Enhancing student employability: A mixed-methods study into work-integrated learning curricula in Vietnamese universities

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This article explores employability content that should be integrated in work-integrated learning (WIL) curricula in Vietnamese universities. An exploratory sequential mixed-methods design was employed that included 15 in-depth interviews and three focus groups with key WIL stakeholders: university department leaders, company leaders, lecturers, industry professionals, graduates, and students; and 461 responses to a student survey. Findings indicated that a WIL curriculum should contain (i) general requirements of the workplace such as work safety and work ethics, (ii) generic skills related to effective communication, and (iii) attitudes towards working effectively with customers. The influence of four factors, field of study, year of study, gender, and WIL experiences, on student preferences in WIL learning content, suggested that student demographic information should be considered when designing and implementing WIL. The research findings provide valuable information for WIL developers in Vietnam and contribute to the global quest to enhance student employability.

Keywords: Graduate employability, higher education, Vietnam, undergraduate curriculum, WIL

Employability implies that a potential employee has taken personal responsibility to be equipped with skills demanded by employers, but it is increasingly being considered as a collective mission involving universities, industry, government, and community (Oria, 2012). Bearing the heaviest burden of responsibility for student skills shortages, universities across the globe have strived to seek solutions to enhance student employability and lift graduate confidence in employment (Tran, 2018). One of the most effective university employability strategies, and one that has been implemented internationally is work-integrated learning (WIL) (Silva et al., 2016; Tran & Nguyen, 2018). Characterized by the integration of academic theory with workplace experiences, WIL allows students to gain workplace experiences from a variety of learning activities such as guest speakers, simulations, field trips, work placements, and internships (Patrick et al., 2008).

The success of WIL relies on students' level of interest and their ability to self-prepare and manage their own learning process (Abeysekera, 2006; Tran & Nguyen, 2018). However, Vietnamese universities have prepared and implemented WIL without taking student needs and industry requirements into consideration (Khuong, 2016). It is evident that students have had to self-secure an internship in the industry (Bilsland & Nagy, 2015), and have been assigned simple manual tasks such as photocopying, typing, faxing, or printing (Khuong, 2016). These are possibly because Vietnamese universities must follow theory-driven curriculum frameworks that have been developed by discipline-based scholars and prescribed by the Ministry of Education and Training (Khuong, 2016). Consequently, WIL has been assessed as ineffective (Khuong, 2016; Le, 2014), and a lack of active student participation in WIL has been reported (Tran & Nguyen, 2018). Although some research has been carried out about WIL in Vietnam, no single study explores the employability content and student expectations of WIL curricula,

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which are increasingly important as the process of granting full curriculum autonomy for Vietnamese universities progresses.

To address this research gap, this article explores required employability content from the perspectives of key WIL stakeholders including university department leaders, company leaders, lecturers, industry professionals, graduates, final-year students; and student preferences in WIL curriculum in three Vietnamese public universities. The aim is to provide meaningful information for curriculum developers, especially WIL creators and implementors in Vietnam, in designing learning content, as well as to contribute to the global quest for solutions to improve WIL quality and enhance student employability.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Student Employability

According to Oliver (2015), students are evaluated as employable if they can "discern, acquire, adapt and continually enhance the skills, understandings and personal attributes that make them more likely to find and create meaningful paid and unpaid work that benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy" (p. 59). In the definition of student employability proposed by Coetzee et al. (2015), the ability to change jobs is included in the concept. Accordingly, the authors define employability as knowledge, skills, attitudes, and attributes enabling students to secure, maintain, and transit employment across different organizations and positions within organizations (Coetzee et al., 2015).

As Creasey (2013) stated, employability is formed by educational background, personal and professional skills, and personal attributes. The first element, a degree, is no longer a "passport into graduate employment" (Harvey, 2000, p. 7). For example, more than 70% of engineering students in South Africa were assessed unemployable due to their lack of workplace skills (Makhathini, 2016). Students in many disciplines such as sport science, humanities, sciences, engineering and social sciences are aware that their university degree is merely a prerequisite (Beaumont et al., 2016) and is not enough to secure employment (O'Leary, 2017). Indeed, employers are now more concerned with soft skills, personal attributes, and professional identity than technical knowledge (Jackson, 2014; Poon, 2014). Employers also value students' soft skills more highly than the prestige of their universities (Finch et al., 2013).

The Importance of Work-Integrated Learning and Workplace Environment

As "the in-between space, the space where self and professional meet" (Trede, 2012, p. 162), WIL provides both personal and professional benefits for students (Abery et al., 2015; Tran & Nguyen, 2018). In terms of professional knowledge and skills, students learn from workplace contexts, which include aspects such as working procedures, working practices and hierarchies, and occupation-specific skills (Abery et al., 2015; Swart, 2014). Students' generic skills including critical thinking, problem-solving, communication skills, abilities in reasoning, analyzing, and diagnosing, conceptualization, collaboration and social intelligence are also sharpened (Jackson, 2015; Rampersad & Zivotic-Kukolj, 2018). From social interactions within the professional communities at their workplaces, students gain knowledge of values and attitudes, as well as the language and behavior required in the workplace (Fleming & Haigh, 2018). The quality of students' workplace experiences depends largely on the WIL workplace environment (Smith et al., 2019). Therefore, the workplace environment plays a vital role in the development of student employability via WIL, including for those studying in fields related to

telecommunications, digital design, or social media marketing, of which up to 80% of the placement time is spent away from the workplace (Bowen & Pennaforte, 2017). Garnett (2012) suggested that students should be provided with authentic WIL activities which create chances for students to learn from the purposes, context, and activities of work.

