Data Analysis

Data Screening

The data were entered into IBM SPSS Statistic V23 quantitative software by the researcher. Once input, data were checked to ensure accuracy by
running frequencies of all variables to identify data entry errors. These data points were checked against the questionnaires and corrected in the data file. Frequencies of all variables were then run again as a final check.

**Missing Data**

Missing data are a fact of life in multivariate analysis and rarely can it be avoided. The researcher's challenge is to determine if there was an underlying cause external to the researcher which would introduce bias into the data and then to select an appropriate course of action to address the issue. The impact of missing data in multivariate analysis might not only introduce sample bias, but has the potential to dramatically reduce the sample size (Hair, Anderson, Tatham & Black 1998).

Two questions need to be asked to address the missing data issue: 1) Are the missing data scattered randomly 2) How prevalent are the missing data? To answer these questions, a Missing Data Analysis was run to determine both the prevalence of any missing data and if the pattern of missing data was random or systematic.

The data were then analysed using a number of statistical techniques:

**Descriptive Statistics**

Descriptive statistics are primarily used to organise, summarise and describe a collection of quantitative information or observations (Kaplan, 1987). In this study, these statistics include frequencies, percentages, means, and
standard deviations. Frequencies and percentages were used to describe the distribution of the demographic information, most of which are nominal (e.g. QA1 Location), dichotomous (e.g. QA2 Gender) or ordinal variables (e.g. QA5 Years teaching,). The Mean, a measure of central tendency, and the Standard Deviation, a measure of variation around the mean, are used to describe the respondents’ perceptions of items relating to soft skills suitability and importance (QA11-A16; AC1-C23). These items, six-point scale are strictly ordinal data but when used to form a Likert Scale as with the items above, they can be analysed as interval data. Descriptive statistics recommended for interval scale items include the mean and standard deviation and additional data analysis procedures appropriate for interval scale items include the t-test and ANOVA (Boone & Boone, 2012).

**One-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA)**

ANOVA is a multivariate statistical technique used to test for the statistical significance of differences between means of more than two groups i.e., to test if the sample means were drawn from the same or different populations. The statistic calculate is the F value which is the ratio of the between-group to within-group variances. Because we need know to where these differences lie, not just that there is a difference, the Scheffe test was selected as a post hoc option. This test identifies which comparisons among groups have significant differences. This test provides the researcher with each possible combination of groups, thus simplifying the interpretative process (Kaplan, 1990). Scheffe is the preferred method when all contrasts might be of interest as it gives narrower confidence limits (NIST/SEMATCH, 2012), and
when there are unequal sample sizes as is the case with the background variables in this research sample population, for example, location, highest qualification, discipline.

**Independent Samples T-test**

The t-test is used to test for statistically significant differences between two independent sample means. The t-test is a special case of ANOVA for two groups or levels of a variable (Hair et al. 1998). The test statistic used to assess the statistical significance between the two groups on a single dependent variable is the t statistic.

**Factor Analysis**

Validity is based on the purpose of educational or psychological testing being able to draw an inference about an individual or group of individuals (Popham, 1990). Construct validity is the degree in which a hypothetical construct is measured (Gay, 1992). The researcher must be sure that the items sample the specific aspects required for the study (Best & Kahn, 1998) and determine if the instrument measures what it was intended to measure (Gay, 1992). The researcher must critically evaluate the evidence presented relating to the construct validity of the instrument. As previously described, the questionnaire consisted of two sections comprising items that were hypothesised to form scales (A11-A16 and C1-C23). An analysis of the construct validity of the scales in both sections was required, to determine if the scales were measuring what they were intended to measure. Exploratory Factor
Analysis was the preferred method chosen to establish instrument construct validity.

Two main issues needed to be considered to determine the suitability of the use of factor analysis. These were the sample size and the strength of the relationship between variables (Pallant, 2001). Although many researchers may not agree on the actual sample size required, and it depends on the number of items to be included and the hypothesised number of factors, there is general agreement that the larger the sample size the better in order to minimise the chances of ‘overfitting’ the data, i.e., deriving factors that are sample specific. However, as a general rule, the minimum is to have at least five times as many observations as there are variables to be analysed, the more acceptable sample size is to have a ten-to-one ratio (Hair et al. 1998).

Exploratory Factor Analysis using Principal Components Analysis was used to analyse the interrelationships between items A11-A16 and C1-C23 to explain these variables in terms of their common underlying dimension or factors. The objective of factor analysis was to find a way to condense the original variables into a smaller set of factors with a minimum loss of information (Hair et al. 1998).

It was hypothesised that first set of items (A11-A16) would form one factor or component called ‘Learning Environment’. In other words, the six items were all measuring different aspects of the same underlying factor. The second set of items (C1-C23) would form three components or factors – Soft Skills Integration, Soft Skills Training and Effects of Soft Skills Development. The aim
was to form factors by systematically deleting items so that all remaining items loaded at >.3 on their hypothesised factor, <.3 on other factors with a difference between factor loadings of >.2. Ideally, each factor should have a minimum least five items.

Once a parsimonious factor structure was found, and scale reliabilities were acceptable, scales were constructed by computing the mean of the items loading on each factor.

**Reliability**

In tandem with the Factor Analysis described above, the reliability of each proposed scale was checked. By running a reliability analysis at each stage of the factor reduction procedure, the decision to keep or delete an item was made on the basis of not only its factor loading but also how its deletion would impact on the scale reliability. The aim was to form a scale with the highest possible reliability while maintaining the integrity of the factor structure.

Reliability analysis is test of a scale’s internal consistency and estimates the relationship of items to other items in a specific group, and to the total test. The internal consistency was estimated using Cronbach’s Alpha. A scale deemed reliable using this method, should have a Cronbach’s alpha coefficient ideally above .7 (Nunnally, 1978; Pallant, 2001; Tabachnick & Fidell, 1996) but for Exploratory Factor Analysis a lower Cronbach’s Alpha of .6 is considered acceptable (Hair et al. 1998).
Summary of Data Analysis Techniques

In general, Parts 1 and 2 of the analyses outlined below were undertaken in an attempt to establish the existence of significant relationships between the background variables, the concepts measuring individual items, and the scales developed from the questionnaire items.

1. Descriptive analysis involving frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations of:

   (a) General information about respondents

   (b) Information about soft skills training

   (c) Information about learning environment

   (d) Information about importance of soft skills

   (e) Information about strategies for soft skills development

2. ANOVA and t-test between demographic data and the importance of specific soft skills and the strategies for soft skills development

   Generally, the independent variables were information about the respondents, such as location, gender, qualification, and teaching experience. The dependent variables were generally based on the scales, such as soft skills importance and strategies for soft skills development.

   Text from open-ended questions was transcribed and entered into word
processing software for coding.

**Data Presentation and Interpretation**

The main results were presented in the form of figures, tables and text. The figures and tables have been specifically designed as analytical tools to assist in the interpretation of the data contained within the associated text of each question respectively. This method provides a simple visual understanding upfront, of the trends of the data contained in the responses to the questionnaire questions, before the more complex details of the results are provided.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has detailed the sequential exploratory mixed-methods approach and data analysis techniques used for this study. The chapter has provided the framework for the following chapters.

The next chapters present the results of the qualitative phase and then the results of the quantitative phase. The data is summarized at the end of the chapter, for discussion in the final chapter.
CHAPTER FOUR

QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Introduction

This chapter describes the findings from the qualitative phase of the study that was overviewed as part of the methodological approach in Chapter Three. The qualitative phase involved 15 semi-structured interviews with managers from a range of organisations who employ business graduates, to gain the employers’ perspectives on the soft skill development of business graduates in Vietnam.

The chapter is organized into four key sections as they emerged from the interview data. The first section reports on the short survey completed at the beginning of each interview to gather demographic information about the managers and their organizations. The second section reports on the managers’ views on the quality of tertiary Business graduates’ preparedness for employment and Vietnamese skills education and training to answer the research question 1.a: To what extent do major employers in Vietnam regard the quality of soft skills competency to be adequate among recently graduated tertiary business students? The third section details the managers’ perceptions of the importance of specific soft skills for business success that addresses the research question 2.a: Which soft skills do major employers in Vietnam identify as being the most important in the business workplace environment? The final
section presents managers’ suggestions on how best to approach soft skills development in business graduates from the perspective of the work place in order to answer the research question 3.a: *What preferred strategies for soft skills development do major employers in Vietnam perceive as most effective in the higher education business context?*

**Demographic Information**

Demographic information was collected from the managers through a short survey given before the interview. The purpose of this survey was to determine the criteria required to qualify as one of the 500 top enterprises in the country in 2011. The questions included information on the manager’s role in the organization, their qualifications and experience as well as details about the organization such as location, ownership, number of employees, sector, number of new employees recruited annually, types of positions offered, and probable vacancies that are likely to be filled.

**Personal Profile of Employers**

The interview sample is 15 employers belonging to the management boards of the enterprises, in which there were six employers holding upper management roles and nine holding middle management roles. A dominant number of respondents were less experienced in management (less than 10 years experience - n=10), which can possibly be explained by the high proportion of young employment in the country. 14 respondents held Bachelor degrees and only one held a Masters degree. Due to the criteria set for the study, a high proportion of the managers (n=12) were qualified in Business and
Economics, with the remaining three having expertise in Civil Engineering, Labor Management, and Electrical Engineering.

**Profile of Enterprises**

As described in Chapter 3, sampling of organizations was spread across the north, south and central regions of Vietnam. However, respondents were drawn from two main economic hubs in the capital, Ha Noi and Ho Chi Minh City. With the onset of economic liberalization and privatization in Vietnam, there has been an influx of private companies. This is reflected in the sample where just over half (n=8) were non-government-owned enterprises. The remaining organizations were government-owned (n=4) and FDI enterprises (n=3). Large organizations were well represented, with over half the organizations having between 2,000-16,000 employees. These larger enterprises were engaged in product manufacturing and processing while those involved in trading were smaller, with fewer than 100 employees. The distribution of the types of business and industries was relatively evenly spread across sub-sectors covering automotive, real estate, mining and geology, textiles, power generation, electronics, food and beverages, and agriculture. Only one was in tourism and one in financial consulting.

The managers' recruitment policies are of particular interest. The majority of the organizations annually recruited recently qualified business and economics graduates to fill vacancies. The number of Business graduates recruited ranged from two to 100 depending on the range of vacancies to be filled, the quality of graduates and the size of the employing enterprises.
Importance of Soft Skills

The section reports on the three themes that emerged from the interview data: the respondents’ understanding of the concept of soft skills; their perceptions of the importance of soft skills in the business workplace; and their suggestions for specific essential soft skills necessary for business success.

Understanding about ‘Soft Skills’

Although the concept of ‘soft skills’ is relatively new in the context of Vietnamese education and the business workplace, a number of respondents (73%) displayed a high level of awareness and understanding of the concept of ‘soft skills’ and the implications for the business workplace. Though most employers had some difficulty expressing it using the accepted terminology, they all believed that soft skills had recently become increasingly popular in Vietnam, especially in the business field. In general, they assumed these skills were behavioral reflecting attitudes and approaches. Some referred to ‘soft skills’ as graduates’ possession of a certain skill level and attitude, as well as their ability to use skills to search for jobs and retain positions, while others referred to them as ‘competencies’, ‘capacities’, or ‘abilities’ rather than skills. As explained by one respondent, ‘soft skills’ were considered to be an umbrella to cover a person’s working life, and so they referred to them as ‘survival skills’. Their explanations indirectly referred to their understanding of ‘soft skills’ competencies hence the misconception is partly due to misunderstanding what is meant. Thus, it could be concluded that even though respondents were not able to use the exact definitions or terminologies relating to ‘soft skills’, they had
a rough idea of their meaning.

**Importance of Specific Soft Skills in the Business Workplace**

In general, when asked about the role of specific soft skills in the workplace, all respondents shared a similar view to Hommerichhousen (2002), Klaus (2010), and Watts and Watts (2008), being that soft skills are very important for any employee in the contemporary labor market irrespective of their specific occupation.

When considering the increasing importance of soft skills compared to hard skills in relation to employment success, the respondents presented some differing views. Around a quarter of respondents argued that there is an equal contribution of soft and hard skills, outlining that both soft and hard skills have their particular strengths. For example, hard skills contribute to the growth of an individual, but soft skills contribute to the success of an individual in terms of getting a job and career advancement. However, over half of respondents argued that soft skills played a more central role than hard skills, particularly in the business fields. As indicated by one respondent:

“In many business situations, a person owning good soft skills can change a problem into an opportunity and deal with the adversaries in a better and more constructive manner”. (Interview 8).

In particular, the respondents highlighted the increasingly important role of soft skills in the present context of the integration of the Vietnamese economy into the global business world. Two respondents from Foreign Direct Investment
enterprises (FDI enterprise) with a long history of multi-national business, emphasised this point with the following comments:

“...soft skills play an integral role in business transactions with other countries…” (Interview 15)

“... the global business environment requires very high competitiveness so that the labour force involved with this must possess a clever head with excellent interpersonal skills…” (Interview 14)

Notably, respondents thought that soft skills have become extremely important in the sales field because they facilitate marketing of a product that is a key factor for successful sales:

“... for an example, some years ago, the price and quality were perceived to be the most important factors to sell a product. Today, however, soft skills appear to be an important element to decide if a product can be sold …” (Interview 9)

“Buying and selling products effectively depends on how good our soft skills are.” (Interview 10)

The importance of soft skills was emphasised by one respondent, working in an FID enterprise. For this respondent’s organisation, one of the compulsory recruiting criteria was that a prospective employee must possess soft skills in areas such as Communication, Group-work, Customer Service, Responsibility, Flexibility and other personal qualities that were potentially
beneficial for a specific job. Soft skills competency was promoted as one of the top priorities for applicants seeking a job with their company:

“Individuals gifted with soft skills would be more successful at work and would be an asset in enhancing the business of the company”. (Interview 13)

Moreover, there was a more general view about the relevance of soft skills in schooling and daily life.

“At school, soft skills help students to perform their study well by the skills of self-management, self-study, and problem-solving. They also facilitate to maintain a happy life.” (Interview 15)

Perhaps, unsurprisingly, a small group of respondents from the manufacturing and processing sector considered soft skills to be less important than hard skills. This group remained convinced that, at least for specific tradespeople such as mechanics and technicians, the tasks they were required to undertake could be done efficiently without having to acquire soft skills. The major reason for this was their belief that interaction with and dependence upon other colleagues in such trades would be minimal, therefore would not require the inter-personal skills characteristic of soft skills.

Nevertheless, by and large, employers preferred those applicants who possessed a range of soft skills. Most respondents held the view that soft skills contributed substantially to business success and were important irrespective of occupation.
Identification of Essential Soft Skills in Business Workplace

The identification of soft skills necessary in the business workplace depended on each respondent’s situation given they came from different regions, types of organizations and levels of management. It therefore stands to reason that they gave divergent perspectives about which soft skills were needed. The most important specific soft skills were therefore identified based on two factors: (1) the employers’ feedback on the specific soft skills they believed recent graduates were deficient in, and (2) their expertise in knowing which soft skills were currently needed most in the Vietnamese business workplace.

There were a range of views about the essential soft skills needed, which varied according to the speciality and expertise of the respondent. Employers with more expertise were seeking graduates with a wider range of soft skills. One respondent, who had 27 years of experience as a business manager, indicated that to be successful at work in any kind of business or industry, employees should possess as many soft skills as possible and supplement them with hard skills to perform effortlessly and efficiently. Another respondent, who holds a Master in Business Management, also subscribed to the view that the more soft skills you have, the more successful you are.

Other less experienced respondents presented the view that since business involves different sectors, each business area requires different soft skills. Some soft skills may be advantageous to one field of business but may not have much relevance for the other. For example, sales staff need to be
equipped with well-developed verbal and written communication skills, whereas marketing staff should also have these communication skills in addition to market research and critical thinking skills. In accounting and finance, business ethics and responsibility were reported as the crucial skills. One person may excel in some soft skills, another will excel in other soft skills, therefore the employer has to recognise the potential of each prospective employee and allocate them to the work portfolio that matches their specific strengths to extract their best performance.

In the interviews, respondents were asked to identify the most important soft skills business graduates need when they start work in the organisation. These soft skills were ranked in descending order based on the frequency with which respondents identified them. The results are presented in Table 4.1.
These soft skills are explained separately below:

**Communication:** All respondents interviewed rated the ability to communicate effectively as one of the most important soft skill, explaining that people who were successful at work were most often good communicators. Some of them opined that poor communication can lead to a loss of business, which, in turn, can lead to a loss in revenue. Some of the respondents were also concerned that many graduate employees with good hard skills could not communicate well with customers and colleagues. This finding indicates that the foremost priority should be given to the goal of developing strong communication skills in business students.
**Team-work:** Over half the respondents valued team work activities as important, making it the second most desirable soft skill. This was a sought after soft skills, particularly as employees were also criticised by some respondents for being selfish and self-promoting in team-work situations. Some respondents explained that the effective combined efforts of individuals in a team produces better products and enhances team spirit. This then can improve the efficiency of the organisation as a whole. Combining various soft skill capabilities possessed by different team members can also lead to increased creativity at the individual level, and result in a better product that then benefits the team and the organisation as a whole. This strategy would also ensure that work is finished at a faster pace, with fewer mistakes and enhanced efficiency. Therefore, it was argued that improving team-work skills for business students should be a priority as it translates into more successful business practices, in a variety of contexts.

**Flexibility:** Along with Customer Service, Flexibility was nominated by just under half the respondents. In order for employees to adapt and adjust to an increasingly global workplace with rapidly changing technology, flexibility is necessary in order to adapt knowledge and skills to new contexts. Graduates also need the flexibility to adjust to a new work environment and the potential changes likely to take place within it.

**Customer Service:** According to respondents, Customer Service skills become increasingly relevant in the context of the current competitive market, as every customer is considered to be king and so their needs
and preferences are a priority. Customer Service and satisfaction have therefore become essential components of any field of business, and are seen as a decisive factor in the success or failure of any business organisation. Thus, the acquisition by employees of Customer Service skills should be a priority of paramount importance for companies. Respondents acknowledged that these skills are of vital importance and should be integrated into the formal business curriculum within Vietnam.

**Interpersonal Skills:** Nominated by just six respondents, interpersonal skills such as being amicable, personable, having a good sense of humour, being nurturing, empathetic, patient, warm and sociable were also considered important in the workplace. Such skills are now recognised as being necessary for all positions within a business organisation. These respondents recommended that interpersonal skills be introduced into the curriculum of Vietnamese business schools to equip graduates to work effectively in an organisation.

**Marketing:** A third of the respondents suggested Marketing, Positive Attitude and Responsibility were necessary soft skills for business staff to perform their work effectively. Some respondents observed that while marketing skills are deficient among many sales staff, these skills have become increasingly important in sales activities so they recommended including these skills in training.

**Positive Attitudes:** The lack of positive attitudes such as confidence and optimism amongst Vietnamese employees was identified as a
possible root cause for creating a negative workplace environment. The necessity of introducing training programs to teach these skills to business students was emphasised by these respondents.

**Responsibility**: Responsibility was nominated as an important soft skill which is required for ensuring tasks are completed on time as planned and with the degree of quality required. These respondents argued that employees needed a greater sense of responsibility in the workplace.

**Presentation**: Presentation, Critical Thinking and Negotiation skills were considered as important by four employers. As respondents explained the ability to adapt to various speaking situations is necessary for anyone who works in business environment. Presenting information and data is a skill that needs to be developed before entering the workforce.

**Critical Thinking**: Four respondents nominated critical thinking as an important soft skill. With globalisation, the increased speed of business and rapidly changing work settings, employees at every level are facing an increasingly complex flow of information. This being so, it is imperative that they possess Critical Thinking Skills to make informed decisions by themselves and graduates need to have been trained in these skills.

**Negotiation**: A key to winning contracts for enterprises is the ability to negotiate and is an offshoot of communication skills.
**Professionalism:** The skill of Professionalism was defined to include the necessity to dress smartly at work, and do a good job. Also emphasised was the need to have an advanced degree or other certification framed and hanging on the office wall.

**Networking:** This skill is also regarded as essential for inclusion in the business school curriculum. This is because, for them to deliver their best, it is necessary to maintain a strong association among individuals who work together in an organisation and for them to form a bond.

