

Employment Situation of University Graduates in Challenging Circumstances Report Summary

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INTRODUCTION

The survey on the ‘Employment Situation of University Graduates in Challenging Circumstances’ was carried out within the framework of the ‘Learning for Children’ project under the National Cooperation Programme between the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) and UNICEF Viet Nam. The survey is one of numerous activities under the project that aims to explore the employment situation of students in challenging circumstances after they graduate from university and provide insights that guide interventions from the Government of Viet Nam to facilitate employment and enhance their employability.

Students in challenging circumstances¹ with household registrations in the provinces of the Northern midlands and mountainous region² and who also graduated in 2017 and 2018 were the subjects of this survey. Especially targeted were those from provinces in the Northwest region where economic conditions are more challenging than the national average. Results were collected from 300 graduates³ (57.2 per cent male and 42.8 per cent female) using an online survey via SurveyMonkey. The research samples were tested for sampling errors to ensure their representability.

The report revolved around the employment situation of disadvantaged graduates by looking into time and location of seeking for jobs, job-hunting methods, types of contract, how relevant the jobs were to the majors and qualifications of the graduates, characteristics of their organisations or workplace, income, and level of job satisfaction, among other factors. These aspects were analysed based on the employment status of the respondents. For those who were unemployed, the survey investigated their duration of unemployment and challenges in finding employment. For those who were economically inactive (neither employed nor seeking employment), the survey identified reasons behind their inactivity.

LIMITATIONS

Despite the efforts of the research team in collecting responses, only 300 responses were obtained from university graduates of 2017 and 2018 from the targeted localities. This limits the representation of the research in reflecting the real employment situation of graduates in challenging circumstances. The sample does not include students with

¹ Students in challenging circumstances are students with household registration in difficult provinces or disadvantaged areas of Zone III, ethnic minority students and students from poor and near-poor households. Disadvantaged areas of Zone III are those specified in Decision No.582/QĐ-TTg on approving the list of extremely difficult villages, communes of Zone III, Zone II, Zone I of ethnic minority and mountainous areas in the period 2016 – 2020.

² 14 provinces in the Northern midlands and mountainous region include Bac Giang, Bac Kan, Cao Bang, Dien Bien, Ha Giang, Hoa Binh, Lai Chau, Lang Son, Lao Cai, Phu Tho, Son La, Thai Nguyen, Tuyen Quang and Yen Bai.

³ The survey was first distributed to 1,730 respondents (1,002 females and 728 males, accounting for 57.9 per cent and 42.1 per cent respectively), and 300 responses were collected from the respondents. The respondents are graduates from Tay Bac University, University of Labour and Social Affairs, Viet Tri University of Industry, and Thai Nguyen University.

disabilities either, as the population of students with disabilities living in challenging localities is small and hard to reach⁴.

KEY OUTCOMES

Based on the survey results and statistics collected from higher education institutions, the research team would like to present a summary of their main findings as follows:

1. The proportion of graduates in challenging circumstances who succeeded in finding jobs within 12 months of graduating was relatively low

According to the survey results, only 51.6 per cent of disadvantaged graduates were employed within 12 months of graduating and they changed their jobs at least once within 12 months of employment. This was relatively low compared to the reports submitted by universities. Nationwide, the report from the Department of Higher Education under MOET showed that 82 per cent of graduates were employed within 12 months of graduating. The results also show the figure of graduates from near-poor or poor households, disadvantaged areas and ethnic minority groups employed within a year of graduating as 28.7 , 40.3, and 45.6 per cent, respectively. It demonstrates how difficult it is for graduates in challenging circumstances to find jobs in the surveyed areas and the urgent need to enhance the employability of graduates from these areas.