The role of workplace environments in workplace learning has been explained by Illeris (2011) using a model of learning in working life. In this model, human learning consists of internal psychological and external interaction processes. The former refers to the individual elaboration on and acquisition of new information and its connection connected with prior learning; the latter implies the interaction of learners and environment. According to Illeris (2011), personal identity is the focus of the individual acquisition process which involves three integrated dimensions: (1) content (such as knowledge, skills, abilities, understandings, and attitudes); (2) incentive (such as motivation, feelings, and emotions); and (3) social (such as communications, interaction and cooperation). In workplace settings, workplace practice is central to the learning environment which is formed by three dimensions: (1) technical-organizational learning environment (such as work content, division of labor and the use of qualifications); (2) sociocultural learning environment (such as norms, values, and traditions); and (3) the interaction between environment and learners. Illeris (2011) argues that workplace learning occurs in the interaction between learners' work identity and workplace practice.

Challenges in Developing Employability via Work-Integrated Learning in Vietnam

The Vietnamese higher-education system has been criticized for failing to produce a skilled and qualified labor force because at present, while large numbers of students graduate each year, many of them cannot secure a job (Tran, 2018). Up to 50% of Vietnamese graduates were assessed as unskilled (Montague, 2013). Skills shortage has occurred in modern industries such as telecommunications, construction, health, and transportation/logistics, and at all levels including managerial, professional, technical, low-level technical and manual positions (Goodwin et al., 2014). Vietnamese graduates' weaknesses are theoretical and practical knowledge; technical skills; and soft skills including writing, foreign languages, communication, time management, problem-solving, decision-making, and independent working skills (Nguyen, 2011; Truong et al., 2018).

More attention has been paid to student employability in Vietnam since the early 2000s when the government made a commitment to enhancing the quantity and quality of the workforce (Tran, 2019). Required graduate attributes were first officially mentioned in the Educational Development Strategy for 2011-2020, approved by Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung, including:

- ability to be creative,
- independent thinking,
- citizen responsibility,
- professional ethics and expertise,
- foreign-language competence,
- work discipline,
- industrial professionalism,
- ability to seek employment or self-employ,
- capability to adapt to changes in the labor market, and
- ability to compete regionally and internationally (Nguyen, 2012).

According to the Guideline 2196/BGDĐT-GDĐH issued in 2010 by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), Vietnamese tertiary institutions need to specify student learning outcomes and

classify them into three groups: knowledge, skills, and work attitudes (Ministry of Education and Training, 2010). Recently, the significance of having a skilled workforce which possesses high professional expertise and good soft skills has been continuously highlighted in the development of the Higher Education Development Strategy for 2021–2030 (Nguyen, 2018).

In Vietnamese universities, WIL in the form of a final-year internship is a curriculum-based strategy used to enhance student employability. The one unpaid internship is compulsory and lasts for 8-12 weeks. As an option, lecturers may invite industry representatives to participate in WIL on-campus activities as guest speakers (Pham & Tran, 2013). However, impractical and scholastically driven curricula, passive and exam-oriented learning styles, theory-driven assessment, limited university-industry cooperation, and lack of autonomy for universities have hindered student skills development, even via WIL (Nguyen et al., 2019; Tran, 2013). For example, a six-week TESOL internship for prospective Vietnamese English teachers was assessed as unsuccessful due to the lack of interactive learning for students, the hierarchical relationship between senior teachers and student teachers, and senior teachers' time constraints (Le, 2014). Likewise, WIL in tourism training programs failed to equip students for the demand of industry employers, mostly because of poor, unsustainable, and superficial relationships between key WIL stakeholders (Khuong, 2016). Tran and Nguyen (2018) found that Vietnamese students did not actively participate in work tasks during the internship, and that the success or failure of WIL experiences relied on students' level of interest.

METHODOLOGY

This article investigates what employability content needs to be integrated in WIL curricula in three Vietnamese public universities. Specifically, the study aims to address the following research questions:

- What do students in Vietnamese universities need to learn in WIL to improve their employability?
- Does demographic background influence student preferences in employability content in WIL curricula?

The research was drawn from a larger study that applied a two-phase approach called an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell, 2015). An exploration initiates a mixed-methods design when measures are not available, or variables are unknown (Creswell & Clark, 2017). In this study, the qualitative phase involved 15 individual in-depth interviews and three focus groups was conducted first to explore required employability content from the perspectives of university and industry stakeholders. The quantitative phase that consisted of a student online survey generalized the qualitative findings about learning content that needs to be included in WIL curricula.

Data was collected in three Vietnamese public universities in three training disciplines: engineering (University A), agriculture (University B), and tourism-hospitality (University C). Ethics approval (No. E17/005) was gained before the data collection process, which occurred from March to November 2017.