**Problem Solving:** As one respondent explained, whether the issue is big or small, we all set goals for ourselves, face challenges and strive to overcome them. The thing we need to know is if there is an easy way to consistently arrive at effective and satisfying solutions. For students also, Problem Solving skills are necessary for success.

**Time-Management:** Respondents were of the view that Time-Management skills are important to complete work effectively, efficiently and on time. These skills are especially necessary for Vietnamese employees who have a bad habit of procrastinating then rushing to complete their tasks at the last moment.

**Market Research and Analysis:** The respondents considered Market Research and Analysis skills to be important because they play a vital role in the success of the company. This is because it is necessary to study market conditions to determine potential sales of a product or
service and understand what products people want, who will buy them, and at what price.

**Leadership:** Those who possessed Leadership skills are able to assume vital professional roles in leading an organisation including marketing, liaison, and customer service.

**Self-Discipline:** Although only mentioned by a couple of respondents, Self-Discipline was valued as a 'foundation skill' in the sense that it serves as a skill which is capable of generating a number of other soft skills such as a positive attitude, self-confidence, and optimism.

**Technological Competence:** Surprisingly, only one respondent who came from the manufacturing industry judged that this skill should be integrated into the formal business curriculum. It was seen to be important in business transactions and especially in the IT and manufacturing industries, with the respondent predicting that it would become more important in the future.

**Equipping Graduates with Soft Skills for Employment**

**Status of Business Graduates' Employment**

The impact of soft skills was acknowledged as significant in the business workplace by respondents. However, they also acknowledged that there were difficulties in finding graduates with the required soft skills. One respondent reported:
“There exist many vacancies in our company because we cannot find enough employees who can meet the requirements.” (Interview 11)

Thirteen of the fifteen employers interviewed were of the opinion that the quality of graduates is very low and does not meet the needs of business and industry. There is a serious mismatch between what graduates have learnt and what prospective employers wanted them to know. According to one respondent, although recent graduates are hard-working and some of them are eager to acquire knowledge, they do not understand fully what they have studied or what skills or knowledge are needed to apply for employment once they graduate. Another respondent presented his view that only 30% of graduates meet the requirements of the job, as they lack work-orientation and cannot effectively put their university acquired skills and knowledge into practice. A growing number of university graduates cannot find jobs matching their academic qualifications and skills, and some have to accept manual work. Additionally, an increasing number of graduates are turning to part-time jobs or find themselves trapped in temporary employment. Most need to be retrained on the job, even for simple skills.

Companies often find it hard to recruit the candidates with the skills required for the job. Some graduates, who are recruited due to pressures of man-power shortages, after a time, disappoint employers as they lack proficiency and are unable to respond to real-world situations. As shared by one respondent:
“Even graduates with good academic records cannot perform well when selected for employment as they don’t possess adequate or appropriate soft skills”. (Interview 10)

When asked about the typical problems encountered by new graduates employed by their organization, the respondents complained about the inefficient quality of recent graduates’ working skills. Graduates “lack a number of necessary soft skills such as communication, negotiation, problem-solving, team-work and adaptability”, a manager of a Government enterprise explained. Another commented that most graduates are weak in their level of knowledge, practical skills, methods of scientific thinking and self-directed learning skills. Only those who acquire degrees from overseas universities are equipped to work effectively. Because of this, many Vietnamese students look for educational opportunities outside Vietnam, especially in developed countries, to improve their competence and hence employability.

A quarter of respondents attributed this deficit in soft skills to be a consequence of Vietnamese culture. Conservatism and selfishness leads to poor team-work skills, for example,

“One intelligent person can finish a task well in time, but when three intelligent people are assigned the same task together, they fail to complete it well ahead of time as expected”. (Interview 2)

Another added that the ‘close’ culture along with traditional style of teacher-centred learning creates passive and dependent students. As a consequence, when they leave school they do not readily take up responsibility
and lack creativity at work. In turn, this limits in their capability to work for professional businesses. He pointed out:

“Vietnamese people are often shy and closed in socialising and passive in interacting with others. They don't appreciate much on some acceptable forms of diplomacy conforming to western culture such as dancing, which has a good potential to gain business agreement… They are not often confident to raise their own ideas, but like to follow the others”. (Interview 5)

Overall, perception of respondents towards the quality of Vietnamese business graduates was negative as they are deficient in many of important soft skills that enhance performance in the business workplace. Skill mismatch has become a persistent and growing problem. An indication of the deficiency is soft skills is made apparent from the proportion of enterprises who need to re-train new employees.

**Status of Vietnamese System of Education and Training**

Given the perception by employers that there is a lack of essential soft skills brought by employees into the workplace, respondents were asked what the ideal solution was to improve soft skills in business graduates so that they are equipped for the workplace. Most employers interviewed seemed to blame the Vietnamese system of education and training, citing a common view that many educational institutions fail to prepare their graduates for employment. They gave examples including deficiencies in curriculum, assessment,
approaches to teaching and learning, and collaboration between educators and employers.

The respondents expressed the view similar to that of Tran (2013) and Stephen et al. (2006) that the Vietnamese university curriculum does not provide soft skills education for students, ‘hard skills’ having been given more prominence. One respondent surprisingly pointed out:

“Many students and even teachers don’t know about the term ‘soft skills’…” (Interview 1)

He thought that this imbalance, coupled with an economic crisis, was a major problem that led to unemployment but also had deeper ramifications for the Vietnamese educational system. Another respondent who recently graduated from the University of Business and Economics, added that ‘at university, more prominence was given to theory than situational practice in the curriculum’ (Interview 3). Student assessment was primarily examination-oriented and aimed to test memory rather than the ability to apply knowledge to working situations. It was felt that the present curriculum was ill-equipped to provide appropriate skills and knowledge to enable students to work effectively in a dynamic business context. He also thought that the teacher-centred method of education and the lack of teacher-student interaction was one of the major reasons for the setback in students’ soft skills development. This could also be explained in the context of the Confucian education model that has existed continuously for thousands of years in Vietnam. The impact of this exam-
oriented teaching and learning system features heavily in the current Vietnamese education system (Seymour, 1993).

Another serious problem is the lack of comprehensiveness in final examinations, contributing to the employability of graduates, as noted by one respondent:

“...It is comparatively easy for students to gain degrees from universities...the one who could get admission to the University could almost be sure to gain his/her degree...”. (Interview 11)

He thought that this led to students failing to make an effort to improve their knowledge and skills in their given field, adding:

“...they don’t care how much they know but what scores they get...”

(Interview 11)

Some respondents commented that the issue was linked to the lack of professional development of teachers. One respondent expressed the opinion that the quality of teaching is low because teachers in the Business Schools have inadequate professional qualifications. He believed that teachers are not required to systematically update their professional knowledge to keep up with current trends and developments, particularly concerning new technological advancements and market dynamics. Additionally, teaching methods have not been updated to meet the increasing need for innovation and higher quality skills demanded of a higher education system that is not yet fully equipped to respond. Moreover, the exponential growth in student numbers has not been
matched by a similar expansion of the faculties, meaning that in the classrooms, student to teacher ratios have increased significantly. The respondents offered that institutions have to invest more resources to strengthen faculty numbers by fostering industry involvement, and that future success depends on both educational leaders and the government to look for solutions.

The majority of employers interviewed did not highly value the adequacy or appropriateness of the skills provided by educational institutions for graduates, a situation they believed arose from a lack of coordination between educational institutions and industry. This has resulted in the haphazard incorporation into the curriculum of the soft skills needed by graduates both for finding employment and for their long-term careers. This deficiency has resulted in growing unemployment of graduates as the employers are not satisfied with the skills possessed by current graduates. Having learnt from over 20 years of managerial experience, one respondent said that only a few universities invited employers to assess the quality of their programs and make suggestions on how institutions can make improvements to keep up-to-date with work place requirements. For example, very few universities invited employers to interact with students on work orientation, where employers have the opportunity to explain what they expect to see in someone who has just completed their degree. This would give potential graduates more insight into what organisations are looking for when they recruit new staff.

In short, the respondents felt that the Vietnamese educational system needed to make many changes to improve the quality of their programs and to ensure that students were abreast of changing technologies in Business and
Industry. Consequently, it is crucial that educational leaders collaborate with employers to determine what types of qualifications and skills are valued, so a closer correlation ensues between the needs of employers and the education required to meet these needs.

**Approaches to Developing Soft Skills in the Workplace**

Given the current skills mismatch outlined in the literature review, it was clear that the respondents shared a common view, struggling to find the right workers and reporting a shortage of workers with adequate skills. This challenge was viewed as a significant obstacle to their business productivity. Most respondents were forced to develop the graduates’ soft skills once they had joined the workplace, rather than depending on skills developed as part of their qualification. In fact, a significant number of new graduate employees required retraining after recruitment. As reported by this respondent:

> “Although graduates do not possess enough skills and practical knowledge to meet our working requirements, we need them to fill in our vacancies. We have to retrain them as much as we can for our increasing work demands”. (Interview 15)

Over half the respondents indicated they offered training support for developing soft skills for their employees, especially for new graduates. Some carried out formal training programmes on their premises by employing experts from educational institutions. Some used experts within the organisation who demonstrated strong soft skill proficiencies, finding that this work-based training on soft skills for new staff proved to be less expensive. Some sent their staff to
soft skills training centres or customer service and marketing conferences to enhance their business skills.

Additionally, organizations inducted new recruits to update them, including information on the current market requirements of their products and detailed briefings on their clients. This support was primarily provided by the larger organizations due to the cost involved. Some smaller organizations who had no formal soft skills training programmes did, however, implement mandated regular rotation of roles so that employees could develop skills required for the various technical and administrative positions, affording them the opportunity to gain a range of soft skills. One respondent shared his view:

“We assumed that the employees can get experience through encompassing various duties and responsibilities so they can improve skills such as adapting to new working environments, building up new relationships and being flexible with many situations.” (Interview 3)

He believed that this kind of soft skills development strategy would not impose a financial burden on the company in terms of the training budget and would provide more productive outcomes for the company. Another respondent pointed out that he sometimes organized induction meetings and additional professional courses to familiarize new staff with the company profile, equip them in skills needed for specific tasks and increase their knowledge of company products. He found this helped to improve the soft skills competency of his staff.

A third of the respondents, even though that they did not provide any
support to develop soft skills for their staff, acknowledged the importance of soft
skills in business success. They took the view that people can learn soft skills
by themselves through work experience and extra effort.

“When employees get more work experience, their soft skills also
improve correspondingly. In some difficult situations, the company could
not support the novices in soft skills development; however, we presume
that the skills of our staff may be improved naturally over the time after
prolonged experience”. (Interview 11)

However, given the imperativeness of soft skills in the business
workplace, most employers did tend to enhance the soft skills competency of
their employees through the on-the-job training even at the cost of money and
manpower. Government-owned enterprises and trading-focused ones
dominated in providing stronger training support for developing soft skills for
their employees. Gaining soft skills competency from work experience was
identified as the most effective strategy for soft skills development. Training
courses offered by external agencies were less preferred.

Strategies for Soft Skills Development in Universities

Respondents were asked to suggest solutions for improving the standard
of Vietnamese higher education, particularly in soft skills education.
Respondents offered some innovative ideas to ensure ongoing program
viability. Their comments supported arguments outlined in the literature (see
Andrews & Tyson, 2004; Bowers & Metcalf, 2008; Doria, Rozanski, & Cohen,
2003; Elmuti, Minnis, & Abebe, 2005) on developing an educator-employer
nexus that would regularly upgrade the business curriculum. The focus would be on identifying which specific skills should be integrated into the curriculum and which training methods would most effectively be adopted.

How to Identify Essential Soft Skills to be Taught

There have been attempts by the Vietnamese Government to carry out educational reforms in business education, but the reforms have not been fully effective or gone in the right direction (Truong & Metzger, 2007). Consequently, students have been inadequately trained and have not acquired the appropriate skills and knowledge required by employers. All respondents suggested carrying out regular surveys of employers’ views about what qualities and skills they expected from graduates and using the results to inform decisions about what should be taught at university. One respondent emphasized the critical role of employers in determining which skills should be taught:

“Employers, who have much experience of running business and labor management, definitely know what they expect from graduates so they will be able to accurately provide the specific right skills which should be taught for students”. (Interview 12)

This view was supported by other respondents who suggested that organizations which were in need of recruits should forward universities their employment requirements, detailing the qualifications, technical knowledge, specific skills, duties and responsibilities for the particular positions they needed to fill. In this way, universities could re-design the curriculum to include the necessary skills and knowledge required by industry and develop appropriate
training methods. In addition, to achieve maximum success, some suggested that educational institutions should organize six monthly or annual workshops to connect students and educators with employers to facilitate career orientation and guidance. In such workshops, the employers could explain what the actual working environment was like, what was expected from the prospective job seekers and how new recruits could apply the skills they studied at university to the workplace. This would equip students with information on what knowledge and skills they needed to be ready for work, and educators would gain valuable ideas about improving curriculum.

In the context of global business, respondents suggested that the soft skills considered to be important could be included by Vietnamese business universities in order to advance global economic integration. They also suggested undertaking further research to identify the top essential soft skills in the global business market. As stated by a general manager from a FID organization:

“…to be competitive in the global economic market, we must possess knowledge and skills that competitors have… There should be more research undertaken to regularly update the top important soft skills in global business market. These skills should be analyzed and then selected for five best skills based on the Vietnamese business context to be integrated into Vietnamese business curriculum”. (Interview 13)

Regarding improving the collaboration between employers and educators, one respondent shared an opinion similar to Phung (2009) that there
are currently too many constraints in fruitful collaboration between educators and employers as the latter seem to take the view that they do not benefit from such collaboration. Efforts are required to make clear the benefits for both sides.

**How to Integrate Soft Skills into the Curriculum**

As in the literature, all respondents were aware of the importance of including soft skills in the formal business curriculum. Interestingly, when asked about the best approach to achieve this, respondents had similar views to Devadason et al. (2010) about the two different models for integrating soft skills into the formal curriculum - Stand Alone and Embedded. Surprisingly, the majority of respondents supported the Stand Alone model - including soft skills into the formal curriculum as a compulsory subject and assessing like the other formal subjects. This is in contrast to the view of Cyphert (2002), Elmuti, Minnis, & Abebe (2005), Luse (1999), and Navarro (2008) about the many benefits of teaching soft skills in a multidisciplinary setting - the Embedded model. A respondent from a government organization who was a former a Dean of Business and Business Training, explained:

“I completely think if universities treated soft skills as a compulsory subject, students would have more responsibility in improving their soft skills by themselves and have more chances from the course to develop their soft skills”. (Interview 5)

The one respondent who opted for the Embedded model, suggested this approach both as an economic measure and to facilitate the acquisition of skills
applicable to specific subjects on the other. Furthermore, activities such as games, competitions, and seminars were also considered good co-curricular or extra-curricular activities to improve students’ soft skills.

**How to Teach Soft Skills**

Identifying methods of instruction is a crucial element needed to achieve high quality education and training. Although educators are the correct ones to decide on training modules and methods due to their expertise and experience, it is also advisable to incorporate the ideas of employers who, with their rich work experience, can contribute significantly in terms of work skills training.

When probed about the distribution of practice and theory in soft skills training, all respondents preferred a practice-based approach to the traditional theory-oriented method. Specifically, it was thought that the way to achieve the greatest improvement in soft skills was by training in practical work situations rather than through theory or structured lessons from books or computers. However, some respondents thought that the theory lessons would be useful for students before they practised their soft skills in the workplace. As expressed by the most experienced business manager:

“Students are not often able to apply what they were trained or educated effectively in various situations in workplaces. Therefore, in my opinion, universities should educate adequately necessary theory of soft skills for students at school first, and then provide them as many opportunities as possible to practise soft skills at workplace such as through internships and placements”. (Interview 7)
The latter point echoes the views of Navarro (2008), Elmuti, Minnis, & Abebe (2005), Cyphert (2002) and Luse (1999), and that the best way to develop soft skills is to provide opportunities of experiential learning. They recommend that students be provided with opportunities through internships at a workplace, an application of or workplace-simulated methods in class.

While respondents believed that it was better to provide training of soft skills in small groups, there were several innovative ideas supporting the preference to develop soft skills practice in the workplace. One initiative, considered practical and cost-effective, was that employers should collaborate with universities by providing real-world projects to give students more opportunity for soft skills practice in a work-like environment which has the added benefit of saving manpower hours for the enterprises. In addition, modules for soft skills training should include case studies on individuals’ experiences, including success stories and business intricacies. One employer suggested that incentives for enterprises are required to develop students’ soft skills. Another suggested that employers who took part in soft skills instruction could assess students’ performance in practical work, while educators could assess the theory components. According to two of the respondents, because soft skills education is comparatively new in Vietnam, educators should review, select and adopt progressive training methods that are relevant for and suitable to the Vietnamese educational context. These methods would be drawn and adapted from developed countries where soft skills education is more prominent, stronger and has proven success.
Who Should Teach Soft Skills?

A majority of respondents considered that current business lecturers would be the best soft skills instructors because they possess teaching skills and experience, especially in theory, that help students acquire knowledge easily. These respondents held the belief that educators and students should have joint responsibility for students’ acquisition of these skills. In contrast, a few thought that employers who had strong soft skills competencies would provide the most effective soft skills training, especially as practical instructors.

The best people to employ as instructors, all respondents strongly agreed, were either those employers who were successful in managing big organizations and demonstrated strong soft skills, and educators who had work experience in business and industry. They conceded, however, that the number of potential instructors is limited and so this may be a constraint for enlisting experts in soft skills training. One respondent suggested that the Government should invest more in training and teaching of soft skills for graduates who have the potential to build a talented labor force if, through curriculum reform, they are given effective soft skills training.

Effects of Compuertechnological Environment on Soft Skills Development

All respondents agreed that the application of computechnology was thought to be increasingly beneficial in the workplace, especially in the business context. It was considered a critical tool to save time, money and manpower, resulting in significant changes in the development of the company. One
respondent presented an example to support this view:

“Products exchanged through business transaction is a crucial task that can be done most economically and conveniently all over the world by applying computechnology only”. (Interview 3)

In universities, respondents commonly agreed that the applications of computechnology helped students access documents and study online. Also, it is a popular tool for entertainment among students. However, there was a common admission that due to the popularity of computechnology, there are also drawbacks. There was a rising awareness among all respondents of the possible overuse of computechnology owing to both purposed and un-purposed jobs become increasingly popular as a consequence. As stated by one respondent:

“We feel worried about spending too much time at computers by employees due to specific scenarios of work and by students for their study access and entertainment. Many people become more and more addicted to computechnological applications. This surely makes bad effects on their skills of human interaction”. (Interview 6)

For most respondents, the abuse or overuse of computechnology reduces the ability to develop or maintain certain of soft skills. One respondent clarified this point:

“When people spend a lot of time at the computer every day, they have less chance to interact with others, so their skills of communication and
“flexibility are gradually disappearing”. (Interview 11)

This supports ‘Transformative Subjugation’ of Laura (2010), a theory that the psychology of humans is gradually changed in a computechnological environment. Two respondents revealed another negative aspect of the application of computechnological in business: the lack of business ethics in online sales and marketing and for one, the instance of dishonest conduct. When asked about a possible solution to the computechnological overuse in terms of curriculum revision, most respondents recommended that it was necessary to balance the non-computer-based and computer-based activities at university and at work. There were also suggestions about educating students and staff about the negative effects of computechnology on soft skills development.

Summary

This chapter provides an overview of the results of the qualitative phase of the study. It consists of three main parts: The status of the quality of business graduates and business higher education; the importance of specific soft skills for business success; and the strategies for soft skills development.

The quality of business graduates and business higher education

There was a clear recognition of a deficiency in the formal business tertiary curricula that leads to poor quality business graduates who cannot meet the growing demands of a changing business environment. This is particularly prevalent given Vietnam is at a crucial stage of global economic integration. It is
perceived that Universities have paid little attention to soft skills education, or do not understand the soft skills that are required by the employers, with the consequence that many graduates do not possess adequately appropriate soft skills to perform the work required of them. On the one hand, employers struggle to recruit suitably qualified employees and are compelled to retrain them, while on the other hand, a large number of graduates are unable to find a job.

The importance of soft skills

Although the term ‘soft skills’ is relatively new in the context of Vietnamese education and business workplace, the respondents displayed a high level of awareness and comprehension regarding the concept of ‘soft skills’ and their implications for the business workplace. This meant that their knowledge of soft skills was sufficient to provide appropriate responses to the interview questions.

