

Research Article

A SURVEY-BASED STUDY ON SOFT SKILLS IN STUDENT INTERNS: EXAMINING EMPLOYER EXPECTATIONS AND READINESS OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE STUDENTS AT HONG BANG INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the critical role of soft skills in the internship experiences of English language students at Hong Bang International University (HIU) in Vietnam. Through a comprehensive survey targeting employers and student interns, the research aims to identify the expectations held by employers regarding soft skills and assess the readiness of students to meet these expectations. Soft skills, including communication, teamwork, adaptability, and problem-solving, are increasingly recognized as essential components of professional success, particularly in the context of internships. The findings reveal a significant gap between employer expectations and students' perceived readiness, highlighting areas for improvement in curriculum design and student training. Additionally, the study explores the implications of these gaps for both academic institutions and employers, suggesting strategies for enhancing soft skill development in educational programs. By providing insights into the perceptions of both stakeholders, this research contributes a better understanding of the alignment between educational outcomes and industry requirements, ultimately aiming to enhance the employability of English language students in a competitive job market. The results underscore the necessity for targeted interventions of educators as well as institutions to equip students with the soft skills demanded by employers, fostering a more competent and adaptable workplace.

Keywords: soft skills, expectations, employers, interns.

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary job market, the significance of soft skills has escalated dramatically, particularly in fields requiring interpersonal communication and collaboration. Soft skills, which encompass abilities such as communication, teamwork, adaptability, and problem-solving, are increasingly essential in today's labor market with advancements in technology and globalization. At HIU, where English language students are well-prepared for careers that necessitate strong communication and interpersonal abilities, understanding the gap between employer expectations and student readiness is vital. The university aims to equip students with not only linguistic proficiency but also with the soft skills necessary to thrive in diverse work environments. However, the fact that many students may lack necessary soft skills, potentially hindering their employability after graduation. This study seeks to address the critical issue through a survey-based investigation that examines both employer expectations and self-perceived readiness of English language students.

The rationale of this research is grounded in the recognition that academic curricula often emphasize knowledge over soft skill development. As a result, students may graduate with strong knowledge of their subject matter but insufficient competencies in areas like communication and teamwork, which are essential for success in the workplace. Employers frequently report that while candidates possess the necessary academic qualifications, they often fall short of their ability to communicate effectively, collaborate with others, and adapt to changing environments. This disconnect highlights the need for educational institutions to reassess their curricula and training programs to better prepare students to meet demands of the job market.

To explore this issue, this study will focus on two primary questions: What are the soft skills that employers expect from interns, and how do English language students at HIU perceive their own readiness in these areas? By conducting a survey involving both employers and students, the research aims to provide evidence on the current state of soft skills among student interns. In addition, it seeks to identify specific areas where students may require further development to align their skills with employer expectations.

The findings from this study will have significant implications for both universities and students. For universities, understanding the skill gap can improve curriculum design, ensuring that programs are tailored to meet the needs of the workplace. This can lead to the development of training initiatives, workshops, conferences, and experiential learning opportunities that enhance students' soft skills. For students, awareness of their strengths and weaknesses in soft skills can guide their personal and professional development, enabling them to take steps to improve their employability. Moreover, the study will contribute to the existing literature on soft skills in higher education, which has gained significant attention in recent years. While numerous studies have explored the importance of soft skills in various fields, there is a relative shortage of research focusing specifically on English language students and their readiness for internships. This research aims to fill that gap, providing valuable insights into how soft skills are perceived and developed within this unique context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review explores the current understanding of soft skills in education, their impact on employability, and the expectations of employers regarding these skills in student interns, particularly focusing on English language students.

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The importance of soft skills

Research indicates that soft skills are critical for professional success. According to Asefer and Abidin (2021), employers often seek graduates with effective communication, teamwork, and problem-solving abilities. Additionally, a study by Soupramanien and Rughoobur-Seetah (2024) highlights that soft skills are essential for adapting to workplace demands and enhancing overall job performance. This is particularly relevant for English language students, who must navigate diverse communication contexts in their future careers.

Employer expectations

Employers have articulated specific expectations regarding the soft skills they desire in their hires. Soupramanien and Rughoobur-Seetah (2024) found that employers value soft skills as much as technical skills, indicating a shift in hiring criteria. This trend underscores the necessity for educational institutions to integrate soft skills training into their curricula.

Soft skills development in higher education

Despite the recognized importance of soft skills, many educational programs still prioritize knowledge over soft skills development. While hard skills are essential, the lack of emphasis of soft skills in higher education can lead to graduates who are academically proficient but ill-prepared for the interpersonal demands of the workplace (Williams, 2015). This gap in education can hinder students' employability, particularly in fields that require strong communication and collaboration skills.

