

From Classroom to Career: Voices on Employability Challenges and Curriculum Relevance

Hong-Van Nghiem, Hanoi University, Vietnam
Thi-Hong-Thuy Dang, Hanoi University, Vietnam
Hoang-Nam Tran, Tokushima University, Japan

The Asian Conference on Education & International Development 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Employability of graduates continues to be a central concern for higher education in Vietnam, particularly as graduates navigate increasingly competitive labor markets. This study explores how graduates from a public university in Vietnam perceive the challenges and enablers shaping their transition from university to employment. Drawing on qualitative responses from five cohorts (2020–2024), the analysis applies Braun and Clarke’s thematic approach to open-ended survey questions on unemployment reasons, effective preparation experiences, and suggestions for curriculum improvement. The findings highlight six interconnected themes: the need for earlier and more structured internships, gaps in professional and technical skills, limited access to job information, persistent language barriers, insufficient soft-skill development, and the misalignment between academic programs and industry needs. Graduates consistently emphasized the importance of real-world exposure, language and IT competence, and stronger collaboration between universities and employers. These findings point toward the necessity of curriculum reform, enhanced career services, and integrated employability pathways that connect classroom learning with real-world practice. The study also underscores the role of qualitative feedback for rethinking higher education contribution to workforce readiness in Vietnam.

Keywords: graduate employability, internships, curriculum, language proficiency, soft skills, Vietnam, thematic analysis

iafor

The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

Across higher education worldwide, employability has moved from a peripheral concern to a central organizing principle for curricula, pedagogy, and quality assurance. Classic frameworks emphasize that employability is not a single outcome (a job) but a set of achievements: knowledge, skills, and attributes, that make graduates more likely to gain employment and succeed in their chosen occupations (Yorke & Knight, 2006). This shift has been accelerated by megatrends—automation, digitalization, demographic aging, and climate transitions—that are reshaping work and the skill bundles demanded by employers at unprecedented speed (OECD, 2023). Global policy syntheses estimate that well over a billion jobs will be transformed in the coming decade, while hundreds of millions of youth and adults require upskilling or reskilling to participate meaningfully in labor markets (OECD, 2023; World Bank, 2023b).

Within this landscape, universities are challenged to connect classroom learning to real contexts of practice. International scholarship has consolidated several levers that reliably strengthen early career outcomes: (i) curriculum relevance (up-to-date disciplinary and technical content), (ii) work-integrated learning (WIL) such as internships and authentic projects, (iii) development and recognition of transferable skills such as communication and teamwork, and (iv) systematic career intermediation that improves students' access to job information and networks (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Oliver, 2015). Syntheses also caution that “employability” should not be reduced to generic soft skills or narrow placement metrics; rather, it is best embedded into the curriculum and assessed in ways that integrate subject knowledge with practice (OECD, 2023; Yorke & Knight, 2006). Recent empirical studies further emphasize that graduates' perceptions of curriculum relevance and practical alignment are critical indicators of employability readiness, highlighting the importance of incorporating student voice into curriculum reform processes (H. Tran et al., 2023).

Southeast Asian systems face these global pressures with additional regional dynamics: rapid structural change, uneven digital diffusion, and significant intra-ASEAN mobility. Regional analyses argue that thriving in such conditions requires stronger alignment between skills formation and industry needs, better use of skills in workplaces, and cross-border collaboration on talent pipelines (ASEAN Secretariat, 2025; OECD, 2023). Recent research from Japan further shows a growing scholarly and policy interest in understanding Vietnamese cultural characteristics in the context of labor migration and international student mobility, reflecting the recognition that employability and integration outcomes are closely tied to mutual cultural understanding between host societies and migrant populations (H. N. Tran, 2023). ASEAN studies also highlight student mobility and WIL as boosters of graduate employability by expanding networks, intercultural competencies, and exposure to diverse work practices (ASEAN Secretariat, 2025). Recent regional strategy work urges coordinated action among ministries, employers, and higher education institutions to modernize curricula, scale experiential learning, and improve information flows about labor demand (OECD, 2023; Oliver, 2015).