Vietnamese employers perceived soft skills to be a crucial element in business success. Most respondents judged soft skills more important than hard skills in the business workplace, especially in the sales field. They emphasized the increasingly important roles of soft skills in the present context of integration of the Vietnamese economy into global business.

Employers identified 19 crucial soft skills that business students needed to be successful in the business workplace and these identified skills will be utilized in the next phase to examine the perceptions of academic staff working in Business Schools in regards to the essential soft skills required for the
workplace.

*The strategies for soft skills development*

This being so, all of the employers strongly recommended enhancement in soft skills education in which a collaboration between employers and educators was considered necessary. Conducting surveys with employers to find out which soft skills they expect business graduates to have was deemed the best way to identify which skills should be taught. Adapting the soft skills perceived as important in other countries into the Vietnamese curriculum was also suggested as way to identify the most appropriate skills.

Regarding how to deliver soft skills in the formal curriculum, integrating soft skills into the formal curriculum as a compulsory subject was preferred by employers to embedding soft skills in other subjects. This may be due to a lack of understanding of how to embed these skills across the curriculum.

As experienced by the employers, it was preferred that soft skills be learnt through practice such as internships and placements at workplaces and work-based learning rather than relying on traditional theory based teaching methods.

Employers who had considerable success in their own business careers and/or who themselves possessed strong soft skills were preferred as instructors of soft skills. Also identified as having expertise were educators with current and up-to-date work experience in industry.
Finally, the drawbacks of computotechnology applications were recognized. The overuse and abuse of computetechnological applications in the business workplace and at school were seen to impede soft skills development and in one reported case led to a lack of business ethics. Therefore, respondents advised that balancing non-computer-based and computer-based activities was important along with educating students and staff about the ill effects of computotechnology.

As indicated in chapter 3, the findings of this phase were used to develop the questionnaire for the survey on business educators in the next phase of the study (Creswell, 2009, p.2). The summary of this chapter leads, in conjunction with the results of the quantitative phase of the study in the following chapter, to the discussion in Chapter Six.
CHAPTER 5

QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Introduction

This chapter presents the results of the data analysis of the quantitative phase of the study. This section of the thesis aims to explore the importance of specific types of soft skills of relevance to business graduates in Vietnam and identify strategies for soft skills development in tertiary business education programs. The analysis in this chapter builds on the qualitative findings of my study in order to explore the systematic development of foundational factors for curriculum reform designed to accommodate the integration of soft skills. The data presented in this chapter was obtained from faculty members of three universities of business and economics through the distribution and collection of a questionnaire. As described in Chapter Three, the questionnaire was developed from the findings of the qualitative phase (Creswell, 2003).

The chapter is organised into four parts, consistent with the sections of the questionnaire (see Appendix D). Firstly, Demographic Information is reported.

The second section reports the descriptive statistics of the provision of soft skills education in answer to the research question 1b: To what extent do
educators of BHEIs in Vietnam regard the pedagogic provision of soft skills as being sufficient?

The third section presents an analysis of those soft skills which are considered as essential for tertiary Business students, and explores the influence of demographic factors on their perceptions. This section answers the research question 2b: Which soft skills do educators from BHEIs in Vietnam identify as being the most important for business tertiary graduates?

The final section seeks to determine if the respondents consider the strategies for soft skills development to be effective. This section aims to answer the research question 3b: What preferred strategies for soft skills development do educators from BHEIs in Vietnam perceive as being most effective for teaching tertiary business students?

As outlined in Chapter 3, the data in this chapter were analysed using a number of statistical techniques: Descriptive statistics including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations; One-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) and Scheffe test; Independent Samples t-test; Exploratory Factor Analysis using Principal Components Analysis; and Cronbach’s alpha, to test scale reliability.

The Likert-type items in the questionnaire used a 6-point response scale ranging from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (6). The significance level was set at p<0.5 for all statistical tests.
Demographic Information

Site Description

In Vietnam, there are 234 universities, eight of which specialise in Business and Economics. Three of these, from three different regions but all from the main university regions, were selected for this study because they had large Faculties of Business and Economics. The programs at all the three sites cover three levels of degrees - Bachelor, Masters and Doctorate - of which the Bachelor degree is the largest. The programs consist of two main parts – general education and specialised education. Within the programs, local business enterprises are involved in the provision of internships and placements. The curriculums, specifically designed for each degree level, are approved by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET). The three sites all provide teaching aids such as computers with internet access.

Site 1

Site 1 is a metropolitan university, with approximately 1,200 staff and 45,000 students. It is one of the long-standing universities of Business and Economics in the country (founded in the 1950s) so it has a number of highly qualified staff with expertise in the field, including approximately 20 professors, 100 vice-professors, 250 staff with doctoral qualifications and 400 staff with Masters degrees. Current staff represent over 20 specialisations relating to Business and Economics. The university has collaborated with many other countries in providing international co-operative training programs, research
funding and opportunities for student internships and placements. These programs are often primarily focused on the teaching of English.

**Site 2**

Site 2 is another metropolitan university located in Vietnam's largest city. The site, founded in the 1970s, has approximately 800 staff and 50,000 students. The staff includes approximately 10 professors, 40 vice-professors, 150 staff with doctorates and 400 staff with a Masters degree. Staff have expertise in over 20 specialisations relating to Business and Economics. The university provides two main strands – Economics and Business Administration. Some programs are delivered in English. The facilities are high quality and new, with a variety of teaching aids with internet access in all classrooms. Six of its programs are international co-operative training programs focussed on the Masters degree.

**Site 3**

Site 3 is a regional university located in a mountainous area of the country. It is a newer university of Business and Economics, founded in the 2000s, with 8,035 students and approximately 400 staff most of whom have relatively little teaching experience. The staff presently includes five professors, 25 vice-professors, 75 staff with doctoral qualifications, and 120 staff with Masters degrees. Staff have expertise in over 10 specialisations relating to Business and Economics.
Response Rate

The written questionnaire was distributed to 786 faculty members across the three sites as explained in Chapter 3.

A total of 577 faculty responded, giving an overall response rate of 73%, which according to Gay (1992) is a reasonable response rate for reliable data analysis. The response rate across the three sites varied from 71% and 77%. The number of questionnaires distributed and the response rates from each site are given in Table 5.1.

There were 209 staff who did not participate in the study. Reasons given for non-participation by the Deans of Faculties were: a) participants were on leave, retired or had recently vacated their positions; or b) refusal to participate with no reasons stated.

Table 5.1: Questionnaire: Number Distributed and Response Rate by Site

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Questionnaires Distributed</th>
<th>Responses Received</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SITE 1</td>
<td>315</td>
<td>40.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SITE 2</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>19.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SITE 3</td>
<td>315</td>
<td>40.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>786</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Even though the response rates were fairly even across the three sites, the proportion of the total sample was markedly different. The highest
proportion was from Site 3 with 42% of the sample followed by Site 1 with 38% and Site 2 with 20%. This is a direct consequence of the initial unequal distribution of questionnaires as explained above.

**Missing Values Analysis**

A missing values analysis showed that there were relatively few missing values overall with the highest being for Discipline (Question A4) with 5.5% missing values. The next highest was for Revision of the curriculum (A10) at 3.5% and Years teaching experience (Question A5) with 3%. Missing values in demographic data are not unusual as respondents chose not to respond to particular items, or consider them not applicable (Hair et al., 1998). For all other items missing values were less than 2%. They were random rather than systematic, so in view of their infrequency there was no need to either exclude, substitute or replace the missing values to perform the analysis required, in particular, the sample size met the most stringent benchmark for Factor Analysis.

**Respondent Demographics**

**Gender**

From the sample of 577, 66% were females and 34% males as shown in Table 5.2. The overall proportion of female respondents was therefore almost double that of males. This dominance of female academics in the sample held for all three sites, with Site 3 having the highest proportion of female respondents, 72% or 2.5 times that of males. The dominance of females is
typical of the academic profession in Vietnam and also reflects the Vietnamese labour force, where the proportion of female labour has often been higher than for males (World Economic Forum, 2008).

Table 5.2: Gender - Frequency Distribution across Sites (N=577)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SITE 1</td>
<td>222</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>41.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SITE 2</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>34.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SITE 3</td>
<td>241</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>27.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>577</td>
<td>198</td>
<td>34.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Qualification

A condition of employment as a lecturer in Vietnamese higher education institutions is that all academic staff must hold a Bachelor degree as a minimum qualification. To graduate with a Bachelor degree, the candidate must achieve an overall graduating score of more than 7/10. Table 5.3 shows the qualifications of staff at the three sites.
**Table 5.3: Qualification – Frequency Distribution across Sites**

(N=568)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Bachelor</th>
<th>Masters</th>
<th>Doctorate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SITE 1</td>
<td>218</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SITE 2</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>28.1</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SITE 3</td>
<td>236</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>49.6</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>568</strong></td>
<td><strong>169</strong></td>
<td><strong>29.7</strong></td>
<td><strong>292</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall, just over half the respondents in the study had a Masters qualification (52%), followed by a Bachelor degree (30%) and less frequently, a doctorate (19%). However, the results show surprising disparities in lecturer qualifications across the three sites. The rate of highly qualified lecturers, that is, those holding a Doctorate, was considerably higher in the metropolitan universities. For example, in Site 1, 36% of staff held a Doctorate, whereas at Site 3, rural university, only 2% did. This suggests that staff are more qualified at Business schools in the larger cities where they are better placed to attract highly qualified staff. Site 3 was also a comparatively new university, probably still in the process of building its student population and academic workforce.

**Discipline or Speciality**

As mentioned, the three sites for the study were chosen because they had large Faculties of Business and Economics. In these faculties, a diverse range of programs and courses were offered within more specialised discipline
areas. These disciplines were grouped into six major areas, and one sub-group – Other - devised by the researcher (as discussed in Chapter 3, p104)

Table 5.4: Discipline – Frequency Distribution (N=545)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discipline</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Banking, Finance and Related Fields</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>20.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business and Management</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>11.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sales and Marketing</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accounting</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>17.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economics</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>18.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International Business</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>20.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>545</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.4 shows the distribution of disciplines within the sample population. The highest proportion of respondents were found in Banking, Finance and Related Fields (21%), Economics (19%), Accounting (17%) and Business and Management (12%) which are key fields in Vietnamese Business universities. There was a lower proportion from the disciplines of Sales and Marketing (4%) and International Business (6%).

The ‘Other’ category is relatively large comprising 20% of respondents. This is due to the wide range of disciplines across which the staff taught at the three sites (as discussed in Chapter 3, p.104) and includes numerous minor specialties taught at only one of the three sites with relatively few respondents
in each. For this reason, this category will not be included in any multivariate analysis.

**Teaching Experience**

Teaching Experience captures the number of years that respondents have been teaching in the Business and Economics fields. In the questionnaire, respondents were asked to select one of five categories ranging from 'less than 5 years’ experience to ‘over 20 years’ experience, as shown in Table 5.5.

Overall, a high proportion of the respondents in this study had relatively little teaching experience, with respondents in the two categories ‘less than 5 years’ (49%) and ‘from 6 to 10 years’ (27%) accounting for over three quarters of the sample population. The proportion of staff who had more than 11 years teaching experience was low: from 11 to 15 years (10%); from 16 to 20 years (7%); and over than 20 years (8%) in all sites.

*Table 5.5: Teaching Experience - Frequency Distribution across Sites (N=577)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>&lt;5 years</th>
<th>6-10 years</th>
<th>11-15 years</th>
<th>16-20 years</th>
<th>&gt;20 years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site 1</td>
<td>222</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>30.6</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>25.2</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site 2</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>21.9</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site 3</td>
<td>241</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>65.1</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>29.9</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>577</td>
<td>282</td>
<td>48.9</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>26.5</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
With regards to the three sites, the proportion of less experienced staff was highest in Site 3 (75%) which is the newest university, followed by Site 2 (72%). Site 1 had the highest percentage of experienced staff with a quarter of the staff in the sample with more than 16 years (14% 16 - 20 years and 13% over 20 years).

**Descriptive Statistics - Soft Skills Training Information**

To identify the prevalence of soft skills pedagogy across the sites in this study, the respondents were asked about how important soft skills were (Question A6); if soft skills are taught in their university and what proportion of their program was spent in teaching soft skills (Question A7); which of these skills were taught in their universities at the time of data collection (Question A8); how well the curriculum had prepared students for the workplace (Question A9); and whether or not the curriculum should be revised for soft skills development (Question A10).

**The Importance of Soft Skills**

The respondents were asked to rate the level of importance from ‘very important’ to ‘not important at all’. The results showed that nearly all business educators were in agreement as to the importance of soft skills for career success, with over one quarter (27%) selecting ‘important’ and almost three quarters selecting ‘very important’ (72%). This pattern of responses was similar for all three sites.

**The Soft Skills Currently Taught**
When asked if soft skills were currently taught in their university, the majority of lecturers (79%) confirmed that soft skills were currently taught. A small proportion, one tenth of respondents, were unsure but 12% (15% at Site 2) responded that their institution did not teach soft skills. This is a puzzling response given that soft skills were taught at all three sites.

Those respondents who indicated that soft skills were taught at their institution, were asked to indicate the proportion of their program spent teaching soft skills. Overall, 70% indicated that between 0 and 40% of their program was spent teaching soft skills (see Table 5.6). On the other hand, 14% indicated that 61% - 100% was spent on soft skills. When breaking down the data by site, some variation is evident, with 65% of respondents from Site 1 and 75% from Site 3 spending between 0 and 40% of their program on soft skills teaching. The reason for this disparity might be that Site 3 is a new university, small in comparison to the other sites, and the majority of staff are less qualified and less experienced.

Table 5.6: Proportion of program - Frequency Distribution across Sites (N=443)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>0-20%</th>
<th>21-40%</th>
<th>41-60%</th>
<th>61-80%</th>
<th>81-100%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site 1</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>31.4</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>33.7</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site 2</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>29.1</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>41.8</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site 3</td>
<td>192</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>39.1</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>35.9</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>443</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>34.3</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>36.1</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In summary, it appears that even though soft skills are seen as important by the majority of academics, the majority spend 40% or less of their program teaching soft skills.

**Soft Skills Teaching Experience**

Respondents were asked if they had experience teaching soft skills. If they indicated they had experience teaching soft skills, two open-ended questions sought more information about the specific soft skills they had taught and how long they had taught these skills to Business students.

Across the three sites, 39% of respondents indicated they had experience teaching soft skills. This means that over half the respondents had no experience teaching soft skills, which is of concern given that they overwhelming agreed that soft skills were important for Business graduates career success. Once again, Site 3 stands out with only 32% of respondents indicating they had experience compared with 45% at Site 1.

For those respondents who had taught soft skills, they had varying levels of experience. Most of the respondents indicated they had less than five years experience teaching soft skills.

Given the opportunity to nominate which specific soft skills they had taught in their universities, only 81 academics or 14% responded to this question. The responses were collated, identifying which soft skills were taught in each site. In total, 26 soft skills were nominated (see Table 5.7). This was of particular interest given that the list of 19 soft skills generated for Part B of the
survey was compiled from the literature and from the interviews conducted with business employers for the first component of this research.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soft Skills</th>
<th>Site 1</th>
<th>Site 2</th>
<th>Site 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Negotiation</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group-Work</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partner Assessment</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transaction Psychology</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening, Sharing and Sympathizing</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Event Organization</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Real Estate Transaction</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Real Estate Agency</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recruitment</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical Thinking</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presentation</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time-Management</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem Solving</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making Decision</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning and Organizing work</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technological Competency</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guidance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideology Development</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Market Research and Analysis</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Skills</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applying Situations into Fact</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Although the proportion who responded was small, the responses gave an indication of the range of soft skills expertise at each site. As shown in Table 5.7, there were differences across the three sites. Only two of the soft skills, Group-Work and Presentation, were nominated by staff across the three universities.

Site 1 had the most soft skills identified by respondents (17), followed by Site 3 with 13, whereas in only five soft skills were identified as having been taught at Site 2. This may be due to the fact that only 27% of the sample or 156 respondents were from Site 2. Since soft skills are an unofficial and optional subject, universities themselves decide the type and number of soft skills taught.

**Preparedness for the workplace**

The respondents were asked how well they thought their faculty prepares students to for the workplace, by rating the level of preparedness from ‘Very well’ to ‘Not at all’.

A majority (67%) responded that their current curriculum had prepared students ‘well’ or ‘very well’ to be ready for the workplace. This response is similar across universities: 69% in Site 1, 65% in Site 2, and 67% in Site 3.

**Revision of curriculum for soft skill development**

The respondents indicated that they believed their faculty’s current curriculum should be revised to incorporate soft skills development. A majority
of respondents (82%) indicated that they believed the curriculum should be revised accordingly. This positive response was consistent across the three sites: 83% in Site 1, 85% in Site 2, and 80% in Site 3.

While these results suggest that educators rate soft skills education highly as an important competency for work readiness, it is beyond doubt that revision of the current curriculum is required, as adequate and appropriate programs in soft skills education are lacking in the universities surveyed.

**Learning Environment: Factor Analysis and Scale Development**

The learning environment section of the questionnaire consisted of six items developed to identify how the current learning environment is. The items were designed to focus on six key areas: Peer collaboration, Technology application, Globalised environment, Online learning, Self-motivated and Social media networking.

The respondents were asked to respond to the six statements by indicating the strength of their agreement from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. A score of 3.5 on such an item indicated a neutral point - neither agreement nor disagreement. Table 5.8 presents the results for each item.
Table 5.8: Learning Environment (N=568)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning Environment</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Online Learning</td>
<td>4.91</td>
<td>.863</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology Application</td>
<td>4.65</td>
<td>.952</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Motivation</td>
<td>4.55</td>
<td>.994</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Media Networking</td>
<td>4.46</td>
<td>1.086</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer Collaboration</td>
<td>4.22</td>
<td>1.257</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Globalized Environment</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>1.095</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On the whole, educators were positive about all items. The highest mean score, belonged to the item ‘Online Learning’ (4.91) indicating that they ‘agreed’ that students learn more effectively in online environments. Similarly, they ‘agreed’ that in their faculty, students regularly use technology in courses (mean=4.65) and that students are self-motivated (4.55) and network through social media (4.46).

There was less strong agreement (Somewhat agree) that students collaborate often with their peers (4.22) or that they are equipped to work in a globalised environment (4.16).

When the six items were devised, it was hypothesised that they would form a single factor – ‘learning environment’. To test this hypothesis, an Exploratory Factor Analysis was run using Principal Component Analysis (IBM SPSS Statistics V23) and the six items loaded on one scale. The scale ‘Learning Environment’ was computed by calculating the mean of the six items.
The factor loadings and descriptive statistics of the scale are shown in Table 5.9.

The mean of the scale was 4.49 indicating the respondents 'agreed' that their faculties were providing a conducive learning environment for their students. The reliability (Cronbach's Alpha) was .863, higher than the acceptable value of .70 (Anderson et al., 2013) and the desirable level of .80. The reliability could have been increased marginally (.867) by deleting the item on online learning (see Appendix K) but this was a critical item and little would be gained by deleting it. The high reliability indicates that the internal consistency of the six items was highly acceptable. All measures indicate this is a valid and reliable scale for measuring the learning environment pertaining to soft skills development.

Table 5.9 Learning Environment: Factor Loadings and Scale Statistics (N=573)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Factor Loading</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social Media Networks</td>
<td>.849</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-motivated</td>
<td>.839</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Globalised environment</td>
<td>.822</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology application</td>
<td>.804</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer Collaboration</td>
<td>.712</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online Learning</td>
<td>.601</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scale Mean</td>
<td>4.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard deviation</td>
<td>.805</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cronbach’s Alpha</td>
<td>.863</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Looking at the demographics, there was no significant difference in the mean of the Learning Environment scale across the three sites, between males and females, between academics with different qualifications or years teaching experience. The only significant difference was between disciplines where educators from International Business agreed more strongly than those from Economics (means=4.90 and 4.35, F(2,421)=2.93, p=.013).

In order to identify how the learning environment impacts on students’ soft skills development please refer to the ‘Discussion’ section in Chapter Six.

**Importance of Specific Soft Skills**

For the purpose of curriculum renewal, identifying which soft skills are important for entering the workplace is an essential task. The educators were asked for their perceptions regarding the importance of 19 specific soft skills, which were nominated by respondents in Phase One of the study.