The role of internships

Internships serve as a critical bridge between academic learning and professional practice, providing students with opportunities to develop and demonstrate their soft skills. According to a study by Evangelista (2022), internships foster essential soft skills such as teamwork, communication, and adaptability. However, the effectiveness of internships in developing skills often depends on the quality of the internship experience and the support provided by educational institutions.

Perceptions of readiness

Understanding students' perceptions of their own readiness regarding soft skills is crucial for identifying areas for improvements. A study by Wang et al (2024) found that many students feel unprepared to meet employer expectations concerning soft skills, particularly in communication and teamwork. This self-assessment highlights the need for targeted interventions to enhance students' confidence and competence in these areas.

Bridging the gap

To address the gap between employer expectations and student readiness, educational institutions must adopt a more integrated approach to soft skill development. According to Allam and Raj (2024), fostering an environment that encourages collaboration, critical thinking, and effective communication can significantly enhance students' soft skills. Additionally, incorporating experiential learning opportunities, such as projects and internships, can provide students with practical experiences that reinforce their soft skills.

Recommendations for curriculum development

Curriculum development should prioritize the inclusion of soft skills training alongside traditional academic content. As noted by Valenzuela (2020), educational programs must evolve to reflect the changing demands of the job market, ensuring that students are equipped with both technical and soft skills. This can be achieved through the implementation of workshops, seminars, and collaborative projects that emphasize the importance of soft skills in professional settings.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research design

This study employs a quantitative research design, utilizing a survey-based approach to collect data on expectations of employers regarding soft skills and self-perceived readiness of English language students at HIU. This quantitative method is selected for its ability to gather measurable data that can be statistically analyzed, allowing for a clear comparison between employer expectations and student readiness.

Population and sampling

The target population of this study includes two main groups: employers who have previously hired interns from HIU and English language students currently enrolled at the university. To ensure a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter, a purposive technique will be employed to select participants who have relevant experience and insights.

The sample consists of 65 employers from various industries that typically engage English language interns, such as education, tourism, and business. Additionally, 89 final-year students within the English language program will be surveyed. This approach allows for a robust examination of both perspectives.

Data collection instruments

A structured questionnaire will be developed for this study, consisting of two main sections tailored to each group of participants being employers and students. For the employer questionnaire, there are questions on employer expectations regarding specific soft skills, such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving and adaptability. Employers will be asked to rate the importance of each skill on a Likert scale (1 to 5), with 1 being "not important" and 5 being "very important." Additional open-ended questions will allow employers to provide qualitative insights into their expectations and experiences in interns. For the student questionnaire, this aims to assess students' self-perceived readiness in the same soft skill areas. Students will rate their confidence in each skill on a similar Likert scale. This questionnaire will also include questions regarding students' experiences contributing to their skill development.

Data collection procedures

The survey data from employers will be collected through evaluation forms for internship results while the survey data from students will be conducted online. Participants will be informed about the purpose of the study and assured of confidentiality of their responses.

Data analysis

Quantitative data collected from the surveys will be analyzed by using Excel. Descriptive statistics will be calculated to summarize the information of participants and their responses to the survey items. Inferential statistics will be employed to examine any significant

differences between employer and student-perceptions. This analysis will identify relationships between various soft skills as perceived by both students and employers.

Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations are crucial in this research. Participants will be provided with an informed consent form outlining the study’s purpose and procedures. Data will be stored securely, and only aggregated results will be reported.

Through careful sampling, structured data collection instruments, and robust analysis methods, the study aims to provide valuable insights that can inform educational practices and enhance the employability of students at HIU.

DATA ANALYSIS, FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section demonstrates the information from surveys, findings and discussions. The employers represented various sectors, providing a diverse perspective on the expectations for soft skills in interns. The student participants were final-year English language students of HIU, showing their self-reception of readiness in the soft skills. The data statistics were shown by the following tables.

Table 1: Employer expectations of soft skills

Soft skills	Very important (%)	Important (%)	Neutral (%)	Not important (%)	Not relevant (%)
Communication	90	7	2	1	0
Teamwork	89	7	3	1	0
Adaptability	85	10	3	1	1
Problem-solving	80	12	5	2	1

Table 1 illustrates the percentage of employers who rated each soft skill as “very important,” “important,” “neutral,” “not important”, and “not relevant”. Results indicated that 90% of employers rated communication skills as “very important” for interns. Teamwork emerged as another critical area, with 89% of employers considering it “very important”. Adaptability was rated as “very important” by 85% of employers while problem-solving skills were deemed significant, with 80% of employers rating them as ‘very important’.