The Qualitative Phase

The qualitative phase included 30 university and industry participants who were involved directly with WIL implementation. In each training discipline, participants were selected from three groups: managing (one university department leader and one WIL host company leader), teaching (one lecturer and one industry professional), and learning (one graduate and five final-year students). This

purposeful selection of participants aimed to ensure that the data yielded from this qualitative phase was authentic and multidimensional (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Final-year students were involved in focus groups (Curedale, 2013), while the other participants were invited to participate in in-depth individual interviews (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). In total, there were three focus groups and 15 individual interviews in the qualitative phase. In the interview and focus group sessions that were conducted face to face and audio recorded, participants shared their perspectives on what learning content needs to be included in WIL curriculums to enhance student employability. After transcribing the interviews and sessions, each transcript was coded and categorized into themes (Creswell, 2015). Specifically, text segments mentioning learning content that needs to be included in WIL curriculum were identified and grouped deductively in three themes: professional knowledge and skills, generic skills, and work attitudes. Participant names were coded to maintain confidentiality (Gibbs, 2008). See Table 1.

TABLE 1: Research participants.

		University A (Engineering)	University B (Agriculture)	University C (Tourism-Hospitality)
University	Department leader (WIL manager)	1	11	21
	Lecturer (WIL coordinator)	2	12	22
	Final-year students (current WIL experiencers)	3, 4, 5, 6, 7	13, 14, 15, 16, 17	23, 24, 25, 26, 27
Industry	Company leader (WIL host company leader)	8	18	28
	Professional (industry WIL educator)	9	19	29
	Graduate (former WIL experiencer)	10	20	30

The Quantitative Phase

The questionnaire development stage was prepared and commenced immediately after interview data was analyzed. Quotes, codes, and themes from the interview data were used to develop the questionnaire items, variables, and sections of the survey (Creswell & Clark, 2017). Likert-type and open-ended questions were employed in the survey (Sue & Ritter, 2016). The participating students were asked to rate the importance of WIL learning content on the five-point scale with 1 denoting "not at all important" and 5 denoting "extremely important" which was assessed as safe and serviceable options to collect opinion data (Sue & Ritter, 2016). Open-ended questions were arranged so that respondents could provide their own response in an empty text box (Sue & Ritter, 2016). In total, the survey instrument consisted of three sections and 23 items, as shown in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1: Survey questionnaire

Section 1: Professional knowledge and skills

In terms of professional knowledge and skills, how important is it that the following content is provided in WIL? Please choose the option that apply

		Extremely important	Very important	Moderately important	Slightly important	Not at all important
Q1	Working procedure					
Q2	Working techniques					
Q3	Working technology and tools					
Q4	Work safety					
Q5	Work ethics					
Q6	Legislative issues					
Q7	Economic issues					

Q8. Other professional knowledge and skills are extremely important in WIL? Please specify

Section 2: Generic skills

In terms of generic skills, how important is it that the following content is provided in WIL? Please choose the options that apply

		Extremely important	Very important	Moderately important	Slightly important	Not at all important
Q9	Teamwork					
Q10	Problem solving					
Q11	Communication					
Q12	Critical thinking					
Q13	Presentation					
Q14	Foreign language(s)					
Q15	Time management					
Q16	Information technology					
Q17	Event organization					
Q18	Risk management					

Q19. Other generic skills are extremely important in WIL? Please specify

Section 3: Work attitudes

In terms of work attitudes, how important is it that the following content is provided in WIL? Please choose the options that apply

		Extremely important	Very important	Moderately important	Slightly important	Not at all important
Q20	Working effectively with managers					
Q21	Working effectively with colleagues					
Q22	Providing effective services to customers					

Q23. Other work attitudes are extremely important in WIL? Please specify

Qualtrics software was used to design an online survey with the advice of a quantitative expert from the Statistics Consultancy Platform of a university. The questionnaire was piloted by 10 researchers and the online survey was tested by 30 tertiary Vietnamese students. The pilot study with an analogous population was used to fine-tune the structure, wording, and instructions of the instrument (Sue & Ritter, 2016). The survey was officially administered in November 2017 and followed a three-phase survey administration procedure (Creswell, 2019). Because Vietnamese universities do not provide students with student email and students use their personal email during their study, the survey link was first sent to the class leaders who acted as information gatekeepers for the whole class. The link was then made available via common email or groups/forums for each class, to all potential respondents from first to final (fourth) year who were studying in the three chosen universities. First and second follow-up invitations were sent one and two weeks after the initial round to optimally increase the response rate (Sue & Ritter, 2016). The final-year students who joined in the focus groups were excluded from this phase because the survey was carried out in the new school year, after these students had graduated.

In total, there were 461 valid responses. SPSS Version 25 was used to analyze the quantitative data. The Cronbach's alpha for the five-point scale was 0.97, indicating the data set's high level of internal consistency. Descriptive statistical analysis, including frequency distribution and summary statistics, was utilized to describe the respondents' demographic information and their responses to each survey question (Sue & Ritter, 2016). Inferential analysis was conducted to examine whether differences could be found between two or more groups of respondents (Sue & Ritter, 2016). A test of normality was conducted to identify the distribution of the data. As the data distribution was non-parametric, the characteristics of variables were then considered to select appropriate tests (Allen et al., 2014). In this research, independent variables were categorical (from two to four groups) and dependent variables were nominal and ordinal. If dependent variables were nominal, the Pearson Chi-square test (X^2) was applied (Shih & Fay, 2017). If dependent variables were ordinal, the Mann-Whitney (U) test was used when the independent variable had two groups (gender), and the Kruskal-Wallis (H) test was used when the independent variable had more than two groups (field of study, year of study, WIL experiences) (Allen et al., 2014). Pairwise comparisons were also conducted to judge the preferable order between groups of students (Cribbie & Keselman, 2003).