Business educators were asked to rate the importance of each identified soft skill on a six-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (6). The 19 items as shown in Table 5.10 have been ranked based on their mean score.
Table 5.10: The Essential Soft Skills (n=577)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Essential Soft Skills</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>5.55</td>
<td>.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Responsibility</td>
<td>5.44</td>
<td>.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Team-Work</td>
<td>5.32</td>
<td>.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Time-Management</td>
<td>5.31</td>
<td>.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Self-Discipline</td>
<td>5.28</td>
<td>.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Presentation</td>
<td>5.27</td>
<td>.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Critical Thinking</td>
<td>5.27</td>
<td>.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Positive Attitudes</td>
<td>5.27</td>
<td>.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Negotiation</td>
<td>5.24</td>
<td>.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Networking</td>
<td>5.23</td>
<td>.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Interpersonal Skills</td>
<td>5.21</td>
<td>.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Problem-Solving</td>
<td>5.20</td>
<td>.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>Professionalism</td>
<td>5.15</td>
<td>.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>Flexibility</td>
<td>5.09</td>
<td>.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>Technological Competence</td>
<td>5.05</td>
<td>.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td>Market Research and Analysis</td>
<td>5.01</td>
<td>.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.</td>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td>4.96</td>
<td>.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.</td>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>4.91</td>
<td>.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19.</td>
<td>Customer Service</td>
<td>4.90</td>
<td>.86</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results were very positive overall, with all mean scores higher than 4.90, i.e. ‘Agree’. Agreement was strongest for Communication (5.55) and Responsibility (5.44), followed by Team-Work, Time-Management, Self-Discipline, Presentation, Critical Thinking, and Positive Attitudes, with no statistically significant difference between the means (5.27–5.32). Market
Research and Analysis. Marketing, Leadership and Customer Service were slightly less positive with the means falling between 5.01 and 4.90.

Respondents were offered an opportunity to nominate any soft skill that they felt was missing, through an open-ended question. Six respondents suggested the skills of ‘Listening’ and ‘Empathising’ as a consideration for the future curriculum.

This question was designed to reveal which of these skills lecturers felt were essential to be integrated into the formal business curriculum to ensure that students were prepared for the workplace. However, given the positive response to all skills, it may be more practical to focus on the top skills.

**Demographic Influences: Specific Soft Skills**

Further analysis was undertaken to determine if there was any influence of respondents’ background such as location, gender, qualification, teaching experience and soft skills teaching experience on their perception of the 19 essential soft skills. As discussed by Edgar & Geare (2004), respondents’ demographic characteristics may have some influence on their views.

**Location**

The educators from the three different sites across Vietnam had mixed perceptions on the importance of the specific soft skills. However, overall their perceptions appeared positive with all mean scores more than 4.6.
A One-way ANOVA was used to investigate if there was a significant difference in the level of importance respondents placed on the 19 soft skills based on Location. The analysis as shown in Table 5.11 indicates that there was a significant difference between locations for the following soft skills: Negotiation; Self-Discipline; Critical Thinking; Responsibility; Professionalism; Problem Solving and Customer Service. For every soft skill where there was a significant impact of location, Site 3 had a lower mean, that is, they considered it less important for business graduates than did respondents from the other site or sites. This may be due to the staff in a mountainous area perceived soft skills less important in business field.

Table 5.11: ANOVA: Soft Skills Importance by Location (N=574)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soft Skills</th>
<th>DF</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
<th>Mean Differences*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Negotiation</td>
<td>2,572</td>
<td>5.801</td>
<td>.003</td>
<td>1(5.33) &gt; 3(5.13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Discipline</td>
<td>2,572</td>
<td>5.524</td>
<td>.004</td>
<td>2(5.40) &gt; 3(5.17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical Thinking</td>
<td>2,572</td>
<td>6.107</td>
<td>.002</td>
<td>1(5.38) &gt; 3(5.18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility</td>
<td>2,572</td>
<td>8.996</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>1(5.55) &amp; 2(5.52) &gt; 3(5.31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem Solving</td>
<td>2,572</td>
<td>4.640</td>
<td>.010</td>
<td>2(5.27) &gt; 3(5.10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professionalism</td>
<td>2,572</td>
<td>17.054</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>1(5.30) &amp; 2(5.27) &gt; 3(4.91)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer Service</td>
<td>2,572</td>
<td>5.570</td>
<td>.004</td>
<td>1(5.02) &gt; 3(4.76)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* 1=Site 1 2=Site 2 3=Site 3

To further investigate which soft skills were regarded as most important in the different sites, the soft skills identified at each site have been ranked in order of perceived importance by the respondents (see Table 5.12). This data will be useful to identify if there needs to be a different set of soft skills.
integrated into the curriculum at each location’ given the differing needs of regional and metropolitan business schools and organisations.

Table 5.12: The Most Important Skills by Site

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Site 1</th>
<th>Site 2</th>
<th>Site 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Responsibility</td>
<td>Responsibility</td>
<td>Responsibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Team-work</td>
<td>Self-discipline</td>
<td>Positive Attitudes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Critical Thinking</td>
<td>Time-management</td>
<td>Team-work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Time-management</td>
<td>Positive Attitudes</td>
<td>Presentation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Negotiation</td>
<td>Networking</td>
<td>Time-management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Professionalism</td>
<td>Team-work</td>
<td>Critical Thinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Self-discipline</td>
<td>Negotiation</td>
<td>Self-discipline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Interpersonal Skills</td>
<td>Problem-solving</td>
<td>Interpersonal Skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Networking</td>
<td>Critical Thinking</td>
<td>Networking</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The key soft skills such as Communication, Responsibility and Team-work were regarded as important by all three universities.

Gender

Respondents presented mixed views regarding the importance of specific soft skills, however, both male and female educators rated the importance of all skills positively with no mean scores less than 4.8.

Independent samples t-test was used test for differences in views held by male and female educators regarding the importance of specific soft skills.
Table 5.13 shows those soft skills that males and females rated differently. For the eight soft skills identified as significantly different, the female respondents felt the skills were of more importance than their male counterparts.

**Table 5.13: T-Test: Soft Skills Importance by Gender (N=577)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soft Skill</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>DF</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Negotiation</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>5.16</td>
<td>.686</td>
<td>2.089</td>
<td>575</td>
<td>.037</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>5.28</td>
<td>.644</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Skills</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>5.07</td>
<td>.720</td>
<td>3.817</td>
<td>575</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>5.28</td>
<td>.606</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>4.80</td>
<td>.872</td>
<td>2.500</td>
<td>575</td>
<td>.013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>4.97</td>
<td>.703</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professionalism</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>4.99</td>
<td>.784</td>
<td>3.059</td>
<td>573</td>
<td>.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>5.20</td>
<td>.777</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer Service</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>4.78</td>
<td>.951</td>
<td>2.401</td>
<td>575</td>
<td>.017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>4.97</td>
<td>.809</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>4.85</td>
<td>.789</td>
<td>2.172</td>
<td>573</td>
<td>.030</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>4.99</td>
<td>.742</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technological Competence</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>4.92</td>
<td>.824</td>
<td>2.707</td>
<td>575</td>
<td>.007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>5.11</td>
<td>.742</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Attitudes</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>5.11</td>
<td>.842</td>
<td>3.531</td>
<td>575</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>5.35</td>
<td>.626</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Qualification**

The views of the respondents from the three qualification groups regarding the soft skills importance were positive with all mean scores more than 4.8. Significant differences were found between the scores of the three groups of respondents on Negotiation, Self-Discipline, Critical Thinking, Responsibility, Time-Management, Professionalism, and Customer Service (see Table 5.14).
Table 5.14: ANOVA: Soft Skills Importance by Qualification (N=567)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soft Skill</th>
<th>DF</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
<th>Mean Differences*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Negotiation</td>
<td>2,565</td>
<td>3.803</td>
<td>.023</td>
<td>D(5.40) &gt; M(5.20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Discipline</td>
<td>2,565</td>
<td>6.818</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>M(5.38) &gt; D(5.14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical Thinking</td>
<td>2,565</td>
<td>6.460</td>
<td>.002</td>
<td>M(5.36) &gt; B(5.14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility</td>
<td>2,565</td>
<td>4.751</td>
<td>.009</td>
<td>M(5.52) &gt; B(5.33)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time-Management</td>
<td>2,565</td>
<td>4.467</td>
<td>.012</td>
<td>M(5.37) &gt; B(5.18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professionalism</td>
<td>2,565</td>
<td>3.561</td>
<td>.029</td>
<td>D(5.29) &gt; B(5.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer Service</td>
<td>2,565</td>
<td>6.013</td>
<td>.003</td>
<td>D(5.16) &gt; M(4.86) &amp; B(4.81)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*D=Doctorate, M=Masters Degree, B=Bachelor Degree

The groups differed in the importance they placed on soft skills, and the significant differences are shown in Table 5.14. Self-Discipline, Critical Thinking, Responsibility, and Time Management were regarded as more important by respondents with a Masters degree. Whereas Negotiation, Professionalism and Customer Service were ranked highest by respondents with a Doctorate degree. In all cases except Self-Discipline, the group with the higher qualification put greater importance on the soft skill.

In short, there were significant differences between educators with different level of qualification on their response to the importance of seven of the soft skills

**Discipline**

The respondents from the six disciplines (‘Other’ category omitted for this analysis as explained on p.104) looked upon the importance the skills positively with mean scores between 5.62 and 4.73. One-way ANOVA results showed
that there was a significant difference between the respondents from different disciplines on four of the skills, Self-Discipline, Responsibility, Time-Management and Marketing as shown in Table 5.15. For three skills, educators from Economics showed lower levels of agreement, while those from International Business rated Self-Discipline and Time-Management as more important than those from the other disciplines.

Table 5.15: ANOVA: Soft Skills Importance by Discipline (N=425)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soft Skills</th>
<th>DF</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
<th>Mean Differences*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-Discipline</td>
<td>2,423</td>
<td>2.794</td>
<td>.017</td>
<td>IB(5.52) &gt; S&amp;M(5.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility</td>
<td>2,423</td>
<td>5.98</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>B&amp;M(5.62) &gt; E(5.12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time-Management</td>
<td>2,423</td>
<td>6.552</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>IB(5.67) &gt; S&amp;M(5.04), E(5.55)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td>2,423</td>
<td>2.311</td>
<td>.043</td>
<td>S&amp;M(5.33) &gt; E(4.80), IB(4.82)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

S&M=Sales and Marketing; IB=International Business; B&M=Business and Marketing; E=Economics

To explore the essential soft skills for each discipline further, Table 5.16 shows the top five ranked by mean which for each discipline. The only essential soft skill that was common to all of the disciplines was Communication. Most of the other soft skills with significant differences across disciplines were in the top five skills, with the exception of Interpersonal Skills, Professionalism and Technological Competence. It is evident that staff from different disciplines perceive different soft skills to be important. For example, Accounting people value Presentation skills, whereas Sales & Marketing people value Problem-Solving skills more highly. These are soft skills that are essential for the discipline areas, so it may mean that any soft skill curriculum development needs to have the flexibility to vary the skills required by discipline.
### Table 5.16: The Most Important Soft Skills by Discipline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Banking, Finance &amp; Related Fields</th>
<th>Business &amp; Management</th>
<th>Sales &amp; Marketing</th>
<th>Accounting</th>
<th>Economics</th>
<th>International Business</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Responsibility</td>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Time-management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Responsibility</td>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Networking</td>
<td>Responsibility</td>
<td>Positive Attitudes</td>
<td>Self-discipline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Self-discipline</td>
<td>Networking</td>
<td>Negotiation</td>
<td>Presentation</td>
<td>Critical Thinking</td>
<td>Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Team-work</td>
<td>Team-work</td>
<td>Problem solving</td>
<td>Negotiation</td>
<td>Team-work</td>
<td>Critical Thinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Networking</td>
<td>Time-management</td>
<td>Positive Attitudes</td>
<td>Team-work</td>
<td>Self-discipline</td>
<td>Responsibility</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In summary, there was a significant influence of ‘discipline’ on the educators’ response regarding the importance of Self-Discipline, Responsibility, Time-Management, and Marketing. The five soft skills regarded as most essential differed accordingly to discipline.

#### Teaching Experience

Teaching experience was identified as one of the factors that may affect respondents’ perceptions about the importance of specific soft skills. The responses regarding the importance of soft skills were positive, with all mean scores more than 4.0.

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to test for significant differences between educators’ perceptions of the importance of the 19 soft skills based on their teaching experience. A significant difference was found on only two of the skills: Communication (F(4,570) =3.098, p =.015) and Negotiation (F(4, 572) =2.955, p =.020) in which the educators with 16–20 year experience rated the
importance higher than the other groups. This shows that educators, regardless of their lecturing experience, have similar perceptions about the importance of soft skills studied, with the exception of Communication and Negotiation. In another words, their level of teaching experience did not have any effect on their perceptions of the importance of most of the specific soft skills.

**Soft Skills Teaching Experience**

Soft skills expertise was identified as one of the factors that may affect respondents’ perceptions about the importance of specific soft skills. The respondents agreed that the soft skills were important, with the means ranging from 4.84 to 5.55.

Analysis was undertaken to determine if respondents with expertise in soft skills had different perceptions about the importance of each soft skill. An independent-samples t-test was conducted which found a significant difference in the means of four soft skills: Team-Work; Customer Service; Networking and Marketing Research and Analysis. Educators who had soft skills teaching experience agreed more strongly about the importance these skills than did those without soft skills teaching experience (see Table 5.17). This finding suggests that the experience of teaching certain soft skills is related to how important it is thought to be.
### Table 5.17: T-Test: Soft Skills Teaching Experience (N=550)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Methods</th>
<th>Experience</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Team-work</td>
<td></td>
<td>5.41</td>
<td>.577</td>
<td>2.765</td>
<td>558</td>
<td>.006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Experience</td>
<td></td>
<td>5.27</td>
<td>.616</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer Service</td>
<td></td>
<td>5.01</td>
<td>.743</td>
<td>2.286</td>
<td>558</td>
<td>.023</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Experience</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.84</td>
<td>.944</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Networking</td>
<td></td>
<td>5.32</td>
<td>.601</td>
<td>2.198</td>
<td>558</td>
<td>.028</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Experience</td>
<td></td>
<td>5.17</td>
<td>.820</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In short, there was a relationship between educators’ experience teaching soft skills, and their level of agreement as to the importance of four of the soft skills: Team-Work; Customer Service; Networking and Marketing; Research and Analysis.

### Strategies for the Development of Soft Skills

The field of soft skills has been a peripheral discipline in Vietnam (Tran & Swierczeck, 2009). Therefore, the goal of identifying strategies for the development of soft skills is considered to be an essential foundational initiative for soft skills development in Business higher education institutions.

In the last section of the questionnaire, there was a list of 23 items based on strategies for soft skills development. The respondents were asked to indicate on a 6-point Likert scale whether they agreed or disagreed to each statement. The response categories went from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. The 23 items were hypothesised to form three independent scales: 'Soft Skills Integration', containing eight items; 'Soft skills Training Methods', with...
eight items; and ‘Effects on Soft Skills Development’ with seven items.

Exploratory Factor Analysis and Principal Components Analysis (IMB SPSS Statistic V23) was used, analysing each set of items as a one-factor model (See Appendix M for details of scale development).

Table 5.18: Scale Characteristics (n=568)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>No Items</th>
<th>Variance explained %</th>
<th>Mean Inter-item Correlation</th>
<th>Cronbach’s Alpha</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Soft Skills Integration</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>39.59</td>
<td>0.613</td>
<td>.607</td>
<td>4.77</td>
<td>.543</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soft Skills Training</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>44.02</td>
<td>0.477</td>
<td>.681</td>
<td>4.95</td>
<td>.527</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effects on Soft Skills</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>40.7</td>
<td>0.360</td>
<td>.630</td>
<td>4.23</td>
<td>.669</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While the generally agreed lower limit for Cronbach’s Alpha is .70, it may decrease to .60 for exploratory research (Hair et al., 1998). Another way of assessing reliability is to use the mean inter-item correlation for the items, and the rule of thumb is that these should exceed 0.3 (Field, 2009). From the analysis, the mean inter-item correlations of 0.360 - 0.613 are all above 0.3 (see Table 5.18). Therefore, on balance, given the exploratory nature of the scales and the small number of items in each, the three scales were considered to be acceptable.

Soft Skills Integration

Identifying how to integrate soft skills into the curriculum is also an important step in the progress of soft skills development. Five strategies for
integrating soft skills into the curriculum formed this scale (see Appendix M). Table 5.19 indicates that all mean scores were above 3.5, indicating respondents agreed with the statements.

Table 5.19: The Strategies for Soft Skills Integration (n=577)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Strategies of Soft Skills Integration</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C19</td>
<td>The soft skills perceived as important in the global context should be integrated into Vietnamese curriculum.</td>
<td>4.98</td>
<td>.794</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C1</td>
<td>Regular contact with employers would assist faculty identify the right soft skills for curriculum reform.</td>
<td>4.94</td>
<td>.801</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C12</td>
<td>Soft skills should be integrated in all Business courses</td>
<td>4.77</td>
<td>.929</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C21</td>
<td>Soft skills should be integrated into curriculum as a formal stand-alone subject.</td>
<td>4.75</td>
<td>.967</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C16</td>
<td>Soft skills resources should be developed locally and made available for local Business Universities.</td>
<td>4.42</td>
<td>.881</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The perception that the integration of soft skills into the business school curriculum is of vital importance in the global context, and ensuring that regular contact with employers is maintained to identify the most important soft skills were regarded as the two most effective strategies for soft skills integration, with similar mean scores (4.98 and 4.94 respectively). The least effective item, though still indicating agreement, was that soft skills resources should be developed locally and made available to local universities (4.42). Findings
suggest that given that Vietnam is at a stage where the nation is trying to improve its integration into the global market, business employees need to possess the soft skills essential to succeed in the business context to help the country compete in the global trading market. Nevertheless, differences between culture, education and the economy of a developing country such as Vietnam and developed countries are significant, and Vietnam should not simply adopt the soft skills programs currently taught at Business Schools in developed countries into its own Business Schools.

In summary, as the first step of curriculum reform for soft skills development – soft skills integration - respondents strongly supported integrating the five key soft skills identified above.

**Soft Skills Training Methods**

Five training methods made up the Soft Skill Training scale (see Appendix M). Table 5.20 shows the means for all items included in the scale, with the means ranging from 4.65 to 5.22. This indicates that the respondents agreed with the specific strategies identified for soft skills training in Vietnam's institutions.
Table 5.20: The Strategies of Soft Skills Training (n=577)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Soft Skills Training Methods</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C2</td>
<td>Soft skills should be learnt in both theory and practice.</td>
<td>5.22</td>
<td>.717</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C9</td>
<td>Students' formal relevant internships should include activities to specially target soft skills.</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>.771</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C15</td>
<td>Soft skills should be embedded in teaching and learning activities across the curriculum.</td>
<td>4.97</td>
<td>.752</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C6</td>
<td>Students should be provided soft skills learning environment-simulated workplace.</td>
<td>4.91</td>
<td>.838</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C13</td>
<td>Students should do work placement outside Vietnam to develop soft skills.</td>
<td>4.65</td>
<td>.892</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Business educators agreed that the most important strategy for effectively implementing soft skills training requires both theory and practice in the context of soft skills lessons (5.22). Like most other subjects in the Vietnamese tertiary curriculum, theory is often explicitly taught through coursework before students go out to practice in industry. For soft skills practice training, respondents agreed that strategies such as internships, learning-environment simulated workplaces, and overseas placements should be included.

In this regard, respondents agreed that formal relevant internships should target soft skills training. Internships usually require final year business students to work in business enterprises for two intern sessions, each of which involves a period of three months where they can finally apply theory to real
workplace practice (Kenh14.vn, n.d., para.1). Under the proposed scheme, soft
skills training undertaken throughout their course would already have prepared
them for the theory/praxis nexus. In short, the survey respondents agreed that
providing soft skills training through simulated workplace packages was an
important strategy. This means students would participate in work situations set
up in the classroom where they would act out real world scenarios (4.91).