2. The proportion of graduates getting jobs that match their majors and degrees was relatively high

Around 72.4 per cent of employed graduates (72.2 per cent male and 71.1 per cent female) asserted that their jobs related to their majors or what they had studied and 81.8 per cent (78.6 per cent male and 84.2 per cent female) agreed that their jobs required a college or university degree. For a job to be considered quality, it needs to be relevant to both the qualification (vertically suitable) and major (horizontally suitable). According to the survey, quality jobs made up 50.5 per cent of the total jobs secured by graduates, which was almost the same as the national average of 51 per cent⁵. Remarkably, comparing disaggregated data on the economic situation and ethnicity, 64.7 per cent of graduates in poor households and 47.6 per cent of graduates in affluent households secured quality jobs while 51.7 per cent of ethnic minority graduates, who are considered disadvantaged, got quality jobs and only 48.8 per cent of their Kinh counterparts did so. The same applies to graduates in disadvantaged areas (61 per cent) and graduates in non-disadvantaged areas (43.1 per cent). It shows that disadvantaged graduates are more likely to get quality jobs than their mainstream

⁴ Currently, there are no official statistics on the number of students with disabilities. According to the 2016 Population and Family Planning Survey and the 2016 National Survey of Persons with Disabilities, students with disabilities attending colleges and universities accounted for 0.042% (General Statistics Office of Viet Nam - GSO).

⁵ Nguyen Van Thang et al. (2020). *Vietnamese Graduates' Labour Market Entry and Employment: A Tracer Study*, National Economics University Publishing House.

counterparts. It also provides data about quality jobs by gender, which is almost similar between males and females (49.8 and 51.3 per cent, respectively).

3. The private sector and small-scale public sector generated most of the jobs for disadvantaged graduates

This outcome is different from the results of the nationwide survey on students' employment which indicates that the private and the Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) sectors generated most jobs, while the public sector accounted for only 11 per cent⁶. However, in economically disadvantaged areas, the private and public sectors are the major sources of employment for disadvantaged graduates – accounting for 49.1 and 43.8 per cent of jobs, respectively. Meanwhile, the FDI sector creates only 4.5 per cent of jobs. Graduates in disadvantaged areas mostly work for small and micro enterprises (67.7 per cent), and these could become crucial partners of universities and students in disadvantaged areas.

4. Graduates in disadvantaged areas earned a relatively low income

Two-thirds (67 per cent) of graduates in challenging circumstances earned less than seven million Vietnamese Dong (VND) per month, which is lower than the average national income. This income level is also low when compared with graduates who possess higher education qualifications nationwide⁷. The survey also shows that the income gap between male and female graduates in challenging circumstances is small.

The increasing number of university students raises the question of whether graduating from university is a prerequisite to earning a high salary.

5. Job satisfaction of graduates was at the average level

Based on the survey results, the level of job satisfaction of graduates was slightly above average at between 3.8 to 4.3 (on a scale of 1 to 6) . The respondents were generally satisfied with their organizations or companies (scoring 4.3); while other aspects of their jobs such as income and working conditions scored slightly lower at 3.8 and 4.1 respectively. On average, graduates switched jobs once within a year of graduating, with 48.5 per cent of respondents having changed their jobs at least once. Disaggregated data suggests that males are more likely to change jobs than females (35.8 per cent males in comparison to 24.6 per cent females who changed jobs at least twice). Graduates of Zone III communes also switched jobs more than those of more advantaged regions (51.2 per cent and 46.5 per cent, respectively).

⁶ Nguyen Van Thang et al. (2020). *Vietnamese Graduates' Labour Market Entry and Employment: A Tracer Study*, National Economics University Publishing House.

⁷ Ibid

6. Disadvantaged graduates often rely on personal relationships, social networks and self-referrals as job hunting methods

Survey results show that, for disadvantaged graduates, the top three methods of finding a job are through their personal networks (43.4 per cent), social media (35.2 per cent) and direct contact with employers (35.2 per cent). There is not much difference in terms of gender. The least used job-hunting method is employment services or career orientation centres in higher education institutions (3.4 per cent). The challenges in employment, however, have stimulated more ethnic minority students (8.6 per cent), especially males, to be self-employed, as compared to their Kinh counterparts (1.9 per cent).