FINDINGS

This section presents qualitative findings about WIL stakeholders' perspectives on employability content that should be included in WIL curricula, followed by quantitative results about students' preferences in WIL curricula and the influence of demographic background on student responses. As mentioned in the Methodology section, the qualitative findings were used as the input for the questionnaire instrument development in the quantitative phase. Therefore, the first research question (What do students in Vietnamese universities need to learn in WIL to improve their employability?) was addressed by the triangulation of qualitative and quantitative data sets. The second research question (Does demographic background influence student preferences in employability content in WIL curricula?) was responded by the quantitative results.

Qualitative Findings

Employability content was classified by interview and focus group participants into three categories (i) professional knowledge and skills, (ii) generic skills, and (iii) work attitudes.

Professional knowledge and skills

The interviewees listed a range of required professional knowledge and skills. In engineering, participating department leaders and lecturers highlighted the students' ability to use and apply new technology, tools, software, and equipment. Meanwhile, the participating professional emphasized work safety and knowledge of economic issues:

> When the students focus on how to operate the machine, they do not care about work safety….we also need to compare how cost-effective equipment is with other equipment as well as to other companies' equipment to invest for the company's operation. (9)

In agriculture, the company leader highlighted the importance of practical working techniques: "In practice, we cannot rigidly apply theory studied in class because it could be effective in conditions of a specific local area but ineffective in others" (18). The professional added in the interview that knowledge of legislative issues was becoming more important if graduates decided to work in the public sector. Meanwhile, the graduate mentioned the role of work ethics and work safety, especially in the use of fertilizers and pesticides to reduce environmental effects and provide safe agriculture products for customers:

> The lesson that I felt impressed the most in the internship is how to use "lá ngón" [a popular poisonous plant in Vietnam] to make a bio-pesticide. As it is a poison, work safety and ethical issues were carefully detailed. (20)

In tourism-hospitality, work procedures and processes were regarded as a foundation to work in industry. The participating hotel leader explained:

> My hotel also has its own standard and working process. Therefore, I inform and require students to follow and obey when practicing or interning in my hotel. I also notify them to change when practicing in other hotels with different processes. (28)

The hotel leader added in the interview that only practice could improve the employees' professional skills, which then increased the hotel's invisible value in the eyes of customers: "customers just come and may use our service once in their lifetime. If they come to a hotel, but they are disappointed with a pillow or a blanket, they never forget, and they will tell others" (28).

In summary, data from the interviews and focus groups identified seven elements in the category of professional knowledge and skills: working procedures, working techniques, working technology and tools, work safety, work ethics, legislative issues, and economic issues related to the profession.

Generic skills

There was a consensus among the interviewees on the importance of communication skills in the workplace. The engineering company leader explained: "If communication is not good, disputes and disagreements will arise affecting the whole working progress of a team" (8). Communication seems even more important to tourism-hospitality and agriculture employees because they work with customers on a daily basis. One agriculture student confirmed that during the internship, "work supervisors pay attention to how the students interact and talk with the farmers" (13).

The participating engineering and tourism-hospitality professionals identified students' weakness in foreign languages. This requirement derived from the emergence of foreign companies as well as international cooperation in recent years in Vietnam:

> Before, the employees were recruited based on professional knowledge, and they can accumulate language skills when working. But it is different now. In foreign-owned companies, knowledge is not enough as employees are required to communicate with foreign managers as well as to use equipment with instructions in foreign languages. (9)

Meanwhile, the generic skill that concerned the agriculture professional and the engineering department leader the most was critical thinking: "Generally, the students are enthusiastic and smart. However, they haven't actively begun to think critically yet as they automatically search Google and copy" (19). To effectively work in the industry, the agriculture lecturer added presentation and event organization skills because of the need to share knowledge and work with different stakeholders such as scholars, customers, and the broader community. The tourism-hospitality graduate highlighted the role of time management skills in the services industry. The engineering professional stated that problem solving, risk management skills, and especially teamwork should be prioritized: "I see many students work alone perfectly but they cannot work effectively within a group as they cannot compromise and balance the different sides' interests and ideas to give out common decisions" (9).

In the qualitative phase, the participants listed 10 generic skills which were often required in the workplace: teamwork, problem solving, communication, critical thinking, presentation, foreign language(s), time management, information technology, event organization and risk management.

Work Attitudes

All participants regarded work attitude as a crucial element in the workplace. However, it is difficult to teach this work element, as the agriculture professional admitted: "professional knowledge and other skills can be learned but no one can teach work attitude" (19). This was reaffirmed by the tourism-hospitality department leader: "training attitude is hard and challenging to us… and requires much time to equip the students" (21).

In the engineering discipline, work attitude towards managers were emphasized. The engineering professional stated that disciplinary attitude was highly demanded: "discipline is the most important principle to remember, especially when working for Japanese employers" (9). He explained that discipline referred to not only the employees' compliance with the workplace's code of conduct but also their obedience to the managers' directions. In agriculture, the participants suggested the significance of colleagues and farmers to the employees' work performance. The agriculture company leader highlighted: "In general, jobs in agriculture are hard and are impacted by natural conditions, thus you cannot follow the jobs unless you are hard-working and enthusiastic. You should be honest when working with farmers and colleagues" (18).