Training Vietnamese business students in soft skills through overseas
placements was less advised, possibly because this activity is more expensive
for HEIs and Vietnamese students, and the soft skills identified abroad are likely
to be better suited to the needs of the host country. Moreover, respondents
agreed that in any case, the best strategy for implementing soft skills training is
to embed them within the curriculum. It could be argued that this would require
all staff to become competent in soft skills training methods, but I do not see
why this should be so. We could initially embed the teaching of soft skills in
every discipline area, within which a staff member, or group of staff could
become responsible for embedded soft skills training in their area.

In addition, the training of students in Vietnamese institutions
significantly reduces the cost of training them abroad. In general, respondents
agreed that in order to train soft skills effectively for business students, training
soft skills in both theory and practice throughout the program should be
regarded as the most important factor. Practising soft skills through formal
internships, which specially target soft skills training was also preferred by
Business educators.
**Effects of Soft Skills Development**

Five items loaded on the scale, Effects on Soft Skills Development (see Appendix M). The items comprised two areas for soft skills development: one is about identifying the best type of soft skills instructor (C8, C10, C17) and the other involves identifying aspects of soft skills development in students (C22 and C3). Table 5.21 shows the mean scores of these items.

*Table 5.21: Effects of Soft Skills Development (n=577)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Effects on Soft Skills Development</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C8</td>
<td>Experts in soft skills are the best instructors in soft skills.</td>
<td>4.60</td>
<td>.947</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C10</td>
<td>Employers are the best instructors in soft skills.</td>
<td>4.31</td>
<td>.946</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C17</td>
<td>Faculty members are the best instructors in soft skills.</td>
<td>4.24</td>
<td>.962</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C22</td>
<td>Bilingual Students Have Better Soft Skills</td>
<td>4.36</td>
<td>.991</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C3</td>
<td>Student interaction with technology needs to decrease for soft skills to develop.</td>
<td>3.64</td>
<td>1.405</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Identifying who could most effectively teach soft skills for students is an important aspect of soft skills development. Respondents tended to agree that the best instructors in soft skills were those staff with at least some formal training themselves in soft skills, and the more expertise they possess, all the better (4.62). In short, experts in soft skills, whether they are employers or educators, were the most agreeable option. However, expertise in soft skill
training is a very limited resource in the country. These experts often are invited by universities to impart soft skills to a large group of students. They introduce or instruct only a few of the soft skills rather than providing adequate training across all appropriate soft skills. The soft skills taught are dependent upon the skills of the expert.

The next best instructors were employers (4.31) followed by faculty members (4.24). Although Business faculty members were the least popular choice agreed by respondents, staff from Vietnamese business schools currently constitute the main source for soft skills education in tertiary intuitions across the country.

The findings also show that two other factors affect the development of soft skills. First, respondents perceived that the students who have more than one language seem better equipped intellectually to acquire soft skills. From this it follows that the acquisition of soft skills for all students could be improved dramatically if soft skill classes were arranged which incorporated a balance of bilingual and non-bilingual students. Second, respondents tended to agree that a decrease in Comutechnological access was necessary for students to improve their soft skills. In comparison to other responses within this scale this concern was not as strongly registered as other points of view and was in the margins between tend to agree and tend to disagree.

Demographic Influences: Soft Skills Development

Are there differences in the strength of agreement on the three scales - Soft Skills Integration, Soft Skills Training Methods and Effect on Soft Skills
Development – when comparing different groups based on their demographic characteristics? To answer this, data was analysed using One-way ANOVA and Independent samples t-tests.

Location

There were differences in the three sites in terms of physical location (urban or rural), size (number of academic staff) and age. It was hypothesised that these differences may influence the respondents’ perceptions of the strategies for soft skills integration of the Business educators.

The sample mean for the three scales, Soft Skills Integration; Soft Skills Training; and Effects of Soft Skills Development were 4.77, 4.95 and 4.23 respectively. There was no statistically significant difference in the mean score on any scale, indicating that which institution respondents come from had no significant influence on their opinion regarding the strategies for soft skills development.

Gender

An Independent-sample t-test was used to determine if males and females had different perceptions of the strategies for soft skills development. The only scale on which there was a significant difference was the Effects of the Soft Skills Development scale with males having a higher mean than females (4.34 and 4.17, t=2.814, p=.005) though both were in the ‘Tend to Agree’ range.
This indicates that male staff more strongly agreed that soft skills development would be affected by having the best type of instructor and by the students' language skills and access to technology.

**Qualification**

An ANOVA was used to identify if there were any difference in educators’ perceptions regarding the strategies for soft skills development based on their qualifications. Table 5.22 indicates that significant differences were found between the qualification levels (Bachelor, Master and Doctorate) in two of the scales: ‘Soft Skills Integration’ and ‘Soft Skills Training Methods’.

*Table 5.22: ANOVA: Strategies for Soft Skills Development by Qualification (N=567)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategies</th>
<th>DF</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
<th>Mean Differences*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Soft Skills Integration</td>
<td>(2)</td>
<td>5.229</td>
<td>.006</td>
<td>M(4.83) &gt; D(4.64)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>D: 4.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soft Skills Training Methods</td>
<td>(2)</td>
<td>6.083</td>
<td>.002</td>
<td>M(5.03) &gt; D(4.86), B(4.88)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effects of Soft Skills Development</td>
<td>(2)</td>
<td>.849</td>
<td>.428</td>
<td>No sig difference</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

D = Doctorate Degree  M=Masters Degree  B = Bachelor Degree

There was no significant difference on the Effects of Soft Skills Development scale. However, educators with a Masters Degree more strongly agreed that integrating soft skills into Business courses and that the soft skills training methods needed to integrate theory and practice were important. This may be because these staff members through their Master programs have an
increased awareness of the importance of soft skills, by way of these programs focusing on globalisation and networking with business people.

**Discipline**

A one-way ANOVA was utilised to identify if there was any influence of respondents’ discipline area on their perception regarding the strategies for soft skills development.

The results show that the respondents coming from different disciplines shared different opinions on the Effects of Soft Skills Development scale. Business, Finance and Related Fields has stronger agreement (4.61) than Accounting (4.41) which in turn was stronger than both Economics (3.95) and International Business (3.87), (F(5,425)=18.732, p=.000)

The educators from Banking, Finance and Related Fields indicated stronger agreement that those from Accounting, Economics and International Business and in turn, those from Accounting agreed more strongly than Educators from Economics and International Business.

**Teaching Experience**

A One-Way ANOVA was used to test for statistically significant differences between the scales based on the educators' general teaching experience.

Overall, the mean scores for each of the ‘years of experience’ groups were above 4.10 indicating agreement with each of the strategies pertinent to
soft skills development. Respondents indicated different levels of agreement in regard to the strategies for Soft Skills Integration scale. Those with over 20 years (4.88) and 6-10 years experience (4.96) had stronger agreement and those with 16-20 years (4.57) and 11-15 years (4.52) experience.

In short, the number of teaching years did influence views about the strategies of soft skills integration. Paradoxically it was those with most and those with few years who had stronger agreement.

**Soft Skills Teaching Experience**

An Independent Samples t-test identify statistically significant differences in the means scale scores of educators with soft skills experience and the ones without soft skills experience.

The only statistically significant difference was on the Soft Skills Training Methods scale where educators who had experience teaching soft skills indicated stronger agreement than those with no experience (5.06 and 4.89; t=3.70, p=.000).

**Conclusion**

This chapter has detailed the results and data analysis of the quantitative phase of the study, then has provided throughout a summation of each of these results.
The next chapter discusses and summarises the findings from the interviews with employers in Phase One and the findings from educators in this chapter.
CHAPTER SIX

DISCUSSION

Introduction

This chapter provides a discussion of the research findings reported in the previous two chapters and is structured around the study’s research questions. It mainly answers the research question 4 in the study. Chapter four reported on the qualitative analysis of the interviews with business employers on the soft skills competence of the higher education business graduates who currently work in their organization. Interview analysis also focused on the specific soft skills respondents identified as being the most important in the business workplace environment and identified employers’ perceptions of the most effective strategies for soft skills development. Chapter five reported the quantitative analysis of a survey of business educators on the pedagogic provision of soft skills in their universities including their perceptions of the most important specific soft skills for higher education business students, and the most effective strategies for soft skills development. In line with the research methodology, the results of the qualitative analysis of Chapter 4 were built on and extended in the quantitative analysis of Chapter 5.

This chapter is in three main parts, drawing on the data analysis chapters. Part one discusses the soft skills competence of business graduates
and soft skills education in business schools. Part two focuses on the importance of soft skills from the perspective of employers and educators by identifying the essential soft skills required for the business workplace. Bringing together both these aspects, Part three recommends strategies for soft skills development in Vietnamese business schools.

**Status of Soft Skills in Vietnam**

Soft Skills Competency of Graduates in the Eyes of Employers

The first research question of the study was to explore the status of recent business graduates’ soft skills competency through the eyes of their employers (Research question 1a). Employers reported that the quality of soft skills competency exhibited by tertiary education business graduates is very low and does not meet the needs of the current business workplace. The majority of employers were disappointed that graduates’ lack of readiness was not of a standard needed to succeed in a competitive and complicated business-working environment, especially in the present context of Vietnam’s integration into the global economic market. For Vietnamese business graduates to succeed in this global context, an extremely high level of business acumen is required but currently lacking. This finding is reinforced by the Vietnamese Minister of Education and Training’s (2005b, p.12) claim that the biggest weakness of the higher education system in Vietnam is its inability to develop a sufficient and skilled reservoir of human resource business performance capacity that will be necessary to meet the demands of industrialization and modernization, and exacerbated by the shortage of specialized business skills required for
international integration.

The employers in the study made it unequivocally clear that the conspicuous inefficiency of Vietnamese business graduates that leads to their poor working performance, was a result of their inadequate soft skills competency. The study found that employers believed that business school graduates were not adequately equipped with the appropriate soft skills necessary for success. For example, while the current competitive business environment requires sales staff who possess strong communication, customer service, marketing skills etc., graduates have proved to be ‘communicatively awkward’ and very ‘innocently naive’ in their attempts to interact with customers (interview no. 5). Graduates were simply not equipped with the soft skills required, and those graduates who did possess some measure of intellectual understanding of soft skills were unable to transfer and apply what they learnt in business school to real-life workplace negotiations. Employers persistently complained that graduates lacked a number of other essential soft skills including, negotiation, problem-solving, team-work and adaptability. Graduates are seen by employers to be weak in their level of knowledge, practical skills, methods of scientific thinking and self-directed learning skills. It was very clear from the study findings that business schools must equip their graduates with a much deeper understanding of the importance of acquiring the appropriate soft skills for effective negotiations capable of maximizing successful business outcomes.

The study revealed that some employers believed that there are additional reasons to explain the difficulty graduates have in mastering soft
skills that are not due simply to the failure of business schools to provide adequate instruction. Employers pointed out that some graduates are strongly influenced by the conservatism of the Vietnamese culture. The theory is that the cultural character of Vietnamese people has been egocentric as well as conservative. This egocentric disposition fosters a form of selfishness that leads to poor teamwork skills. Employer in interview 2 illustrated another example of the way in which Vietnamese cultural character can adversely affect the acquisition of soft skills. The suggested was that the ‘close’ and conservative culture of Vietnamese people gave rise to the traditional style of teacher-centred learning that creates predominately passive and dependent students. Since students are not encouraged to be extroverted, they are not generally proactive or assertive. Consequently, after leaving school, they do not readily seek out responsibility, and when work is offered, they do what they are told but lack initiative. Because they are introverted, they tend not to be creative or possess strong communication skills and so remain limited in their capacity to work effectively in any but menial jobs.

This being the case, employers reported that they found it very difficult to recruit suitable candidates to fill existing vacancies in their businesses. The problem represents an unchanged scenario that has plagued the Vietnamese business world for years. In a report in 2005 by the Ho Chi Minh City Department of Labour, Invalids, and Social Affairs (cited in Le & Truong, 2005, p. 29) it is claimed that "only about one third of the companies in operation are satisfied with the qualifications of their new recruits". While a growing percentage of graduates cannot find jobs matching their academic qualifications and skills, some have to accept manual work and graduates are turning to part-
time jobs or find themselves trapped in temporary employment (interview no. 1). As a consequence, the rate of unemployment among tertiary graduates is increasing significantly (General Statistic Office, 2014). This situation is ironic given that there is an acute shortage of skilled labour in Vietnam. Employers interviewed confirmed this dilemma when they complained that to keep their businesses going, they had to employ graduates who, during their interview, illustrated that they were ill qualified and unable to think of creative answers to real-world business scenarios. In other business enterprises in Vietnam, job vacancies have existed for many years simply because employers have not been able to recruit the qualified employees they were hoping to find. In these cases, businesses had to divert their more qualified employees to take on lower level responsibilities, but at their previous executive pay level. Some companies have chosen to retrain their skilled and trusted employees for simple tasks just to keep the business functioning but doing so puts an obvious strain on the company’s budget. Attempts to retrain new recruits who were found to be lacking the requisite skills has not met with great success because employers commonly use available staff who might have a high level of soft skills but little or no training or understanding about how to effectively teach these skills to others.

Although recent graduates are hard-working and enthusiastic about acquiring knowledge and have excellent hard skills, their soft skills competency remains very low. Employers believe that new graduates have limited comprehension of what they have studied and are confused about what skills or knowledge they need to apply in the context of their employment once they graduate. These problems clearly illustrate that Vietnamese business schools
are currently limited in their ability to provide the appropriate soft skills education and training required by their graduates.

**Status of Soft Skills Education in Business Higher Education Institutions**

The next research question of the study was to investigate the perceptions of employers and educators as to the status of soft skills education in Business Higher Education Institutions (BHEIs) in Vietnam (Research question 1b). To meet this aim, the inadequacies of the current curriculum, approaches to soft skills training, and the soft skills trainers’ capability were explored.

In line with Tran (2013b) and Stephen et al., (2006) the majority of employers interviewed held the view that the Vietnamese university curriculum does not adequately provide appropriate soft skills education for students. On the other hand, ‘hard skills’ courses have featured quite prominently in the curriculum and, by and large, educators considered that the current hard skills curriculum had prepared students for the technical aspects of business. They also agreed that the business school curriculum should be radically revised to incorporate soft skills units specifically designed for business. This supports findings from Oblinger and Verville (1998) regarding a hiatus that has existed since the 1990s. They found that college graduation requirements based primarily on getting passing grades on academic courses failed to produce graduates with the requisite balance between hard and soft skill competencies needed to succeed in the workplace. The study by Tran and Swiercze in 2009
indicates that soft skills continue to be neglected and marginalised as an obscure disciplinary area in Vietnamese universities. This marginalisation became evident when a number of the educators interviewed for this study revealed that they did not know, or were unsure, if soft skills were currently taught in their own universities. Even among those educators who did have soft skills experience, some confused the names of soft skills units currently being taught at their universities with the names of other subjects (for example, agency, real estate transaction, real estate agency).

In addition, educators indicated there was little uniformity in the types of skills taught in the various universities across the different regions of the country. This may be due to the fact that the needs of workplaces vary between regions. These discrepancies can make it difficult for graduates to secure employment in regions other than from where they graduated. This is one reason why it has been argued that there needs to be a more uniform national program with similarly focussed curriculum for all BHEIs. Moreover, the inadequate and inappropriate skills provided by BHEIs for graduates, according to most of the employers, arose from the lack of coordination between educational institutions and industry. This resulted in a haphazard incorporation of the much-needed specific soft skills packages that students require to be successful in gaining employment and to maintain a long-term career. Furthermore, this deficiency has resulted in the growing problem of unemployment among graduates (General Statistic Office, 2014) as employers are not satisfied with the skills possessed by current graduates. Therefore, a greater focus on soft skills education coupled with more regular conversations between business and educational institutions, was strongly recommended as a
means of delivering a curriculum that will provide both the soft and hard skills required by graduates to meet workplace requirements. The study findings also suggest that better communication between the business schools themselves is needed, not just between business schools and industry.

While the learning environment is good for students to develop their soft skills (see ‘Learning Environment’ in Chapter 5), the study found that the current arrangements for soft skills teaching and learning in BHEIs were judged to be poor quality. This is exacerbated by the sociocultural disposition of the Vietnamese people that adversely affects the uptake of certain soft skills. To compensate for the passive nature of Vietnamese students, there should be innovative methods of soft skills training designed to help overcome their communication problems and reticent nature. A failure to recognize this has meant current training methods are both backward and ineffective. This being so, there needs to be soft skills training programs that not only deal with the negative aspects of the culture but with the failure to quickly respond to the increasing demands of the modern business workplace. In some current soft skills programs, there is too much emphasis on theory rather than praxis or the practical application of the skills as essential tools in the workplace environment. The traditional approach of the ‘teacher-centred’ method of instruction is dominant in Vietnam (Pham, 2010) that has been identified as one of the major reasons for the lack of progress in students’ soft skills development. The persistence of this exam-oriented teaching and learning system, which features heavily in current Vietnamese education, has a continuing negative impact (Nguyen et al., 2015; Seymour, 1993).
The shortage of qualified soft skills trainers in business institutions and the poor quality of these trainers was identified as a serious impediment to soft skills development among students in BHEIs. Trainers were reported as having inadequate professional qualifications and insufficient work experience. In essence, there have been virtually no professional soft skills trainers in Vietnamese business schools. What rare soft skills training has taken place has been in teaching situations where inadequately trained staff refer to soft skills within their specialised discipline-based programs. The study revealed that even in the newer soft skills programs, there was a reliance on soft skills trainers who had not been formally trained in soft skills, but only self-taught through what books and documents they could find, of which there are very few in Vietnamese libraries. This dearth of soft skills material is, in part, a consequence of the lack of understanding of soft skills education within the Vietnamese educational system. In addition, due to the shortage of professional soft skills trainers, the student-teacher ratio is too high at 26:1 (General Statistic Office, 2014). These large classes seriously undermine the goals of soft skills lessons where, as far as possible, small group practice is required.

Employers and business educators indicated that there are numerous problems with the soft skills curriculum and that soft skills training methods have been severely hampered by the lack of professionally trained soft skills teachers. Recognition of these limitations provides the rationale for a radical rethinking of the way soft skill programs can be professionally developed and effectively integrated into the curriculum. It is essential that those who teach soft skills are properly trained, and this will initially require that they study abroad in countries where the universities have experts in this area. Redesigning of
curriculum and developing better training methods using professionals from abroad should be done in tandem. Drawing these elements together with the aim of working towards the mutual goal of building a professional program is of paramount importance.

The Importance of Soft Skills

This section discusses about the perception of respondents regarding the importance of soft skills and the essential soft skills in business workplace that should be integrated into the formal business curriculum (Research question 2).

The Importance of Soft Skills in Business

Along with the views of overseas educational researchers such as Buhler (2001), Laud & Johnson (2012), and Osman, Girardi & Paull (2012), Vietnamese employers and educators recognised the importance of soft skills for business success and their place in business education. All the employers interviewed considered soft skills to be important. These employers represented diverse industries from different regions, thereby reinforcing the point made in the literature that soft skills function as a vital component in the financial success of virtually all business and industries (Hommerichhousen, 2002; Klaus, 2010; Watts & Watts, 2008). Over half those interviewed also rated soft skills as more important than hard skills for business careers. At the current stage of integration of the Vietnamese economy into the global business community, when dealing with foreign business partners, soft skills are even
more essential. Therefore, FDI enterprises need employees better equipped with specific soft skills. In the sales field, soft skills were considered to be particularly important because they promote the marketing of a product that is a key factor for successful sales, as stated by one manager “...years ago price and quality were perceived to be the most important factors to sell a product. Today, however, soft skills appear to be an important element to decide if a product can be sold” (interview 10). By way of contrast, in manufacturing and processing industries, soft skills were considered less important than hard skills. Despite this emphasis on hard skills, employers stressed that it was critical that business educators from all areas of the country acknowledged the vital importance of soft skills in business education. Their considered opinion was that soft skills must be treated as an essential component of the curriculum.