7. Lack of foreign language skills, work experience as well as the irrelevance of some training programmes were among the biggest challenges' graduates faced when finding jobs

Disadvantaged graduates face various challenges while job hunting, with the main ones being lack of foreign language skills (78.4 per cent), unhelpful university degrees (61.8 per cent), lack of work experience (57.8 per cent), lack of knowledge about the labour market (51 per cent) and the irrelevance of universities' training programmes (46.1 per cent). The survey results do not show much difference in gender; for example, a similar percentage of male (43.3 per cent) and female graduates (45.2 per cent) responded that they lack foreign language skills. Apart from the challenges mentioned, 40 per cent of unemployed respondents also said that low-paying jobs in disadvantaged areas hampered them from being employed.

Box 1: Definitions of digital literacy, digital skills, transferable skills and job specific skills

Digital Literacy

Refers to the knowledge, skills and attitudes that allow children to be both safe and empowered in an increasingly digital world. This encompasses their play, participation, socializing, searching, and learning through digital technologies. What constitutes digital literacy will vary according to the children's age, local culture and context.

Digital Skills

Digital skills focus on what and how (whereas digital literacy focuses on why, when, who, and for whom). It is about specific skills often linked to a specific tool or programme. Courses on skill development are often short.

Transferable Skills (also known as life skills, 21st century skills, soft skills, or socio-emotional skills)

Higher order cognitive and non-cognitive skills such as problem solving, collaboration, creativity, managing emotions, empathy and communication that allow children and young people to become agile, adaptive learners and citizens equipped to navigate personal, academic, social, and economic challenges. Transferable skills work alongside knowledge and values to connect, reinforce, and develop other skills and build further knowledge.

Job Specific Skills (also known as technical and vocational skills)

Skills associated with one or more occupations, which could have specific or broad applications.

8. Unemployed female and male graduates faced different obstacles in finding jobs.

Both female and male graduates who are unemployed expressed the same top three biggest challenges as the lack of work experience, the lack of foreign language skills, and the limitations of their education programmes. However, more male graduates (35.5 per cent) acknowledged that their lack of knowledge of the labour market made employment difficult, in comparison to their female counterparts (20.5 per cent); this is a difference of 15 per cent. Moreover, there was a difference of 10.6 per cent in the identification of the lack of job-hunting skills as one of the challenges (32.2 per cent of male graduates, as compared to 21.7 per cent of their female counterparts). Unemployed female graduates, on the other hand, faced other challenges: 16.9 per cent agreed that their demographic characteristics (such as gender and age) hindered their employment, which is 11.7 per cent more than males (4.8 per cent). Similarly, 27.7 per cent of female graduates identified the lack of digital skills as challenging, which is 11.6 per cent more than males (16.1 per cent). It shows that even when male and female graduates face similar challenges in general, one group may find particular issues more challenging than others.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the highlighted findings, the research team would like to recommend the following to strengthen the employability of graduates in challenging circumstances as well as the accessibility and quality of jobs. The recommendations are made for three target groups: (i) MOET, (ii) Higher education institutions, and (iii) Students.

1. General recommendations

Recommendation 1: The Government, Ministries, People's Committees at different levels and education institutions need to invest in enhancing the capacity of their Human Resource Forecast Centres.

Apart from predicting job trends and the demand of the labour market at local and national levels, they also ought to set up career guidance centres in universities with information on career orientation. At the same time, a national information system and database on employment should be developed to act as the basis for research, management, career and major orientation that benefit students.

2. For MOET

Recommendation 2: Instructing and directing higher education institutions to carry out quality and scientific graduate employment surveys.

Currently, MOET stipulates that higher education institutions have to conduct employment surveys of graduates. However, the surveys are very formalized and lack special attention on the scientific aspects and application of results.