All tourism-hospitality industry participants confirmed that "service attitude is the most important factor". The participating hotel leader highlighted the impact of good attitude towards customers: "Attitude is the key. Customers may not pay attention to anything, but a neglectful or careless attitude will deeply engrave in their minds" (28). In his interview, the professional shared that he also reminded students about organizational culture, such as conforming to the company's working times and dress code during the internship. Even in the workplace or internship, "students need to consider themselves as part of the business" (30), as well as "being ready to learn and being modest with other colleagues" (23).

In the interviews and focus groups, the participants suggested three groups of people who were usually involved in the working life of an employee: managers, colleagues, and customers.

Quantitative Results

This section reports quantitative results about students' preferences in employability content in WIL curricula in three categories: (i) professional knowledge and skills, (ii) generic skills, and (iii) work attitude; and discusses the influence of demographic background on student preferences in WIL curricula.

Professional knowledge and skills

Table 2 reports on the importance of the seven elements of professional knowledge and skills. With the highest mean values at 4.09 and 4.07, work safety and work ethics were the two most important elements to the respondents. These were followed by working techniques, procedures and technology/tools applied in the workplace with mean values ranging from 3.74 to 3.84. With the lowest mean values of 3.58 and 3.53, the remaining elements (legislative and economic issues) were the two least important elements according to the participating students.

TABLE 2: Importance of professional knowledge and skills.

Professional knowledge and skills	Mean	Standard deviation
Work safety	4.09	0.99
Work ethics	4.07	0.96
Working techniques	3.84	0.92
Working procedures	3.76	0.95
Working technology and tools	3.74	0.92
Legislative issues	3.58	0.96
Economic issues	3.53	0.97

In response to the open-ended question, there were a few suggestions about other professional knowledge and skills that are specifically applied in each profession. For example, engineering students expected to learn repairing techniques and procedure. For the agriculture cohort, procedure for assessing agriculture products was extremely necessary while for the tourism students, techniques in introducing tourism destinations were in demand.

Generic skills

Students ranked foreign languages, communication, and presentation skills as the top three with mean values of 4.10, 3.95 and 3.88, respectively (Table 3). Significantly, foreign languages were the only generic skill that was assessed above the *very important* level (score 4). Following the three generic skills related to effective communication was the group of generic skills which were more applicable to individual work: risk management, information technology, problem solving, critical thinking and time management. The mean values of these elements ranged from 3.69 to 3.84. Finally, respondents ranked two generic skills, usually used in group work, teamwork (M = 3.53, SD = 0.97) and event organization (M = 3.44, SD = 0.96) as the least important.

TABLE 3: Importance of generic skills.

Generic skills	Mean	Standard deviation
Foreign languages	4.10	0.96
Communication	3.95	0.90
Presentation	3.88	0.96
Risk management	3.84	0.99
Information technology	3.75	0.96
Problem solving	3.73	0.90
Critical thinking	3.73	0.97
Time management	3.69	0.96
Teamwork	3.53	0.97
Even organization	3.44	0.96

The importance of skills related to effective communications was reaffirmed in the responses to the open-ended question. Suggestions relating to skills in how to negotiate and communicate with foreigners were prominent. Additionally, skills used in job interviews were mentioned, indicating that students expected to gain professional advice about employment preparation from their WIL activities.

Work attitudes

As Table 4 shows, attitudes towards providing effective services to customers ($M = 4.21$, SD = 0.88) were the most important element to the students who participated in the survey, while work attitudes when working with managers ($M = 3.81$, SD = 0.95) and colleagues ($M = 3.69$, SD = 0.95) scored lower.

TABLE 4: Importance of work attitudes.

Work attitudes	Mean	Standard deviation
To customers	4.21	0.88
To managers	3.81	0.95
To colleagues	3.69	0.95

Attitudes towards other people were added in response to the last open-ended question. Interestingly, five responses suggested the importance of one's "attitude to the self" (R39, R52, R293, R315, R324). One of the participating students made a comment: "I need to keep a responsible attitude to myself. Sometimes I have not tried my best, please remind me and keep me awake" (R39).

Influence of demographic background on student responses

As shown in Table 5, most of the responses came from engineering students. A slightly greater representation of third-year students was recorded among the population, and most of the respondents already experienced WIL activities. The majority of the respondents were male.

TABLE 5: Demographic information of the respondents.

Field of study	Engineering	61.4%
	Agriculture	23.0%
	Tourism-Hospitality	15.6%
Year of study	Year 1	22.3%
	Year 2	23.7%
	Year 3	29.5%
	Year 4	24.5%
Gender	Male	66.4%
	Female	33.6%
WIL experiences	Yes	69.0%
	Not yet	26.2%
	Do not know	4.8%

Results from a Pearson chi-square test revealed a significant gender difference among discipline groups ($X^2(2, N = 461) = 194.576$, $p < .001$). As Table 6 shows, female students made up a larger proportion in agriculture and tourism-hospitality, while male students were predominant in engineering.

TABLE 6: Distribution of respondents by gender and field of study.