In contrast to the perceptions of employers, educators themselves indicated that soft skills education has only figured as a peripheral subject area in business educational institutions. As was pointed out in Chapter Five a number of business educators did not even know if soft skills were taught in their own institutions, and if they did know, they had no idea of the extent to which they were taught. This lack of knowledge about the soft skills curriculum in business schools also explains, in part, why employers are so dissatisfied with the quality of business graduates. It follows that their lack of understanding about soft skill contributes to the disconnect between the universities and the workplace resulting in graduates who are unable to meet the current demands of Vietnamese businesses.
It can be concluded from the above comments that there is a serious problem with the present state of soft skills education in Vietnamese BHEIs. While developed countries have focused on soft skills education for many years, Vietnam still largely ignores this important subject (Tran & Swierczek, 2009). For a long time business enterprises have been unable to fill some vacancies, so it is ironic that the rate of unemployed graduates has increased (Asian Development Bank, 2008). The country’s economy is being integrated into the global economy and this requires a highly skilled labour force. Part of the problem in filling vacancies is that employers have not been able find the right employees who possess the necessary soft skills. Issues such as these indicate that the implementation of soft skills programs into Vietnamese BHEIs should be recognised as a matter of priority.

The Essential Soft Skills

Due to the growing mismatch between supply of and demand for skills in the business workplace (International Labour Organisation, 2014), there was a suggestion to compile a list of those essential skills recommended by both employers and educators in Vietnam. From the study reported here, both employers and educators agreed that there were 19 soft skills essential for the current business workplace and that business students should be well versed in these and their application. Notably, communication was judged as the most important soft skills for business success by both employers and educators. This reinforces findings in other studies (Kamsah, 2006; Boud & Middleton, 2003; Brown, 2002) that, as a top priority, employers prefer employees who have good communication skills. However, there was a lack of consensus as to
which other skills were the more important ones. Table 6.1 shows that employers regarded team-work, flexibility, customer service, interpersonal skills and marketing to be the most important, while educators rated responsibility, team-work, time-management, self-discipline and presentation to be the more important skills. In addition, the findings show a deficiency in types and number of soft skills that are currently taught in business schools (refer to Table 5.6)

There are only five soft skills currently taught in Site 2, thirteen skills in Site 3 and seventeen skills in Site 1.

Figure 6.1: Rating of Soft Skills by Employers and Educators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employers</th>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>Educators</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td></td>
<td>Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team work</td>
<td></td>
<td>Responsibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexibility</td>
<td></td>
<td>Team-work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Costumer service</td>
<td></td>
<td>Time-management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal skills</td>
<td></td>
<td>Self-discipline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td></td>
<td>Presentation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility</td>
<td></td>
<td>Critical thinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive attitudes</td>
<td></td>
<td>Positive attitudes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical thinking</td>
<td>More important</td>
<td>Negotiation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presentation</td>
<td></td>
<td>Networking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negotiation</td>
<td></td>
<td>Interpersonal skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professionalism</td>
<td></td>
<td>Problem-solving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Networking</td>
<td></td>
<td>Professionalism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem-solving</td>
<td></td>
<td>Flexibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time-management</td>
<td></td>
<td>Technological competence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Market research &amp; analysis</td>
<td></td>
<td>Market research &amp; analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td></td>
<td>Marketing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-discipline</td>
<td></td>
<td>Leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technological competence</td>
<td>Less Important</td>
<td>Customer service</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The deficiency of soft skills taught by Business Schools reveals that there has not been regular consultation between employers and educators regarding updating and incorporating the necessary skills into the curriculum. While employers are looking for graduates who possess the skills needed to carry out their work effectively in the changing competitive business environment, universities equip their students with the skills for which they have expertise or that they regard as most valued in the workplace. This lack of effective communication between universities and the business sector has existed since the 1990s, and although it was reported by the Vietnamese Ministry of Education in the ‘Summary and Evaluation of Ten Years of Renovation in Education and Training (1986-1996)’ it has still not been actioned. This being so, it has now been confirmed that the skills deficiency among recent business graduates is one of the reasons for the increase in youth unemployment. This problem has its roots in the mismatch between what employers are looking for from graduates and how universities are equipping their students.

It was evident from the data presented in the previous chapter that there were differences between sites in terms of the importance of specific soft skills, particularly metropolitan versus regional sites. For example, in metropolitan Sites 1 and 2, negotiation was an important soft skill, whereas for the regional Site 3 this was not judged as a top priority. Between-site variation may be due to the differing requirements and needs in workplaces in the different regions. It therefore stands to reason that universities may need to prioritise particular soft skills that are important in their region. For new skills training, so that their students are not disadvantaged, they may need to either bring soft skills experts
to these areas, or up-skill their staff in these soft skills. It will be important in these cases to have strong regional connections between employers and educators. Additionally, given the differing importance of specific soft skills across disciplines, any soft skill curriculum developed needs to be sufficiently flexible to vary the skills as required by different employers.

Communication was only common skill identified as important across all sites and disciplines and currently this skill is taught in all three sites. This indicates that communication could be a focal point for all soft skills education.

Given the recognition by employers and educators of the overall importance of the 19 specific soft skills, the findings of this study support the development of soft skills programs that can and should be integrated into the tertiary business school curriculum. Moreover, for the curriculum to remain relevant, regular consultation between universities and the business sector are urgently recommended to identify the specific essential soft skills necessary to equip students for the workplace.

**The Strategies for Soft Skills Development**

This section draws on the analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data to propose the best strategies for effective soft skill development in Vietnam (Research question 3). Given soft skills education has not been a focus for higher education in the country to date, identifying the fundamental strategies for soft skills development is a major step for curriculum reform. This section identifies how best to integrate soft skills into the Business curriculum; soft skill
pedagogical approaches; and the important question of who is best equipped to teach soft skills.

**Soft Skills Identification**

Identifying which specific soft skills business students should be equipped with is critical. Employers interviewed thought that undertaking regular surveys of employers’ views about the qualities and skills they expected from graduates was the best way to identify which skills should be taught at Business schools. While educators also supported this method, they had a preference for the integration into the curriculum of only those soft skills thought to be important in the global business context.

Vietnam is focused on assimilation into the global economic market, and to be competitive, the labour force must possess the knowledge and skills required to achieve success in this global environment. However, there is a concern that differences in culture, education and the economy between a developing country such as Vietnam and developed countries is so significant that applying the skills taught at schools in developed countries may not be applicable or relevant for Vietnamese institutions. On the other hand, it is argued that employers, who obviously have a great deal of experience running businesses and with labour management issues, definitely know what qualities and skills employees need to perform well, and so are in a better position to advise universities as to the appropriate soft skills that should be taught.

In the Vietnamese higher education context, there are educators and even policy makers who have little experience of workplace practice. Despite
these limitations, they take it upon themselves to update soft skills requirements through written documents and based purely on assumptions. The findings of this study suggest that because of this inexperience, they have failed to identify the appropriate soft skills that should be taught to business students. Nevertheless, the studies of Jones and Harrington (2002) and Szul (2002) indicated that collaboration between business firms and universities represents a vital step in the development of appropriate soft skill programmes in higher education. Development of a curriculum to meet workplace needs is a function that higher education business schools cannot achieve alone. This being so, educators and employers should have frequent consultations to identify which soft skills are essential in the business workplace and/or which additional skills are essential in the global business workplace. Skills to meet both work environments should be integrated into the formal curriculum. This is a feasible solution to the current complaint that both curriculum and course content are not relevant for meeting the demands of the business workplace (Tran & Swierczek, 2009).

**Soft Skills Integration**

There is a range of methods of soft skills delivery suggested in the literature, such as the stand-alone model, the embedded model and the extra-curriculum model, discussed earlier in the thesis (see p.62). Interestingly, both groups of respondents regarded the stand-alone model as the preferable strategy. In this way, students would have more responsibility for improving their soft skills once they had acquired the basic understanding and had been given sufficient opportunity to develop their soft skills. One possible explanation
for the preference for this method this is that in the traditional Vietnamese model of learning, students often need to work harder to pass the examination in compulsory stand-alone subjects.

However, this preference is in contrast to Glenn (2007), Gray, Emerson, & Mackay (2005) and Devadason et al. (2010) who support embedding soft skills into the general curriculum. This method, they claim, can more efficiently increase the students’ understanding of the vital importance of soft skills while also reaching a broader range of students.

**Soft Skills Training Method**

Identifying methods of instruction and training is an important element in the development of soft skills teaching for business students, particularly when deciding whether this training should occur in universities or in the work place. Respondents, both employers and educators, strongly preferred practical lessons to the traditional theory-oriented method. Consistent with the views advanced by Cyphert (2002), Elmuti, Minnis, & Abebe (2005), Luse (1999), and Navarro (2008), the respondents also reported that soft skills competency could be improved through opportunities to engage in experiential learning. For example, both groups of respondents suggested that students should be provided with workplace internships where they would have the opportunity to experience practical applications of their new soft skills. This method, undertaken first in class then in the work place, would help students more easily apply what they learn from theory into practice. Formal internships should include activities which specifically target soft skills, where students would
participate in actual projects in a work environment. Furthermore, educators shared the employers’ view that students should also be provided with the opportunity of overseas work placements to advance their skills and to provide professional development in the international business environment. However, this could prove to be a costly exercise and the extent to which scholarship support would be available is uncertain. Nonetheless, the commitment to internships which combine training with work-integrated learning could be developed further.

The findings reported here confirm that the current training system and teaching methods in the Vietnamese higher education system are largely inefficient and ineffective with traditional theory-oriented lessons still persisting in universities in general and in university soft skills courses in particular. The findings also suggest that one of the reasons for graduates’ poor soft skills is that educators are lacking in their general knowledge in soft skills education. This being so, there is a need to balance theory and practice as it applies to specific courses. Given that soft skills education is comparatively new in Vietnam, educators should review, select and adopt progressive training methods that are relevant in, and suitable to the Vietnamese educational context. These innovative ideas may need to be imported from developed countries where soft skills education is considerably stronger and more widespread. Given the aim of increasing and effectively implementing soft skills practice among students, there needs be a support from enterprises that would provide valuable opportunities for students to practice their for soft skills and guidance on which soft skills are necessary in practice.
Soft Skills Trainer

There is currently a lack of qualified lecturers in universities, particularly in the new area of soft skills education. Therefore, creating a source of professional trainers in soft skills is a problem. One of the aims of this study was to identify who are the preferred trainers of soft skills among three possible and available sources: business educators, employers, and soft skills experts. The respondents had different opinions about which type of soft skills trainers were preferred to teach business students. The employers considered current business lecturers to be the better soft skills instructors than the employers because they possess teaching skills, teaching experience and business knowledge, especially theory, all of which facilitate learning. In contrast, the educators thought that employers would be better soft skills trainers than faculty members because they have work experience and skills that educators lack. Both groups supported soft skills experts who have experience in both education and the workplace to be the best soft skills trainers. However, given that the number of the experts in Vietnam is limited, the best way forward may be to support a cooperative venture between employers and educators in soft skills training. As a good strategy in soft skills training, as shown in the previous section, educators could lead theory components and employers could lead practical sessions. In this way, a nexus between theory and practice could be achieved and integrated into workplace learning opportunities.
Conclusion

This chapter has considered the present study’s findings and discussed them with reference to each of the research questions. The results have also been considered in relation to relevant previous studies. The key findings and an in-depth discussion of the implications of the present study for theory, research, employers, educators and policy makers will be presented in the following chapter, the conclusion.
CHaPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSION

Introduction

The burden of Chapter Six has been to elucidate the findings from the Qualitative and Quantitative Phases, of my study, reflecting the different perspectives of executive employers in Vietnam on the importance of soft skills education and the development of innovative strategies for the inclusion of soft skills into the curricula of Vietnamese Business Higher Education Institutions (BHEIs). This final chapter endeavors to provide an integrated summary of the findings of my study in alignment with a more general perspective on the implementation of soft skills training in the tertiary educational sector, and its benefits for business school graduates and the Vietnamese economy. Recommendations will be then made about plausible interventions to expand and formally incorporate soft skills into the Vietnamese business school curriculum. Once this goal is achieved, the final focus will be on advancing the main outcomes of the study, along with a statement of the strengths and limitations of the study, with suggestions for the further research.
Key Findings of the Study

This section provides an integrated summary of the quantitative and qualitative results of the study. In this context the results are summarised in juxtaposition to and alignment with each research question relevant to the outcome and central objectives of the study. Having earlier explained the vital importance of soft skills development within institutions BHEIs in Vietnam, the study achieved three main objectives: 1) to investigate the level of soft skills competency possessed by business higher education graduates, as perceived by a representative body of executive employers from diverse businesses; 2) to discover the employers' views regarding the vital importance of specific soft skills for success in the field of business, and thus their perspectives on the paramount importance of soft skills education in Vietnam's Business Schools; 3) to identify the most effective strategies for the implementation of soft skills development in BHEIs, as discerned by business employers and business educators.

Both business employers and business educators perceived that soft skills have become increasingly important in the current Business workplace. Nevertheless, employers made clear their perception that the level of soft skills competency amongst business schools graduates was lamentably deficient. My study revealed that 93% of business employers were not satisfied with the quality of soft skills acquisition possessed by business students upon graduation. This being so, there was almost unanimous agreement amongst employers that most graduates were unready to enter the workplace without further training that the employers themselves would have to provide. Not
surprisingly, they blamed the higher education system for inadequately preparing their business students for the nature of their transition to workplace efficacy. Employers admitted that while graduate students technological or 'hard skills' were acceptable, their understanding of the contribution of soft skills to the success of business negotiations and 'human relations' in general was decidedly deficient. Employers perceptions indicated that business schools were not themselves adequately equipped to provide their students with the measure of soft skills capacity required to maximise their workplace contributions to business interactions, both national and global. The central problem is that business graduates, who are supposed to be represent Vietnam's educated labour force, do not meet the requirements of the country’s industrialisation and modernisation, driven by its goals to achieve integration with the global economy and fiduciary recognition. My study revealed that business employers have become aware that it is crucial that the teaching of soft skills be integrated as a formal academic dimension of the business school curriculum, and their opinion should serve to facilitate my own initiative to make this happen.

The findings from both phases of the study indicate that there were 19 soft skills that were considered as essential in the current business workplace (see Figure 6.1). Although employers and educators understandably expressed different perceptions about the importance and prioritising of these soft skills, they concurred that all 19 of these skills should be integrated into the business curriculum. The skills of communication and team-work were rated as the most important soft skills by both groups of respondents.
How to identify the right skills for teaching, how to integrate these skills into curriculum; how to instruct these skills, and who should teach these skills were acknowledged in the study as the foundational elements required to initiate a formal elucidation and strategy for the implementation a comprehensive soft skills program in Vietnamese business schools. A corollary to this curriculum enterprise which emerged from discussion with respondents, and has been reinforced by a study undertaken by Jones and Harrington (2002) and Szul (2002), was that the collaboration of employers and educators should be regarded as imperative to facilitate the development of appropriately pragmatic soft skill programmes introduced into the Vietnamese higher education business school sector.

Regarding soft skills identification, employers concurred that regularly undertaking surveys on employers’ views about what qualities and soft skills should be expected from graduates is the most efficient way to identify which soft skills should be incorporated into the business school curriculum. Educators also strongly supported this method, though they slightly preferred the integration into the business school curriculum of only those soft skills which were perceived as important in the global business context. This being so, the general consensus was that the determination of which soft skills should be included into the curriculum should be designed to be dynamic and flexible enough to recognise the differing needs of businesses in different business areas. Essentially, there would be a pedagogic focus on the 19 identified soft skills within the study to function as the soft skills discipline-core or matrix, but that the structure into which they are embedded should be sufficiently adaptable
to accommodate evidentially-based recommendations for subtleties of change associated with the new or altered needs of industry defined as stable.

For the best method of soft skills integration, both groups of respondents agreed that the core discipline of soft skills selected should be integrated as a compulsory stand-alone subject into the curriculum, but that peripheral changes could be embedded in various subjects throughout the curriculum, in accord with the expertise and specialisation best suited to the specific soft skills development needed. One reason given for this was the general belief that given the traditional model of learning, students are often obliged and inclined to work harder to pass their exams in the context of compulsory stand-alone subjects.

A number of company recommendations emerged from the discussion, and were also enunciated by reference to the literature, that soft skills could be developed effectively through practice lessons rather than straightforward theory lessons. This strategy would afford opportunities for providing internships and work placements to students as an effective structure to assist them in the development of effective business practices which rely on their burgeoning competency with soft skills. These strategies would help students to transfer what they learned from theory to practice more easily. In addition, it was suggested that employers could include students in real projects, which would provide an effective way for companies and businesses to save labour expenses whilst giving students an opportunity to develop their soft skills.
Both educators and employers agreed that individuals who have expertise in education and in soft skills were more likely to make the best soft skills trainers, whether they be located in the workplace or in a Business School. However, it was acknowledged that the number of the experts is limited in the country due to the emergent nature of soft skills education. For the best solution, it is recommended that there could be a cooperative venture between employers and educators in soft skills training, in which educators should take part in theory lessons and employers could lead the development of practice lessons.

**Key Outcomes of the Study**

The findings of the study reveal the following outcomes:

A provision of a pragmatic definition of 'soft skills' which can readily be used as a connotative descriptor for expanding the concept for pedagogic purposes.

A literature of soft skills importance to soft skills in Business field was set up. This is valuable resource for stakeholders to understand about the status of soft skills in the Business workplace so that they have in-time appropriate actions to enhance the quality of working labour according to the background of the country.

A list of 19 essential soft skills for business success in Vietnam has been identified. In conclusion, it is evident that there is concurrence that these key Soft Skills instruments should be promoted and integrated into the formal business curriculum in Vietnamese BHEIs. In so doing, this contribution also
serves business employers with a soft skills checklist for staff development and recruitment.

Innovative foundational approaches for soft skills development were discovered which serve to provide the needed materials to initiate a new soft skills program for BHEI's. These approaches are suitable for the current status of the country’s higher education system, culture and economy.

The benefits of the collaboration between educational institutions and business enterprises in soft skills education were recognised as being essential. Collaboration between these parties could serve both to enhance the effectiveness of soft skills training, while at the same time saving the Vietnamese government a great deal of money.

**Recommendations of the Study**

The outcomes of the study provide employers, business educators and Vietnamese Government policy makers with the following recommendations:

**Employers**

Evidence from the study revealed that the poor quality of soft skills that graduates possessed could not be blamed on any particular organisation or group, but it was suggested that if this deficiency were to be rectified then both educators and employers need to make greater efforts to bridge the divide between higher education and the labour market. Specifically, they need to work together to determine what soft skills are needed and how they can best
be implemented into the curriculum of BHEIs. It has been observed that employers have often placed high expectations on new graduates and have complained about their lack of soft skills competency. One reason why employer’s dissatisfaction with new graduates should be respected is that my study has made clear that soft skills need to be developed in contexts of real business practice. This being so, employers need to take responsibility to acknowledge graduates need time and guidance to help expand the theoretical and simulated knowledge gained from formal study and that new recruits need guidance from employers to learn how to apply what they learned within the context of real working environments.

As has been well-evidenced in the literature (National Centre for Vocational Education Research, 2003), it is clear that gradually, and steadily, the transition for newly appointed staff from the theoretical status of their soft skills competency to the level of competency required by the actual practical application of these skills in the business workplace will be inevitable. At this initial stage of employment, it is clear that the responsibility for improving the theoretical tenor of soft skills belongs primarily to employers. Employers should utilise the skills of their own experts who have demonstrated strong soft skills competencies to train their new staff to understand the subtle ways in which the theoretical aspects of soft skills development need to be tailored to the particular circumstances pertinent to their application. If they do not have such experts, another recommendation is that they employ soft skills experts from other enterprises or educational institutions to train their staff on their premises. They should also implement mandated regular rotation of roles so that their staff can continue to develop a range of soft skills required in the contexts of various
business orientations and negotiating responsibilities. Moreover, they should send their staff to soft skills training centres. Customer service and marketing conferences are also an excellent resource and networking environment that can be used to enhance their competency in business soft skills. In addition, given the negative effects which can emerge from the conservative and ‘close’ culture of Vietnam, employers should create a comfortable and active working environment where staff are naturally encouraged to take up the opportunity to improve their soft skills.