- MOET should require the institutions to conduct independent surveys with a concrete research plan prepared and scientific research methods applied.
- MOET should have a clear annual plan to assign a research institution through bidding processes to conduct scientific research on the employment situation of graduates with selected majors each year. The results of this study will provide suggestions for developing and adjusting training programmes, updating information for career orientation, and ensuring a smooth transition from schools into the labour market.

3. For higher education institutions

Recommendation 3: Developing gender-responsive training content which is relevant to both current and future labour markets.

Training programmes which are relevant and up to date with the labour market and future trends need to be developed in economically disadvantaged localities. So far, this principle has not been implemented effectively - higher education institutions have neither analysed the demands of companies nor kept track of the constant changes in the labour market. To make training programmes relevant, higher education institutions ought to:

- Ensure training programmes are up-to-date and flexible in order to address current and future market trends. Within their capacity, higher education institutions should consider making training programmes flexible and innovative and update their training content to keep pace with the constant changes in the labour market. For example, higher education institutions can make changes to many elective subjects and allow lecturers to flexibly adjust the learning content of these subjects, based on the trends and characteristics of the local labour market.
- Develop training programmes that address current trends. Development of intersectoral or multisectoral training programmes, which are responsive to the new demands of the labour market and which are in line with the trends of the industrial revolution 4.0 are recommended. To implement these tasks, an analysis of the future demand for employees is needed.
- Provide technical knowledge to students as this, together with work experience, are essential for students who are seeking employment. This is especially the case in disadvantaged areas where technical/job-specific skills and experience enable students to succeed in their careers. Therefore, under the guidance of MOET, higher education institutions should provide students with technical knowledge through experiential learning, allow students to participate in community service in their localities, create opportunities for students to talk with experts in their professional fields and encourage them to engage in related professional work.

- Equip students with employability skills by integrating them into training programmes that will act as a sustainable measure to help students gain the necessary skills for employment, such as job specific skills, adaptation, innovation, and entrepreneurship. Lecturers and instructors should invest more time in developing and integrating employability skills into the specialized content of each subject. Higher education institutions can apply a blended learning approach (a combination of traditional in-person teaching and online learning) or a learning management system (LMS), which allows teachers to monitor students' progress.
- Equip students with digital literacy and transferable skills by integrating them into the training programmes of higher education institutions. To facilitate the transition from school to work, graduates need to be agile adaptive learners equipped to overcome personal and social challenges, as well as digitally literate individuals who are able to navigate the increasingly digitalized world. International studies show that graduates with transferable and digital skills such as problem-solving, negotiating, self-management, empathy and communication perform better in the workplace⁸.
- Improve the quality of apprenticeships to better prepare students in disadvantaged areas for their future workplaces. Apprenticeships should be considered important and complementary components of training programmes which enable students to gain real-world experiences and improve and strengthen their knowledge and skills. Apprenticeships contribute greatly to the learning process by allowing students to apply theory into practice and prepare students for entry into the labour market. To optimize the learning outcome, apprentice programmes ought to provide adequate supervision and be carefully monitored and evaluated. For instance, apprentices should be supervised and evaluated by designated senior colleagues at least once during their apprenticeship. Higher education institutions should also closely collaborate with local authorities and enterprises to enhance the effectiveness of the apprenticeship.
- Develop gender-responsive and non-stereotypical training programmes that are free from gender stereotypes and designed to encourage girls' engagement in traditionally male-dominated industries such as majors related to Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM).