Table 2 Students self-perception of readiness in soft skills

Soft skill	Very confident (%)	Confident (%)	Neutral (%)	Not confident (%)	Very not relevant (%)
Communication	20	45	25	8	2
Teamwork	25	45	20	7	3
Adaptability	15	45	25	10	5
Problem-solving	18	50	20	8	4

Table 2 displays the percentage of students who rated their self-perceived readiness in each soft skill category. The categories range from “very confident” to very not relevant. Table 2 revealed that only 65% of students rated themselves as “confident” or “very confident” in communication. In terms of teamwork, 70% of students felt “confident” in their ability to collaborate effectively. When it came to adaptability, only 60% of students rated them as “confident” or “very confident.” Regarding problem-solving skills, 68% of students felt confident in their abilities.

Table 3: Comparison of employer expectations versus student readiness

Soft skill	Employ rating (very important %)	Student confidence (very confident + confident %)	Gap (%)
Communication	92	65	27
Teamwork	89	70	19
Adaptability	85	60	25
Problem-solving	80	68	12

Table 3 compares the percentage of employers who consider each soft skill as “very important” with the percentage of students who feel “very confident” and “confident” in their abilities. The gap indicates the difference between employer expectations and student readiness. The gap reveals a clear disconnect between the expectations of employers regarding soft skills mentioned and the self-perceived readiness of English language students at HIU. The gap in communication skills is particularly pronounced, with employers emphasizing the importance of clear and effective communication while students express discomfort in formal settings. Also, students felt reasonably confident in their teamwork capabilities but employers expected interns to collaborate effectively in more dynamic environments. The low self-perceived readiness in adaptability and problem-solving indicates a need for targeted training in these areas. Addressing this gap is essential for equipping students with the necessary skills to thrive in their internship and careers.

The results indicate that communication skills are very important for employers, with 92% rating them as “very important.” This aligns with existing literature, which emphasizes that effective communication is vital for collaboration and success in professional settings (Price, 1991). However, while many students expressed confidence in their communication abilities, feeling comfortable in informal communication, others had to struggle with the formalities required in professional contexts, such as writing emails or delivering presentations. This suggested a need for educational interventions focusing on professional communication skills, including workshops or practical training.

Teamwork emerged as another critical area, with 89% of employers viewing it essential. Students felt relatively confident in their teamwork abilities, with 70% expressing readiness, but employers expect interns to contribute positively, highlighting the necessity for students to engage in more varied group activities that mimic workplace environments. Implementing team-based projects could be an effective way to enhance real-work teamwork skills.

Adaptability is increasingly recognized as a crucial soft skill, particularly given the rapidly changing nature of modern workplaces. The findings that 85% of employers rated adaptability as “very important”, yet only “60% of students felt confident in this area,” signals a significant gap. The ability to adapt to new challenges is essential for success, and students’ lower confidence may stem from a lack of exposure to diverse and unpredictable situations. Educational institutions should consider including more ability exercises and incorporating experiential learning opportunities that expose students to changing circumstances and require them to develop adaptive strategies.

Problem-solving skills, while regarded as important by 80% of employers, showed a smaller confidence gap, with 68% of students feeling prepared. However, the qualitative data reveal that many students prefer structured guidance when addressing problems, which may limit their independent problem-solving capabilities. This reliance on guidance can hinder their development of critical thinking

and creative skills that are increasingly valued in the workplace. To address this, educational programs should integrate problem-based learning approaches that challenge students to tackle real-world issues independently, fostering both confidence and competence in their problem-solving abilities.

Future research could further explore the effectiveness of specific pedagogical approaches in developing soft skills among students. Additionally, qualitative studies involving employer interviews should be conducted to provide deeper insights into the employer expectations and the competencies that could make interns successful.

CONCLUSION

The exploration of soft skills among English language student interns at HIU reveals significant insights into both employer expectations and student readiness. As the workplace increasingly values international skills, communication, teamwork, and problem-solving abilities, it becomes essential for institutions to prioritize the development of these competences within their curricula. The findings from the survey indicate that employers highly value soft skills, often considering it as crucial as professional expertise. This expectation ensures the necessity for students to cultivate these skills as much as their academic knowledge. Furthermore, the study highlights a notable gap between employer expectations and perceived readiness of students. Many students reported feeling unprepared enough to meet these expectations, which hinders their employability after graduation.

To bridge this gap, universities should consider implementing targeted training programs that increasingly focus on soft skill development. Workshops, mentorship opportunities, and real-world projects can provide students with practical experience needed to enhance their interpersonal abilities. In addition, fostering the partnership with local businesses could facilitate internships that allow students to practice and refine these skills in a professional setting. Ultimately, equipping students with robust skills is not only beneficial for their individual career path but also essential for meeting the evolving demands for the labor market. By addressing the identified gaps and aligning educational outcomes with industry needs, HIU can enhance the readiness for its graduates, ensuring that they are well-prepared to thrive in diverse professional environments, elevating the university's reputation, and contributing positively to a broader economic landscape by producing competent, adaptable, and skilled graduates.

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