This study also revealed that employers had no reservations or problems about cooperating with universities to work jointly with the aim of enhancing the quality of soft skills education. However, my study revealed that universities generally prefer to keep business employers separate from and outside of the university training process. This being so, employers need to use the information provided here to take a more active role in persuading educators that collaboration between the business sector and education have been shown to benefit both parties, both educationally and financially. Collaboration between business employers and higher education institutions serves to improve the soft skills competencies of business students, thus assisting the efforts of those students who strive for preparedness in the workplace, because graduating business students benefit from it personally, with considerable benefits for employers and universities. The study shows that universities cannot “bring the market” into their curriculum and provide their students effective soft skills practice unless employers and universities cooperate with each other. The
findings suggest several ways for employers to assist universities in developing soft skills educational programs.

to provide business students with professionally related activities designed to help them ascertain the depth of understanding needed to achieve the level of soft skills competency required to prepare them for the practical scenarios they will confront in the business world;

to provide and establish adequate communication channels between employers and universities to negotiate the soft skills requisite for graduates, so universities are sufficiently familiar with employers’ priorities which can be integrated into the business curriculum;

to encourage government support for business schools to offer soft skills work-based practice through placements and internships in a variety of business enterprises familiar with how soft skills are best applied in actual workplace environments;

to encourage and support cooperative ventures within universities which involve students in joint projects with businesses that help to expand student competency horizons for different soft skill applications by way of interacting with knowledgeable professionals in the field;

and to provide soft skills training activities in universities and in workplace environments by selecting and appointing experts within these enterprises who have demonstrated sufficient interest, experience, and
proficiency in the use of soft skills to improve student performance applications within varied business contexts.

**Business Educators**

Soft skills have increasingly been recognized as a vital component in the business career success of students. However, the study shows that soft skills education in BHEIs has not had sufficient attention for the development of soft skills programs. A few basic soft skills are taught in a rudimentary manner at some tertiary institutions in Vietnam. However, the present study reveals that business educators in general were not even familiar with the term ‘soft skills’. Given the degree of soft skill naivety within BHEIs, it is palpably clear that these institutions have a responsibility to train their staff in at least a basic knowledge in what has become one of the new frontiers in business education globally.

There is no doubt that reference to the importance of soft skills in achieving business success could be undertaken even in common contexts such as departmental and faculty meetings.

Employers complained that Business graduates were not adequately equipped with the appropriate soft skills to meet the ever more challenging requirements of the changing business workplace. This being so, educators should organize scheduled consultancy meetings with employers to provide regular updates on the essential soft skills that they require from graduates to maximize the success of graduates in different business environments. This could be done in two ways: 1) Educators could join employers in their meetings identifying the appropriate soft skills that would be integrated into the formal
curriculum. 2) Educators could invite employers to have conversations/meetings focused on career aspirations with students so that students understand what employers are looking for and can then equip themselves with the necessary skills to be employable after graduation.

It is recommended that the 19 essential soft skills for business career success be integrated into the formal curriculum as a compulsory stand-alone subject in all Business schools across the country. Moreover, the findings indicated that educators from different disciplines and different regions perceived that specific soft skills can, in varied contexts of application, be categorized by way of different levels of priority. This suggests that each discipline and region may have its own views on the importance of soft skills. From this it follows that business educators should have a sufficient understanding of how best to prioritize the more or less important soft skills in particular disciplines and in specific regions. However, it is suggested that these skills be integrated into a uniform core or matrix of soft skills so that all BHEIs can ensure that graduates meet the standard requirements for the application of soft skills in the workplace.

The literature and findings of the study show that soft skills could be further developed through practice lessons rather than theory lessons. Therefore, educators should provide students chances to practice soft skills, such as internships and work placements, in a workplace environment in Vietnam or even overseas. Through these internships and work placements, universities have an opportunity to foster real projects with enterprises in which students can participate in innovative programs of learning about the array of
soft skills practices in different working environments. In addition, because soft skills education is new in Vietnam, educators could select and adopt the methods of soft skills training from the countries which have a long history of soft skills education, always mindful that what is taught is relevant to and suitable for the Vietnamese educational context. In designing methods of soft skills training, educators should focus on student-centered methods, thereby helping students to be more active and flexible. This approach has resulted in an increase to students’ confidence and in a reduction of the ‘closed' culture previously discussed.

Given the status of soft skills education in the three main universities of Business, the findings suggest that there are a number of essential soft skills that are not taught in BHEIs and furthermore a lack of trainers with expertise in soft skills. A recommendation is offered that BHEIs should employ experts in specific soft skills who may come from business enterprises, where they currently train their own staff. By training other students outside their own context of employment, they inadvertently increase the likelihood of enlarging the number of graduates who will in turn teach soft skills to others.

**Government Policy Makers**

The study revealed that given the current situation of both Business higher education institutions and Vietnamese local enterprises, it is not easy for either of them to lead change or to work collaboratively. Internal problems, which need attention, distract employers from realizing that enhancing graduate working skills is their responsibility (Le & Truong, 2005). Therefore, what is
required is an appropriate policy from the government to bring these organisations together. A clear policy from the central government should outline a willingness to support the co-operation between the higher education sector and employers. This may include creating clear benefits for both sides (a Win-Win) that is a decisive element in achieving success in such collaboration (Phung, 2009). A supportive policy might also involve investing in research and programs to develop close and effective relationships between the two sectors. Student support services should be considered as one of the accreditation criterion in the higher education system. By giving BHEIs more authority and accountability, a more competitive and productive system might be formed.

A centralised educational system under tight control of the government is no longer appropriate for supporting a market driven economy (Tran, 2014). A strong connection between higher education and industry can happen only with the support from the central government, while loosening the tight grip the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) holds on the university curriculum. Universities need greater freedom to determine their own programs and courses in order to find the best way to help their students enhance workplace skills.

**Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research**

In this study, detailed consideration of causes and results from the acute skills mismatch of demand factor (i.e. what employers want from recent graduates) and the supply factor (what graduates have to offer) were highlighted. Specifically, suppliers - BHEIs - have not been able to equip
graduates with the soft skills needs demanded by employers. Appreciation of this point makes it easier to comprehend why the collaboration of employers and educators in soft skills education was thought to be the most efficacious solution for closing the skills gap. This being so, there needs to be further studies that focus on improving the collaboration of employers and educators for soft skills development.

Another contribution of this study has been to provide more details and in depth analysis of an array of specially selected essential soft skills in business higher education than has previously been achieved in general fields. This was achieved through the use of an exploratory sequential mixed-method analysis with an initial semi-structured interview of employers who relied fervently on the labour force as their major resource of employment. My study then adopted a questionnaire survey of business educators who academically produce the labour force across the country on which the employers rely. The findings are considered to be at a high level of reasonability and accuracy. However, because the business programme at tertiary level is focused upon in the study, generalisations cannot be made for other institutional levels such as vocational/technical education or other specialities.

The study was concerned to obtain the perceptions of the employer participants regarding which soft skills should be regarded as essential in the current Business workplace. Because the business workplace changes continuously, business success requires a labour force with updated skills and knowledge. As technology changes, our views on the nature of things should also change. Some ideas might be proved useful now, but tomorrow they might
become irrelevant to the changing situation. This being so, it is recommended that studies are developed and conducted regularly to identify the updated soft skills necessary for success in the new business workplace.

Given that soft skills education and training are new within the higher education sector in Vietnam, the scope of the study has been concerned with investigating the foundational strategies for soft skills development. However, for a complete soft skills program, more research studies will be required which delve even more deeply to produce a more comprehensive understanding of the ever changing dynamic of the myriad approaches to the development of soft skills.

Although the study focuses on a variety of issues associated with soft skills development in BHEIs, many of the findings from the study can be extrapolated to show the relevance of soft skills to the pedagogies of other higher education institutions (HEIs) as the values expressed by soft skills are in large part, human values of consideration of interest, the subject matter of which should itself be integrated into the curriculum of HEIs. Admittedly, this is a consideration which is extraneous to our present objective, but the idea is certainly worthy of critical reflection and yet another challenging research project.

**Conclusion**

The study has shed light on the issue of graduate employability in the Vietnamese Business context where the underdeveloped business higher
education sector has been heavily criticised, even blamed, as the cause for widespread unemployment among Business higher education graduates. The study has reinforced the belief that the primary solution to unemployment among graduates ought to be the provision of soft skills education that would lead Vietnamese Business tertiary graduates to meeting the soft skill requirements of the business workplace. A critical reading of the literature in this field has revealed that soft skills have become increasingly important in Business career success, so BHEIs need to focus on soft skills education. Business students need to be adequately equipped with short skills to effectively demonstrate their paramount importance in cultivating relationships of loyalty and trust within the business world. Graduate students need to be well acquainted with an array of soft skill strategies designed to meet the challenging demands of the current changing nature of the business workplace. Many of these issues have not been discussed in the Vietnamese context before. By analysing qualitative data from business employers and quantitative data from business educators, the study importantly moves beyond knee-jerk criticisms of the Vietnamese Business higher education system. My study locates a dimension of the problem of the recent reduction in Vietnam's gross national product to the current and virtual invisibility of effective soft skills programs within the educational curriculums of its business schools. This research study recommends that one initial solution to this economic problem starts with the recognition of the important contribution which soft skills education is capable of making to the employment success of students in the business field, and in turn to the level of business success nationally and internationally which is based partly on the extent to which the effective application of soft skills competency
can transform struggling business relationships into successful business outcomes. This is one reason why the strategies for soft skills development, in which the collaboration between educators and employers plays a decidedly vital role, can in principle make such an enormous difference to improving the success of global business and economic outcomes both nationally and globally.
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APPENDICIES
Appendix A

ETHICS APPROVAL – PHASE ONE

HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

Notification of Expedited Approval

| To Chief Investigator or Project Supervisor: | Doctor Kylie Shaw |
| Co Co-investigators / Research Students: | Professor Ronald Laura |
| Re Protocol: | Ms Thu Hang Truong |
| Date: | 15-Oct-2013 |
| Reference No: | H-2013-9267 |
| Date of Initial Approval: | 15-Oct-2013 |

Thank you for your Response to Conditional Approval (minor amendments) submission to the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) seeking approval in relation to the above protocol.

Your submission was considered under Expedited review by the Chair/Deputy Chair.

I am pleased to advise that the decision on your submission is Approved effective 15-Oct-2013.

In approving this protocol, the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) is of the opinion that the project complies with the provisions contained in the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research, 2007, and the requirements within this University relating to human research.

Approval will remain valid subject to the submission, and satisfactory assessment, of annual progress reports. If the approval of an External HREC has been "noted" the approval period is as determined by that HREC.

The full Committee will be asked to ratify this decision at its next scheduled meeting. A formal Certificate of Approval will be available upon request. Your approval number is H-2013-9267.

If the research requires the use of an Information Statement, ensure this number is inserted at the relevant point in the Complaints paragraph prior to distribution to potential participants. You may then proceed with the research.

For Noting:

1. Application Queries
   a. It has been noted that the Participant Information Statement and Consent Form is relating to phase one of the project. Please confirm that prior to commencing phase two the HREC will be notified, be provided the opportunity to review and approve any relevant material.

2. Participant Information Statement
   a. Within the Further Information section please change the students personal email address to their "firstname.lastname@newcastle.edu.au" version of their University of Newcastle student email address.

   b. Within the section Complaints section please ensure the details of the local contact are added as indicated on page 10 - Follow up section of the application.
Appendix B

ETHICS APPROVAL – PHASE TWO

HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

Notification of Expedited Approval

To Chief Investigator or Project Supervisor:  
Doctor Kylie Shaw

Cc Co-investigators / Research Students:  
Professor Ronald Laura
Ms Thi Thu Hang Truong

Re Protocol:  
Essential Soft Skills for Successful Business Graduates in Vietnam

Date:  
21-Jan-2014

Reference No.:  
H-2013-0267

Thank you for your Variation submission to the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) seeking approval in relation to a variation to the above protocol.

Variation to approve content of participant questionnaire

- Questionnaire, version submitted 4.12.2013

Your submission was considered under Expedited review by the Chair/Deputy Chair.

I am pleased to advise that the decision on your submission is Approved effective 17-Dec-2013.

The full Committee will be asked to ratify this decision at its next scheduled meeting. A formal Certificate of Approval will be available upon request.

Professor Allyson Holbrook
Chair, Human Research Ethics Committee

For communications and enquiries:
Human Research Ethics Administration

Research Services
Research Integrity Unit
The Chemistry
The University of Newcastle
Callaghan NSW 2308
T +61 2 492 17894
F +61 2 492 17104
HumanEthics@newcastle.edu.au

Linked University of Newcastle administered funding:

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<th>Funding project title</th>
<th>First named investigator</th>
<th>Grant Ref</th>
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Appendix C

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Short Introductory Questionnaire & Interview Protocol for Employers

EMPLOYER INTRODUCTORY QUESTIONNAIRE

Thank you for agreeing to be part of the study ‘Essential Soft Skills for Successful Business Graduates in Vietnam’. ‘Soft Skills’ are a set of personal qualities, attributes, talents, or level of commitment that an individual can bring to the workplace to set him or her apart from other individuals who may have similar skills and experience.

The purpose of this study is to provide information that may be utilized by business educators to improve the skills of students entering the workforce. We are very interested to know how prepared you think business graduates are to work effectively in the field of Business.

This interview will be anonymous and all answers will be treated in the strictest confidence.

SECTION A: Personal and Business Information

A1: What is your role in this organization? __________________________________________

A2: How many years of working experience in this role, or a similar role, do you have?

- Under 10 years
- 11 – 20 years
- 20 - 30 years
- Over 30 years

A3: Do you have any previous experience in other organizations?

Yes

No

If so, what type of positions have you had?

_____________________________________________________________________________

_____________________________________________________________________________

A4: What is your highest qualification? ____________________________________________

A5: How would you best describe your enterprise?

Government
Non-Government FDI

A6: How many employees are in your organization? ________________________________

A7: How many new graduates do you employ each year? ____________________________

A8: What type of position do you most often need to fill now? ______________________

SECTION B: Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. Can you start by telling me more about your organization?
   What type of business is it?
   What is the work environment like?
   Please describe a typical working day for a new graduate.

2. To what extent are you familiar with the concept of ‘soft skills’ in business?

3. To what extent do you think soft skills are important in the business workplace?

4. Do you think business graduates are lacking soft skills that are essential in your workplace? If yes, which skills are they?

5. What are the most important soft skills business graduates need when they start work in your organization?

6. What are the typical problems encountered by a new graduate in their first year of working in your organization? Does the organization have processes in place to support the new graduates?

7. Do you conduct soft skill training in your workplace? If so, can you tell me more about this?

8. Do you think that the soft skills perceived to be important in the global business context are considered to be as important in Vietnam as well?

9. Do you think there should be more collaboration between business organizations and business schools to help prepare graduates with the skills businesses claim they need?

10. What is the ideal solution to improve soft skills for business graduates?

   Good answers: Offer students 6 - month internship to enhance their soft skills.
Appendix D

SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

Faculty Member Questionnaire

Essential Soft Skills for Successful Business Graduates in Vietnam

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study ‘Essential Soft Skills for Successful Business Graduates in Vietnam’. The purpose of this study is to identify the specific important soft skills which should be integrated into tertiary business curriculum and investigate strategies for the development of soft skills within Vietnamese Universities of Business.

‘Soft Skills’ are a set of personal qualities, attributes, talents, or level of commitment that an individual can bring to the workplace to set him or her apart from the other individuals who may have similar skills and experience.

As an educator you have unique and valuable knowledge about the importance of soft skills and the soft skills education. Your time in filling in this questionnaire is greatly appreciated. It should only take about 20 minutes to complete. Your involvement is strictly confidential and anonymous. You are not required to write your name on the questionnaire.

Participation in the study is entirely voluntary. This project has been approved by the University’s Human Research Ethics Committee, Approval No. H2013-0267.

Should you have concerns about your rights as a participant in this research, or you have a complaint about the manner in which the research is conducted, it may be given to the researcher, or, if an independent person is preferred, to the Human Research Ethics Officer, Research Office, The Chancellery, The University of Newcastle, University Drive, Callaghan NSW 2308, telephone (02) 49216333, email Human-Ethics@newcastle.edu.au.

Please do not hesitate to contact me, or my supervisors, if you require more information about the study. There will be an additional page at the end of the questionnaire with instructions for return of the survey.

Thi Thu Hang Truong
School of Education
Faculty of Education & Arts
University of Newcastle
University Dr, Callaghan NSW, 2308, Australia
E: ThiThuHang.Truong@newcastle.edu.au
Tel: (+61) 1685347133

Dr Kylie Shaw
School of Education
Faculty of Education & Arts
University of Newcastle
University Dr, Callaghan NSW, 2308, Australia
E: Kylie.Shaw@newcastle.edu.au
Tel: (+61) 41726814

Prof. Ron Laura
School of Education
Faculty of Education & Arts
University of Newcastle
University Dr, Callaghan NSW, 2308, Australia
E: professorlaura@hotmail.com
Tel: (+61) 41726814
### PART A: Demographic information

Please answer the following questions by ticking in the boxes and completing in the spaces.

#### GENERAL INFORMATION

A1. Where is the location of your university?
   - [ ] Ha Noi Capital
   - [ ] Ho Chi Minh City
   - [ ] Thai Nguyen City

A2. What is your gender?
   - [ ] Male
   - [ ] Female

A3. What is your highest qualification?

A4. Which speciality or discipline are you teaching or working in?

A5. How many years have you been teaching in this field?
   - [ ] Less than 5 years
   - [ ] From 6 to 10 years
   - [ ] From 11 to 15 years
   - [ ] From 16 to 20 years
   - [ ] Over than 20 years

#### SOFT SKILLS TRAINING INFORMATION

A6. How important do you think soft skills are in career success of Business graduates?
   - [ ] Very important
   - [ ] Important
   - [ ] Somewhat important
   - [ ] Not important at all

A7. Are soft skills taught in your university?
   - [ ] Yes
   - [ ] No
   - [ ] Unsure

If yes, please specify what proportion of your program is spent teaching soft skills:
   - [ ] 0 – 20%
   - [ ] 21 – 40%
   - [ ] 41 – 60%
   - [ ] 61 – 80%
   - [ ] 81 – 100%
A8. Have you had experience in teaching soft skills?
   □ Yes
   □ No

If yes, please specify the soft skills have you taught?
________________________________________________________________________________________________________

How long have you taught soft skills to Business students?
________________________________________________________________________________________________________

A9. How well do you think the current curriculum of your faculty prepares students to be ready for workplace?
   □ Very well
   □ Well
   □ Not very well
   □ Not at all

A10. Do you think the current curriculum of your faculty should be revised for soft skills development?
   □ Yes
   □ No
   □ Unsure

LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Please indicate on the 1 to 6 point scale whether you agree or disagree with the statements about learning environment in your Faculty by ticking in the box.

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<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat Disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
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<tr>
<td>A11</td>
<td>Students collaborate often with peers in this faculty</td>
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<tr>
<td>A12</td>
<td>Students use technology in courses regularly</td>
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<td>A13</td>
<td>Students in this faculty are equipped to work in a globalised environment</td>
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<td>A14</td>
<td>Students learn more effectively in online environments</td>
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<td>A15</td>
<td>Students in this faculty are self-motivated</td>
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<td>A16</td>
<td>Students in this faculty network through social media</td>
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PART B: The Important Level of Specific Soft Skills

To what extent do you agree that the following soft skills are important for Business graduates entering the workplace?

Please indicate on the 1 to 6 point scale whether you agree or disagree on the importance of the following soft skills to Business Graduates by ticking in the box.

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<td>Team-work</td>
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<td>Negotiation</td>
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<td>Self-discipline</td>
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<td>Critical Thinking</td>
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<td>Responsibility</td>
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<td>Interpersonal Skills</td>
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<td>Problem-solving</td>
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<td>Professionalism</td>
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<tr>
<td>B17</td>
<td>Networking</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B18</td>
<td>Market Research and Analysis</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B19</td>
<td>Technological Competence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

B20. Are there any other soft skills that you think are important for graduates entering the workplace?
### PART C: Development of Soft Skills in Students

To what extent do you agree with the following statements about the development of soft skills?