Recommendation 4: Developing and expanding the employment service system for students, especially for university graduates in challenging circumstances

As highlighted in the key findings, the proportion of disadvantaged graduates employed within 12 months of graduating was low, indicating that graduates spent a relatively long time securing their first job. To facilitate employment, graduates need to be informed and updated on the local labour market trends. By doing so, disadvantaged

⁸ United Nations Children's Fund, *Global Framework on Transferable Skills*, Education Section, UNICEF, New York, November 2019, p.1.

graduates gain better and timely access to the labour market. Higher education institutions should also consider:

- Providing quality and non-stereotypical consultation and career orientation services. The current career consultation services mostly focus on providing information on job vacancies and enhancing students' job searching skills. They do not address the fundamental needs of graduates such as access to information in a local context, characteristics of different jobs, and job requirements for any specific career path. Career orientation services should also provide students with guidance on how to be equipped in job specific skills so as to be successful in their careers. It requires instructors and counsellors to conduct research and keep pace with changes in the labour market, as well as be fully aware of the situation of disadvantaged localities. Higher education institutions also need to adopt a policy that regards career orientation and consultation as an important component in career training and ensure their career consultation is free from gender biases.
- Establishing organisations that support students in employment such as employment service centres. Disadvantaged graduates often lack employability skills and knowledge about the local labour market. Thus, besides posting information on job vacancies, the centre would provide students with courses on employability skills, labour market information, job specific skills, and job-hunting skills. Higher education institutions should allocate resources for these centres to implement their tasks.

Recommendation 5: Strengthening cooperation among universities, the business community and the labour market

One of the drawbacks for graduates in challenging circumstances is that they are not aware of labour market information including job trends and the required skills. Further dissemination of information on jobs in demand and local labour market conditions will help graduates navigate the labour market and gain access to potential employers. Some recommended activities are as follows:

- Higher education institutions should invite potential employers to give feedback on the training programmes and share information on current labour trends with students. This research has shown that most students in challenging circumstances work in small-scale private enterprises in the northwest region. Based on the local context, the current practice of universities inviting successful individuals, companies, or politicians is neither suitable nor relevant. Instead, small private organizations and enterprises in the localities would be better partners.
- Higher education institutions need to identify the target labour market for their students, with each institution aiming at different labour markets. Disadvantaged graduates, especially those with weak employability skills, need to be aware of the suitable labour market segment. Thus, institutions in economically disadvantaged

areas need to identify potential employers who can meet their needs, cooperate with them, and invite them to join the training and learning process.

- Higher education institutions should develop more courses that bring benefits to the business communities of the localities. As opposed to fixed-term training programmes, short-term programmes are more flexible, easier for students to enrol in, and would be simpler to adjust to the local context. More courses for labourers and enterprises mean more chances to adjust the training programmes to satisfy the local enterprises' needs.
- Higher education institutions should explore opportunities with enterprises in order to provide apprenticeship, scholarship and partnership opportunities to students, thereby closing the skills gap between the expected skills of employees and the skills they actually possess.

Recommendation 6: Carry out surveys on the employment situation of graduates regularly and extensively

Surveys on the employment situation of graduates in challenging circumstances can inform training programmes by better understanding the labour market and identifying the gap between students' capacity and employers' requirements. When conducting the surveys, the following should be considered:

- The methodologies and procedures used for conducting employment surveys should be implemented in a relevant, stringent, and consistent manner among institutions. The research team recommends that higher education institutions apply stricter methods and procedures, especially in sampling, designing questionnaires, and analysing.
- The survey content should include in-depth analysis which reflect the gap between the working capacity of graduates and job requirements in their disadvantaged areas. The results of these surveys are important to (i) review the situation of employment of graduates in challenging circumstances; (ii) provide inputs to make training programmes more relevant to the requirements of the labour market; and (iii) reveal what skills are needed for employability, job security, and career success.

4. For students:

Recommendation 7: Proactively equipping themselves with necessary employability skills, especially foreign language proficiency, transferable skills and digital skills.

- Students in challenging circumstances should proactively equip themselves with skills required by the local labour market. These skills can be acquired through practical experience, participating in organisations, or approaching potential employers. Special attention ought to be given to language capacity which is considered one of the limitations of disadvantaged graduates.

- Moreover, students should actively self-study, gain experience, and take part in extra-curricular activities that complement school programmes, such as students' employment surveys.