Vietnam's transition toward higher value-added activities has intensified attention to graduate outcomes. World Bank diagnostics describe a skills premium alongside skills mismatches: graduates enjoy strong private returns to higher education, yet firms—especially in dynamic sectors—report difficulty finding workers with the right mix of technical, digital, and socio-behavioral skills (Demombynes & Testaverde, 2018; World Bank, 2013, 2023b). Multiple studies note that unemployment is often elevated immediately after graduation (a transition

effect) but declines with experience; nonetheless, employer surveys frequently cite inadequate practical preparation and limited job-search capabilities as key constraints (Bhandari, 2023; Judy Yang & Tran, 2022). Recent analyses underscore the growing need for digital fluency, analytical capability, and stronger workplace communication (World Bank, 2023a). Policy briefs further emphasize demand for advanced digital skills such as cloud, cybersecurity, and AI/ML across sectors (Judy Yang & Tran, 2022; World Bank, 2023b, 2023a).

The current study analyzes open-ended survey responses of university graduates in Vietnam to describe (i) barriers to employment, (ii) experiences that helped them secure jobs, and (iii) recommendations for improving training and services.

Methods

Design and Data Source

This qualitative component forms part of a broader mixed methods graduates employability study conducted at a public university in Vietnam, targeting five consecutive cohorts graduating between 2019 and 2023. The institutional graduate tracer survey is administered annually, approximately 14 months after each cohort's graduation, in accordance with national higher-education quality-assurance guidelines. This timing allows respondents sufficient post-graduation experience to provide reflective insights on their employment trajectory, job relevance, and perceptions of curricular adequacy while minimizing recall bias (OECD, 2023; World Bank, 2023b).

All graduates from a specific Faculty within the university were invited to participate through email and online survey links distributed by the researchers. Participation was voluntary and anonymized, with informed consent obtained electronically. The survey design followed tracer-study frameworks widely adopted across ASEAN universities (ASEAN Secretariat, 2025), combining quantitative indicators of employment outcomes with qualitative prompts to elicit contextual responses.

The qualitative section of the questionnaire consisted of open-ended written responses addressing four central questions: (i) Reasons for not having a job; (ii) Experiences that helped graduates secure employment; (iii) Suggestions for improving the university's training to meet employer needs; and (iv) Reasons for intending to change jobs (if applicable). These prompts were intentionally framed to capture graduates' self-perceived barriers, enablers, and institutional expectations, aligning with thematic areas recommended by international tracer-study guidelines (OECD, 2023; World Bank, 2013). The dataset analyzed in this paper was drawn exclusively from the qualitative survey data representing responses from graduates across the five cohorts. Record identifiers were removed before analysis.

Analysis

All open-ended responses were imported into Microsoft Excel and subsequently cleaned and standardized before analysis. Text entries containing spelling inconsistencies, emoticons, or non-semantic fillers were removed, while original meaning and nuance were preserved. Responses in Vietnamese were translated into English by two bilingual research assistants, then backchecked by a faculty reviewer to ensure conceptual equivalence and cultural fidelity. Analysis followed the reflexive thematic analysis procedure (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which emphasizes researcher reflexivity and interpretive depth rather than mechanical coding

reliability. An iterative hybrid approach combined inductive insights from the data with deductive anchors derived from the survey structure and existing employability literature (OECD, 2023; Yorke & Knight, 2006). Coding was performed manually, supported by frequency tallies and keyword mapping in Excel to ensure transparency.

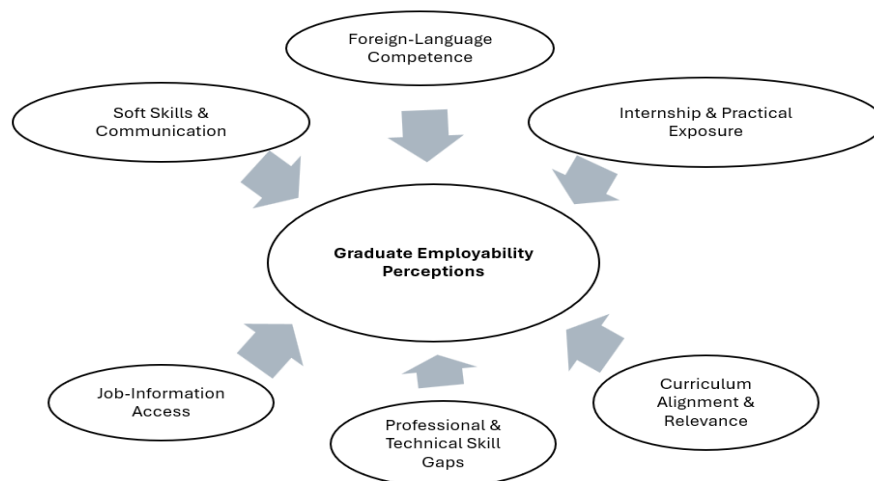
To strengthen analytic credibility, triangulation was applied: two coders independently analyzed approximately 25% of the corpus and compared coding frames, refining definitions until conceptual saturation was achieved. Discrepancies were discussed and resolved through consensus, a process preferred in reflexive qualitative research over statistical inter-coder reliability (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Reflexive memos were maintained throughout to document interpretive decisions and enhance confirmability. Verbatim excerpts were selected for inclusion based on representativeness, clarity, and diversity of viewpoints rather than frequency alone, following guidance from qualitative reporting standards (Nowell et al., 2017).