*Please indicate on the 1 to 6 point scale whether you agree or disagree with the statements by ticking in the box.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat Disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- **C1** Regular contact with employers would assist faculty in identifying the right soft skills for curriculum reform.
- **C2** Soft skills should be learnt in both theory and practice.
- **C3** Student interaction with technology needs to decrease for soft skills to develop effectively.
- **C4** Soft skills should only be integrated in core Business courses.
- **C5** Soft skill resources developed in other countries should be adapted for Vietnam.
- **C6** Students should be provided soft-skills learning environment simulated workplace.
- **C7** Students develop effectively soft skills through online training programs.
- **C8** Experts in soft skills are the best instructors in soft skills.
- **C9** Students’ formal relevant internship should include activities to specifically target soft skills development.
- **C10** Employers are the best instructors in soft skills.
- **C11** Soft skill should be trained in practice and theory equally.
- **C12** Soft skills should be integrated in all Business courses.
- **C13** Students should do work placement outside Vietnam to develop soft skills.
- **C14** Soft skills should be trained in practice rather than in theory.
<p>| | | | | | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Please indicate on the 1 to 6 point scale whether you agree or disagree with the statements by ticking in the box.</strong></td>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>Somewhat Disagree</td>
<td>Somewhat Agree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C15</td>
<td>Soft skills should be embedded in teaching-learning activities across the curriculum.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C16</td>
<td>Soft skill resources should be developed locally and made available for local Business Universities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C17</td>
<td>Faculty members are the best instructors in soft skills.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C18</td>
<td>Soft skills should be taught as extra-curriculum.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>C19</td>
<td>The soft skills perceived as important in global contexts should be integrated into Vietnamese curriculum.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>C20</td>
<td>Access to technology is essential for Business students to develop soft skills</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>C21</td>
<td>Soft skills should be integrated into the curriculum as a formal stand-alone subject.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C22</td>
<td>Students who speak at least two languages have better soft skills</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C23</td>
<td>No education of soft skills needed for those who are naturally good at soft skills</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C24</td>
<td>What other comments do you have for developing soft skills for Business students in Vietnam?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thank you for completing the questionnaire!
Appendix E
INVITATION LETTER TO EMPLOYERS

Hang Truong
Faculty of Education & Arts
School of Education
University Drive
Callaghan NSW 2308
Phone: (+61) 423310884
Email: ThiThuHang_Truong@uon.edu.au

Date 18 September 2013

Invitation Email to Potential Participations

Dear Mr ………,

I am a doctoral student from the School of Education at Newcastle University, Australia. I am conducting the research project ‘Essential Soft Skills for Successful Business Graduates in Vietnam’ which is supervised by Dr Kylie Shaw and Professor Ronald Laura. I am contacting you to invite you to take part in the research study.

The purpose of this project is to explore the specific soft skills needed for business graduate success in Vietnam and also address the issue of soft skill development within business education and workplace. The outcomes of the project will be to inform the field of business about the importance of specific soft skills for graduates from the perspective of employers. The aim is to integrate findings from this research into business tertiary curriculum in Vietnam. This study will recommend business tertiary curriculum reform and further explore the changing environment of study and work in Vietnam and globally.

We are inviting the managers in the top 15 successful organizations in different fields throughout the country. We have learnt your organization’s name through the list of 500 Top Enterprises in Vietnam in 2013. Moreover, we know that you play an important role in managing human resource and business for such a successful organization which gives a significant benefit/contribution to the development of Vietnamese economy, and also provide employment for many business tertiary graduates in the North of Vietnam so we would like to find out your perception regarding the importance of specific soft skills needed for business graduates to be successful in workplace.

If you would like to take part in this study, please study the documents attached, complete the Consent Form, and return it to us following the email address provided at the end of the Consent Form by the date indicated. I will contact you by telephone to confirm the time of interview first and then make an interview which is about 20 minutes in length and will be undertaken in Vietnamese or English.

Your participation is a significant contribution for the success of our research project.

Thank you.
Yours sincerely,
Hang Truong
Dear Educator,

You are invited to participate in a doctoral study into the development of soft skills curriculum in the Universities of Business in Vietnam. You are eligible to participate if you are currently a lecturer in the Universities of Business in Vietnam.

The purpose of this study is to identify the specific important soft skills which should be integrated into tertiary business curriculum and find out strategies for the development of soft skills within these universities.

As an educator you have unique and valuable knowledge about the importance of soft skills and the soft skills education. Your time in filling in the attached questionnaire is greatly appreciated. It should only take about 20 minutes to complete. Your involvement is strictly confidential and anonymous. You are not required to write your name on the questionnaire.

Participation in the study is entirely voluntary. This project has been approved by the University’s Human Research Ethics Committee, Approval No. H2013-0267.

Should you have concerns about your rights as a participant in this research, or you have a complaint about the manner in which the research is conducted, it may be given to the researcher, or, if an independent person is preferred, to the Human Research Ethics Officer, Research Office, The Chancellery, The University of Newcastle, University Drive, Callaghan NSW 2308, telephone (02 49216333, email Human-Ethics@newcastle.edu.au.

Please do not hesitate to contact me, or my supervisors, if you require more information about the study.

Yours sincerely,

Thi Thu Hang Truong
School of Education
Faculty of Education & Arts
University of Newcastle
University Dr, Callaghan NSW, 2308, Australia
E: ThiThuHang.Truong@uon.edu.au
Tel: (+84) 1665347133

Dr Kylie Shaw
School of Education
Faculty of Education & Arts
University of Newcastle
University Dr, Callaghan NSW, 2308, Australia
E: Kylie.Shaw@newcastle.edu.au
Tel: (+61) 41726814

Prof. Ron Laura
School of Education
Faculty of Education & Arts
University of Newcastle
University Dr, Callaghan NSW, 2308, Australia
E: professorlaura@hotmail.com
Tel: (+61) 41726814
Appendix G
CONSENT FORM

Hang Truong
Faculty of Education & Arts
School of Education
University Drive
Callaghan NSW 2308
Phone: (+61) 423210584
Email: thuHang.Truong@uon.edu.au

Consent Form
‘Essential Soft Skills for Successful Business Graduates in Vietnam’
Document Version 2; dated 2 August 2013

I agree to participate in the above research project and give my consent freely.

I understand that the project will be conducted as described in the Information Statement, a copy of which I have retained.

I understand I can withdraw from the project until such time as the data analysis has commenced and do not have to give any reason for withdrawing.

I consent to     ☐ participating interview
☐ having the interview recorded.

I understand that I can review, edit or erase the transcript of my interview.

I understand that my personal information will remain confidential to the researcher.

I have had the opportunity to have questions answered to my satisfaction.

Interview Information
My availability for an interview is: __________________________

Print Name: _____________________________________________

Contact Details: __________________________________________

Signature: ___________________________ Date: _________________

Please email this form to: ThuHang.Truong@uon.edu.au
## Appendix H

**DEMOGRAPHIC DATA OF EMPLOYERS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employer Code</th>
<th>Personal Information of Employers</th>
<th>Information of Organization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Vice-manager: Managing and leading all activities of customers services</td>
<td>5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>General manager: managing and leading all activities of bridge and road construction, coffee trading, and coffee production</td>
<td>14 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Chief of Secretariat: Managing work force</td>
<td>2 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Manager: Liaison with other related organizations and even the Government for trading Apatite Ore and exporting Apatite product</td>
<td>9 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No.</td>
<td>Position/Role</td>
<td>Company Type</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----</td>
<td>---------------</td>
<td>---------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Vice manager: Human resource management, recruiting, training and education</td>
<td>Government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Dean of Business Planning Department: setting up plans of business</td>
<td>Non-government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>General manager: Leading and managing all activities of the company</td>
<td>Non-government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Dean of Marketing Department: organizing labour and managing all marketing activities</td>
<td>Non-government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Manager: managing trading rubber; real estate and rental properties</td>
<td>Non-government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Dean of Business Department: In charge of import and export of gold jewellery and marketing</td>
<td>Non-government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Manager: design, production and marketing textiles</td>
<td>Non-government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Vice-manager: managing trading electricity throughout Vietnam</td>
<td>Government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>General manager: Real estate and realty business in land,</td>
<td>Foreign Direct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>Position</td>
<td>Years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----</td>
<td>------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Vice-manager: managing business in yarns and textiles</td>
<td>7 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Vice-manager: managing steel industry and marketing</td>
<td>5 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix I

PROJECT INFORMATION STATEMENT

------------------

Hang Truong
Faculty of Education & Arts
School of Education
University Drive
Callaghan NSW 2308
Phone: (+61)423310884
Email: ThiThuHang.Truong@uon.edu.au

Information Statement for Research Project
‘Essential Soft Skills for Successful Business Graduates in Vietnam’
Document Version 2; dated 2 August 2013

Your organization is invited to participate in the doctoral research project ‘Essential Soft Skills for Successful Business Graduates in Vietnam’ of the PhD course in Educational Leadership which is being conducted by Hang Truong, supervised by Professor Ronald Laura and Dr Kylie Shaw from the School of Education at the University of Newcastle, Australia.

The research is designed to investigate the specific soft skills which contribute to the success of business graduates in the workplace. We are also interested in the status of soft skills in business workplace, and the relating aspects for the development of soft skills at schools or in workplace.

Why is the research being done?

The purpose of this project is to explore the specific soft skills needed for business graduate success in Vietnam and also address the issue of soft skill development within business education and workplace. ‘Soft Skills’ are defined as a set of personal qualities, attributes, talents, or level of commitment such as communication skills, negotiation skills, problem-solving skills .etc. that an individual can bring to the workplace to set him or her apart from other individuals who may have similar skills and experience. The outcomes of the project will be to inform the field of business about the importance of specific soft skills for graduates from the perspective of employers. The aim is to integrate findings from this research into business tertiary curriculum in Vietnam. This study will recommend business tertiary curriculum reform and further explore the changing environment of study and work in Vietnam and globally.

Who can participate in the research?

Government, non-government and FDI enterprises across Vietnam are invited to participate. Your enterprises will be selected from the list of 500 Top Enterprises in Vietnam in 2012.
What choice do you have?

Participation is entirely voluntary. Only those people who give their informed consent will be included in the project. Whether or not you decide to participate, your decision will not disadvantage you or your organization. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw from the project until such time as the data analysis commences without giving a reason and have the option of withdrawing any data which identifies you.

What would you be asked to do?

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to undertake a short questionnaire to give some background information and a telephone interview about your perception of the importance of specific soft skills to business success. You will be provided with interview questions in advance. The researcher Hang Truong will contact with you to conduct the interview by telephone, Skype, Google Talk or in person. The interview will be recorded and you will be able to review the recording/transcript to edit or erase your contribution.

How much time will it take?

The short questionnaire will take 5 minutes to complete and the interview will take approximately 20 minutes.

What are the risks and benefits of participating?

There are no identifiable risks associated with participation in this research. There is no identifiable information regarding any individual participants collected through the interview. Whilst there are no anticipated benefits to any individual participants, the anticipated benefits of the research are that the results will contribute to current understandings about the importance of specific soft skills in business success. Participants will be sent a summary of the research findings.

How will the information privacy be protected?

Any information collected by the researchers which might identify you will be only accessed by the researchers unless you consent otherwise, except as required by law. No individual or organisation will be identifiable in any material published by the researcher. De-identified data will be kept in a locked filing cabinet the researcher’s office located in the HPE Building at The University of Newcastle in secure environment for a minimum of 5 years.

The interview will be transcribed by a Vietnamese interpreter, who has Bachelor and Master of TISO from a transcription service bound by a confidentiality agreement, and has no connection to the University of Newcastle to facilitate comprehension and avoid misunderstanding.

How will the information collected be used?

After the interview has been recorded, it will be translated into English. The data collected will be used in reports, conference presentations, publications, public exhibitions and the researcher’s thesis. The results may also be used by the Business Schools to develop best practice in soft skills training.

What do you need to do to participate?
Please read this Information Statement and be sure you understand its contents before you consent to participate. If there is anything you do not understand, or you have questions, contact the researcher.

If you would like to participate, please complete the attached consent form and return it to the researcher by email. The researcher will then contact you to confirm a time for the interview.

Further information
If you would like further information please contact Dr Kylie Shaw on +61 41726814 or by email kylie.shaw@newcastle.edu.au or Hang Truong on (61) 423310884 or by email ThiThuHang.Truong@uon.edu.au

Thank you for considering this invitation.

Prof Ronald Laura
Principal Supervisor

Dr Kylie Shaw
Co-supervisor

Hang Truong
PhD Candidate

Complaints about this research
This project has been approved by the University of University, Approval No. H-2013-0267 Should you have concerns about your rights as a participant in this research, or you have a complaint about the manner in which the research is conducted, it may be given to the researcher, or, if an independent person is preferred, to the Human Research Ethics Officer, Research Office, The Chancellery, The University of Newcastle, University Drive, Callaghan NSW 2308, Australia, telephone +61 2 4921 6333, email Human-Ethics@newcastle.edu.au.
## Appendix K

### RELIABILITY FOR LEARNING ENVIRONMENT SCALE

#### Reliability Statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cronbach's Alpha</th>
<th>Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items</th>
<th>N of Items</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>.863</td>
<td>.865</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Item-Total Statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item-Total Statistics</th>
<th>Scale Mean if Item Deleted</th>
<th>Scale Variance if Item Deleted</th>
<th>Corrected Item-Total Correlation</th>
<th>Squared Multiple Correlation</th>
<th>Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student - Peer Collaboration</td>
<td>22.73</td>
<td>15.953</td>
<td>.591</td>
<td>.370</td>
<td>.857</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology Application</td>
<td>22.30</td>
<td>17.038</td>
<td>.703</td>
<td>.517</td>
<td>.832</td>
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<tr>
<td>Work in Globalized Environment</td>
<td>22.78</td>
<td>15.958</td>
<td>.721</td>
<td>.570</td>
<td>.827</td>
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<tr>
<td>Online Learning</td>
<td>22.04</td>
<td>19.166</td>
<td>.471</td>
<td>.308</td>
<td>.868</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self-Motivated</td>
<td>22.39</td>
<td>16.507</td>
<td>.739</td>
<td>.642</td>
<td>.825</td>
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<tr>
<td>Network through Social Media</td>
<td>22.48</td>
<td>15.841</td>
<td>.745</td>
<td>.692</td>
<td>.822</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
# Appendix L

## FACTOR ANALYSIS FOR STRATEGIES SCALES

### 1. SCALE 1: SOFT SKILLS INTEGRATION

**Component Matrix^a Run 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Component</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C12 Integrating SS in All Business Courses</td>
<td>.737</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C19 Integrating Important SS in Globe in Vietnamese Curriculum</td>
<td>.696</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C1 Employers' Contribution in SS Curriculum Development</td>
<td>.653</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C16 Adapting Local SS Resources for all Business Universities</td>
<td>.542</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C4 Integrating SS in Core Business Courses</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C18 SS Extra-Curriculum Applied</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C5 Adapting SS Resources from Other Countries</td>
<td>.430</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C21 Soft skills should be integrated into the curriculum</td>
<td>.405</td>
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Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.
a. 3 components extracted.

Items 4 and 5 deleted – only loading on Component 2

**Component Matrix^a Run 2**

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<td>C12 Integrating SS in All Business Courses</td>
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<tr>
<td>C19 Integrating Important SS in Globe in Vietnamese Curriculum</td>
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<td>C1 Employers' Contribution in SS Curriculum Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>C16 Adapting Local SS Resources for all Business Universities</td>
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<tr>
<td>C21 Soft skills should be integrated into the curriculum</td>
<td>.412</td>
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Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.
a. 2 components extracted.

Item 18 deleted – only loading on Component 2

**Component Matrix^a Run 3 FINAL**

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<td>C12 Integrating SS in All Business Courses</td>
<td>.733</td>
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<tr>
<td>C19 Integrating Important SS in Globe in Vietnamese Curriculum</td>
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<tr>
<td>C1 Employers' Contribution in SS Curriculum Development</td>
<td>.677</td>
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<tr>
<td>C16 Adapting Local SS Resources for all Business Universities</td>
<td>.593</td>
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<tr>
<td>C21 Soft skills should be integrated into the curriculum</td>
<td>.413</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.
a. 1 components extracted.
Variance explained 39.59%; Cronbach's Alpha .607

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reliability Analysis</th>
<th>Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C12 Integrating SS in All Business Courses</td>
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<tr>
<td>C19 Integrating Important SS in Globe in Vietnamese Curriculum</td>
<td>.514</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C1 Employers' Contribution in SS Curriculum Development</td>
<td>.533</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C16 Adapting Local SS Resources for all Business Universities</td>
<td>.551</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C21 Soft skills should be integrated into the curriculum</td>
<td>.623</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Item 21 was retained as a scale of five items is preferable top one of four items and this item was important for the study.

2. SCALE 2: SOFT SKILLS TRAINING

Component Matrix* Run 1

<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Component</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C13 Oversea Placement Applied</td>
<td>.706</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C6 Learning Environment Simulated Workplace Applied</td>
<td>.655</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C15 Embedding SS in Other Subjects</td>
<td>.641</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C9 SS Internship Applied</td>
<td>.599</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C2 Theory and Practice Applied</td>
<td>.577</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C11 Practice and Theory Applied Equally</td>
<td>.444</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C7 SS Training Program Applied</td>
<td>.404</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C14 Practice Applied Rather Than Theory</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

a. 2 components extracted.

Item 14 deleted – only loading on Component 2

Component Matrix* Run 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Component</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C13 Oversea Placement Applied</td>
<td>.705</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C6 Learning Environment Simulated Workplace Applied</td>
<td>.654</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C15 Embedding SS in Other Subjects</td>
<td>.641</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C9 SS Internship Applied</td>
<td>.600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C2 Theory and Practice Applied</td>
<td>.577</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C11 Practice and Theory Applied Equally</td>
<td>.444</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C7 SS Training Program Applied</td>
<td>.405</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

a. 2 components extracted.

Items 11 and 7 deleted – loading stronger and negatively on Component 2 than Component 1
Component Matrix Run 3 FINAL

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Component 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C6 Learning Environment Simulated Workplace Applied</td>
<td>.725</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C9 SS Internship Applied</td>
<td>.681</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C2 Theory and Practice Applied</td>
<td>.659</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C13 Oversea Placement Applied</td>
<td>.639</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C15 Embedding SS in Other Subjects</td>
<td>.607</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.
a. 1 components extracted.

Variance explained 44.02%; Cronbach’s Alpha .681

Reliability Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Cronbach’s Alpha if Item Deleted</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C2 Theory and Practice Applied</td>
<td>.633</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C9 SS Internship Applied</td>
<td>.622</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C6 Learning Environment Simulated Workplace Applied</td>
<td>.599</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C13 Oversea Placement Applied</td>
<td>.639</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C15 Embedding SS in Other Subjects</td>
<td>.648</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. SCALE 3: EFFECT ON SOFT SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

Component Matrix Run 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Component 1</th>
<th>Component 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C10 Employers are the best SS Trainers</td>
<td>.719</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C17 Faculty Members are The Best SS Trainers</td>
<td>.702</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C3 Bad Effects of Computechnology</td>
<td>.645</td>
<td>-.362</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C22 Bilingual Students Have Better Soft Skills</td>
<td>.570</td>
<td>.302</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C8 Experts in SS are the best SS trainers</td>
<td>.458</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C20 Computechnological Application is essential</td>
<td></td>
<td>.845</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C23 No SS Education for People Naturally Good at SS</td>
<td>.400</td>
<td>.514</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.
a. 2 components extracted.

Item 20 deleted – only loading on Component 2
**Component Matrix**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component Matrixa Run 2</th>
<th>Component</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>C10 Employers are the best SS Trainers</td>
<td>.722</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C17 Faculty Members are The Best SS Trainers</td>
<td>.701</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C3 Bad Effects of Compuettechnology</td>
<td>.652</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C22 Bilingual Students Have Better Soft Skills</td>
<td>.564</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C23 No SS Education for People Naturally Good at SS</td>
<td>.391</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C8 Experts in SS are the best SS trainers</td>
<td>.461</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.
a. 2 components extracted.

Item 23 deleted – item loading heaviest on Component 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component Matrixa Run 3 FINAL</th>
<th>Component</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C10 Employers are the best SS Trainers</td>
<td>.724</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C17 Faculty Members are The Best SS Trainers</td>
<td>.709</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C3 Bad Effects of Compuettechnology</td>
<td>.660</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C22 Bilingual Students Have Better Soft Skills</td>
<td>.566</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C8 Experts in SS are the best SS trainers</td>
<td>.502</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.
a. 1 components extracted.

Variance explained 40.70%; Cronbach’s Alpha .630

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reliability Analysis</th>
<th>Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C10 Employers are the best SS Trainers</td>
<td>.524</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C17 Faculty Members are the Best SS Trainers</td>
<td>.535</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C3 Bad Effects of Compuettechnology</td>
<td>.569</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C22 Bilingual Students Have Better Soft Skills</td>
<td>.591</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C8 Experts in SS are the best SS trainers</td>
<td>.605</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>