			Gender		Total
			Male	Female	
Field of study	Agriculture	*f*	43	63	106
		%	40.6	59.4	100
	Tourism - Hospitality	*f*	9	63	72
		%	12.5	87.5	100
	Engineering	*f*	254	29	283
		%	89.8	10.2	100

f = frequency

Mann-Whitney (U) tests and Kruskal-Wallis (H) tests were run to test four hypotheses:

- Field of study has no influence on the student preferences in employability content in WIL curricula.
- Year of study has no influence on the student preferences in employability content in WIL curricula.
- Gender has no influence on the student preferences in employability content in WIL curricula.
- WIL experiences have no influence on the student preferences in employability content in WIL curricula.

Results confirmed the influence of four factors, field of study, year of study, gender, and WIL experiences, on student preferences in WIL employability content. The influence of each factor is discussed below.

TABLE 7: Influence of field of study on students' perceptions of WIL learning content.

			Field of study		
			Agriculture	Tourism-Hospitality	Engineering
			n = 106	n = 72	n = 283
Professional knowledge and skills	Work safety	Mean rank	221.00	168.10	250.75
		Test result	H = 25.939, df = 2, N = 461, p < .001		
		Significant pairwise result	Tourism-Hospitality – Agriculture, p = .006 Tourism-Hospitality – Engineering, p < .001		
Generic skills	Teamwork	Mean rank	236.46	180.88	241.71
		Test result	H = 13.434, df = 2, N = 461, p = .001		
		Significant pairwise result	Tourism-Hospitality – Agriculture, p = .004 Tourism-Hospitality – Engineering, p < .001		
	Presentation	Mean rank	241.65	189.13	237.66
		Test result	H = 9.349, df = 2, N = 461, p = .009		
		Significant pairwise result	Tourism-Hospitality – Agriculture, p = .007 Tourism-Hospitality – Engineering, p = .004		
	Risk management	Mean rank	208.75	256.06	232.96
		Test result	H = 6.093, df = 2, N = 461, p = .048		
		Significant pairwise result	Agriculture – Tourism-Hospitality, p = .015		
Work attitude	Working effectively with managers	Mean rank	236.89	108.86	239.51
		Test result	H = 9.481, df = 2, N = 461, p = .009		
		Significant pairwise result	Tourism-Hospitality – Agriculture, p = .013 Tourism-Hospitality – Engineering, p = .002		

n = number, N = total number, H = Kruskal-Wallis value, df = degrees of freedom, p = probability value
Mean rank = average ranking of each group

In terms of field of study, as shown in Table 7, tourism-hospitality students had lower demands for studying work safety, teamwork, presentation skills, and attitudes towards managers in WIL than their engineering and agriculture peers (p < .05). However, they prioritized risk management skills significantly more than agriculture respondents (p = .015).

Results from the Kruskal-Wallis tests showed that year of study had significant impact on student preferences in generic skills and work attitudes (Table 8). In terms of generic skills, teamwork, problem solving, communication, presentation, foreign language(s), and information technology were most often chosen by second-year students. In detail, second-year students had a higher interest in teamwork than the rest of the students; more interest in problem solving, communication and foreign languages than first and third-year students; and more interest in presentation and information technology skills than students in the final two years. Attitudes towards managers were of most concern to students in the first two years and of least concern in the final year.

TABLE 8: Influence of year of study on the student perceptions of WIL learning content.

			Year of study			
			Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4
			n = 103	*n* = 109	*n* = 136	*n* =113
Generic skills	Teamwork	Mean rank	223.13	265.70	214.82	224.18
		Test result	*H* = 11.076, *df* = 3, *N* = 461, *p* = .011			
		Significant pairwise result	Year 3 – Year 2, *p* = .002 Year 1 – Year 2, *p* = .015 Year 4 – Year 2, *p* = .015			
	Problem solving	Mean rank	218.87	263.83	209.60	236.13
		Test result	*H* = 12.358, *df* = 3, *N* = 461, *p* = .006			
		Significant pairwise result	Year 3 – Year 2, *p* = .001 Year 1 – Year 2, *p* = .010			
	Communication	Mean rank	218.20	257.26	215.48	236.02
		Test result	*H* = 8.020, *df* = 3, *N* = 461, *p* = .046			
		Significant pairwise result	Year 3 – Year 2, *p* = .010 Year 1 – Year 2, *p* = .024			
	Presentation	Mean rank	231.86	262.04	217.11	216.99
		Test result	*H* = 9.516, *df* = 3, *N* = 461, *p* = .023			
		Significant pairwise result	Year 4 – Year 2, *p* = .008 Year 3 – Year 2, *p* = .006			
	Foreign language(s)	Mean rank	214.80	259.52	217.99	233.91
		Test result	*H* = 8.923, *df* = 3, *N* = 461, *p* = .030			
		Significant pairwise result	Year 1 – Year 2, *p* = .009 Year 3 – Year 2, *p* = .010			
	Information technology	Mean rank	229.17	261.69	210.67	227.54
		Test result	*H* = 10.117, *df* = 3, *N* = 461, *p* = .018			
		Significant pairwise result	Year 3 – Year 2, *p* = .002 Year 4 – Year 2, *p* = .043			
Work attitude	Working effectively with managers	Mean rank	246.64	252.32	219.76	209.70
		Test result	*H* = 8.928, *df* = 3, *N* = 461, *p* = .030			
		Significant pairwise result	Year 4 – Year 1, *p* = .032 Year 4 – Year 2, *p* = .012			

n = number, N = total number, H = Kruskal-Wallis value, df = degrees of freedom, p = probability value
Mean rank = average ranking of each group

As shown in Table 9, gender influenced student responses to the importance of professional knowledge and skills as well as generic skills. Regarding professional knowledge and skills, while male students focused on work safety, female peers prioritized working procedures. In terms of generic skills, there was a tendency for female students to value the importance of communication (p = .040), critical thinking (p = .024) and event organization (p = .009) at a higher level than male students.

TABLE 9: Influence of gender on the student perceptions of WIL learning content.

			Gender	
			Male	Female
			n = 306	n = 155
Professional knowledge and skills	Working procedure being applied in the workplace	Mean rank	222.05	248.66
		Test result	U = 26.453, df = 1, N = 461, p = .033	
	Work safety	Mean rank	240.77	211.71
		Test result	U = 20.725, df = 1, N = 461, p = .018	
Generic skills	Communication	Mean rank	222.41	247.96
		Test result	U = 26.344, df = 1, N = 461, p = .040	
	Critical thinking	Mean rank	221.47	249.81
		Test result	U = 26.630, df = 1, N = 461, p = .024	
	Event organization	Mean rank	219.97	252.77
		Test result	U = 27.090, df = 1, N = 461, p = .009	

n = number, N = total number, U = Mann-Whitney value, df = degrees of freedom, p = probability value
Mean rank = average ranking of each group

Significant differences were found between groups of students with and without WIL experiences in responding to the importance of work ethics and risk management (p < .05). As Table 10 shows, students who had already experienced WIL seemed to have more expectations that they would study these two work elements than those who had not participated in any WIL activities.

TABLE 10: Influence of WIL experiences on the student perceptions of WIL learning content.

			WIL experiences		
			Yes	Not yet	Unsure
			n = 318	n = 121	n = 22
Professional knowledge and skills	Work ethics	Mean rank	241.46	205.75	218.64
		Test result	H = 7.315, df = 2, N = 461, p = .026		
		Significant pairwise result	Not yet – Yes, p = .008		
Generic skills	Risk management	Mean rank	238.18	207.23	257.95
		Test result	H = 6.218, df = 2, N = 461, p = .045		
		Significant pairwise result	Not yet – Yes, p = .023		

n = number, N = total number, H = Kruskal-Wallis value, df = degrees of freedom, p = probability value
Mean rank = average ranking of each group

DISCUSSION

This paper explored (i) required employability content in WIL from the perspectives of key stakeholders including university department leaders, company leaders, lecturers, industry professionals, graduates, final year students; and (ii) student preferences in WIL curriculum in three Vietnamese public universities. An exploratory sequential mixed methods design was employed to enhance the validity and reliability of the findings.

Employability Content in Work-Integrated Learning Curricula

Results from 15 in-depth interviews and three focus groups with university and industry stakeholders revealed a broad picture of key employability content that they perceived needs to be required in WIL

curricula: (i) seven areas of professional knowledge and skills (Table 2), (ii) 10 areas of soft skills (Table 3), and (iii) work attitudes towards people in the workplace (Table 4). Interviews with participants working directly in industry (company leaders, industry professionals and graduates) provided a longer list of required employability content than interviews with participants from universities (department leaders, lecturers and final-year students). However, industry and university participants had no difference of opinion over workplace employability requirements.

Responses from the student survey indicated that students preferred employability content that they saw as closely linked to authentic workplace settings and practice. This was supported in Illeris's (2011) model of learning, which conceptualizes that workplace learning occurs when students are involved in real work tasks and are immersed in technical-organizational and social-cultural learning environments at the workplace. The issue currently at hand for Vietnamese universities is that students' learning process is separated from the workplace (Nguyen et al., 2019), and that reflects a need for aligning learning content with industry practices.

In summary, this study identified employability content required in WIL curricula, including (i) general requirements of the workplace such as work safety and work ethics, (ii) generic skills related to effective communication and (iii) attitudes towards working effectively with customers.

Regarding professional knowledge and skills, responses to the student survey indicated that students were interested in learning about general requirements of the workplace and industry, specifically, work safety and work ethics, more than individual professional attributes. As studies on WIL in engineering and hospitality disciplines from South Africa and Australia have suggested, although the knowledge and skills to work and perform actual tasks in the workplace satisfied the employers' needs, student knowledge of the industry was weak (Makhathini, 2016; Milne & Caldicott, 2016). This situation is similar in Vietnam due to both teaching staff and students concentrating on and prioritizing the theoretical basis of technical knowledge, as opposed to its practical application (Tran, 2015). Therefore, work safety and ethical considerations have not been seen as a priority. Of the seven elements in this study's survey, work safety was considered as the most important (Table 2). This finding reaffirmed the lack of attention to health and safety education and management in Vietnam (Phung et al., 2015), and further suggested the incorporation of industry work safety in WIL curricula.

In terms of generic skills, there was a consensus among the participants in the qualitative and quantitative phases about the significance of communication skills in the workplace. Results of the survey revealed that students also highly valued other skills relating to effective communication such as foreign languages and presentation skills. In fact, communication skills and foreign languages have been identified as weaknesses of Vietnamese graduates for some time (Nguyen, 2011; Truong et al., 2018). The reason probably lay in the tendency of Vietnamese students' experience to be characterized by traditionally passive learning and teacher-centered teaching approaches (Nguyen et al., 2019). When "the teacher [talk] most of the time and the students [take] notes most of the time" (Tran, 2013, p. 639), there is little chance for students to improve skills relating to oral communication. Of the 10 generic skills mentioned in the survey, participants placed the greatest importance on foreign languages which have been identified as the key to enhancing the national competitive position of Vietnam in the global political and economic arena (Dang et al., 2013). The result reflected the students' awareness of the competitiveness of the labor market under the impact of globalization, and their expectation to experience international work environments in WIL.

Findings from the qualitative phase suggested that engineering and agriculture students should concentrate on developing good relationships with the internal staff of their company, such as managers and colleagues. For tourism-hospitality students, the focus must be the external customers. However, results of the descriptive analysis showed that a service-oriented work attitude towards customers was essential to students in all three fields (Table 4). These results probably reflected the current development trend of the economy as well as the new requirements from employers. As the economy is developing towards service-driven work, employers, even those in technical industries, have increasingly demanded an understanding of customer-behavior trends and business skills (Siddoo et al., 2018).

Influence of Demographic Background on Student Responses

Results from Kruskal-Wallis tests and Mann-Whitney tests confirmed the influence of four factors on student preferences in employability content required in WIL curricula: (i) field of study, (ii) year of study, (iii) gender, and (iv) WIL experiences. It is important that student demographic background is taken into consideration in designing and implementing WIL curricula.

Regarding field of study, it is worth noting that while agriculture and engineering are technically focused, tourism-hospitality is service-driven. The disciplinary differences probably explained the explanation for the impact of field study on student preferences in WIL learning content. Specifically, engineering and agriculture students prioritized work safety, teamwork, presentation skills, and work attitudes toward managers, because these elements seemed to be essential in dealing with the project work and technical tasks that characterize these fields. In contrast, tourism-hospitality students paid attention to risk management, which was helpful in such a demanding and high-pressure service industry.

Year of study had an impact on student preferences in WIL learning content. Second-year students tended to have different perceptions than the rest of the participating students, preferring teamwork, problem solving, communication, presentation, foreign languages, and information technology. This is probably because in the second year, students are getting familiar with peers and studying environments, that enables them to be active in skills and identity development. This result was in line with that of Tran (2017), who found that second-year students were more interested in enhancing generic skills than other students. Moreover, students in the first two years rated work attitude towards managers more highly than final-year students. In years 1 and 2, most students have not engaged in workplace contexts and are provided chances to approach industry stakeholders working in managing positions via career orientation activities arranged by universities. Thus, work managers were probably the most influential industry persons for these students.

Gender was another influencing factor. Work safety was found to be more significant to male students, while their female peers prioritized working procedures. This could be due to male employees working in more manual-labor-oriented and highly technical positions than female employees, who often work indoors (Jensen et al., 2014). In terms of generic skills, female students valued the importance of communication, critical thinking, and event organization at a higher level than male students. This result supported the conclusion of Rampersad and Zivotic-Kukolj (2018) who found that females often rated themselves higher in social intelligence and evaluation than their male peers.

WIL experiences also affected the students' responses, with students who had had WIL experiences assessing work ethics and risk management as more important than students who had not participated

in any WIL activities. Exposure to work-based experiences is likely to help students recognize the role of risks and the importance of ethical considerations to industry practices.

Implications for Practice and Research

This research revealed student preferences in employability content that are closely linked to authentic workplace settings and practice. This finding not only confirmed the importance of the workplace environment to student employability but also indicated the shortages of opportunities for students to be exposed to real-world experiences in Vietnamese universities. One internship or practicum in the last semester seemed not enough for students. Therefore, a diverse range of compulsory WIL activities, especially those conducted in the workplace, should be arranged throughout the duration of higher education training programs. Broadly, this research emphasized the importance of aligning learning content with industry practices, as well as the need to change the current teaching practices from a theoretical to a practical orientation to enhance student employability in Vietnamese higher education and similar contexts. The influence of four factors, field of study, year of study, gender, and WIL experiences, on student preferences in WIL employability content suggested the importance of demographic information to the design and implementation of WIL activities. The finding implied the need to contextualize WIL curriculum and personalize placement training plans to satisfy students' individual employability needs.

This study was methodologically limited because in the quantitative phase, responses from engineering and male students far outnumbered those from other students. These inequalities may constrain the interpretation and comparison of the students' preferences in WIL learning content by field of study and gender. In future research, the involvement of participants from other fields of study is likely to produce more reliable data sets and provide a broader generalization. Moreover, the inclusion of non-public and foreign-owned universities in future work would produce more meaningful findings on solutions to enhance student employability.

CONCLUSION

This article explored the employability content that needs to be integrated in WIL curricula in three Vietnamese universities. Results from 15 in-depth interviews, three focus groups, and 461 responses to a student survey revealed that to enhance student employability, WIL curricula should contain (i) general requirements of the workplace, such as work safety and work ethics, (ii) generic skills related to effective communication, and (iii) work attitudes towards customers. This study also confirmed the influence of demographic background on student preferences in WIL learning content. These findings reflect a call for university responsiveness to both industry requirements and student individual learning demands. That is a difficult challenge that requires efforts and dedication from universities to solve. In Vietnam, the task ahead is to accelerate the process of granting full curriculum autonomy for public universities so that employability content can be integrated in university curricula.

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