Results

Analysis of 923 valid qualitative responses from graduates across five cohorts (2019–2023) revealed a coherent and interconnected structure of employability perceptions. Six overarching themes emerged, representing recurring priorities and constraints identified by respondents: (1) internship and practical exposure, (2) professional and technical skill gaps, (3) job-information access, (4) foreign-language competence, (5) soft skills and communication, and (6) curriculum alignment and relevance. Each theme is described below with representative translated excerpts (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Thematic Map of Graduate Employability Perceptions



Internship and Practical Exposure

A dominant and cross-cutting concern among respondents was the insufficient duration and depth of internship experiences during undergraduate study. Students often viewed short or late-stage placements as inadequate preparation for workplace realities. Many students want to start internships earlier and extend them across multiple semesters to enhance applied learning and confidence.

“Students should proactively seek opportunities at companies earlier, not just as a formality in the final semester” (Male, 2021).

Graduates emphasized that meaningful internships helped them build professional networks, understand organizational culture, and test their career interests. Those who had more structured placements reported smoother transitions into full-time employment.

“Make full use of the internship period to gain real experience; theory alone is not enough” (Female, 2022).

These findings underscore the value of embedding WIL as a continuous rather than terminal component of undergraduate curricula, with explicit learning outcomes and employer feedback mechanisms.

Skill Gaps in Professional and Technical Competencies

Respondents frequently highlighted deficiencies in specialized or technical skills required in their respective fields.

“Equip students with updated specialized knowledge and emphasize the importance of continuous self-improvement” (Male, 2020).

Language-major students, for instance, mentioned the need for stronger training in applied translation tools, digital content production, and industry-specific knowledge. Graduates in business, information technology, and social sciences echoed similar concerns regarding technological readiness and analytical proficiency.

“Language students still need more professional knowledge to work in related industries” (Female, 2023).

Graduates recognize the importance of discipline-specific upskilling, suggesting that universities should regularly review course syllabi, integrate micro-credential modules, and engage employers in competency mapping to ensure alignment with sectoral demands.

Job-Information Access and Career Intermediation

Another major theme related to limited access to job information, employer connections, and recruitment support. Respondents often relied on informal networks, social media, or peers rather than structured university platforms. Many noted that career fairs or employer talks were either infrequent or not well-publicized.

“I found jobs from many sources — friends, teachers, and online platforms — but not always from the university channel” (Female, 2021).

“It would help if departments regularly updated information about job opportunities or alumni working in companies” (Male, 2022).

The findings reveal the need for a centralized career information system with stronger employer partnerships, curated job boards, and alumni mentorship to improve transparency and reduce search frictions.

Foreign Language Competence

Even among graduates from language-intensive programs, foreign-language proficiency remains a recurring self-assessed limitation, particularly in speaking and workplace communication. Respondents emphasized that competitive job markets require proficiency beyond academic grammar, especially in business English, Japanese, or other foreign languages relevant to industry contexts.

“Be fluent in a foreign language and add a second major or skill to increase competitiveness” (Female, 2020).

“Students should look for opportunities to practice their foreign language early, not wait until senior year” (Male, 2022).

Graduates view language proficiency as a decisive employability asset. Universities could enhance learning outcomes by embedding Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) modules, partnering with language centers, and incentivizing students to achieve recognized proficiency benchmarks (IELTS, JLPT, TOEIC, etc.).

Soft Skills and Communication

Respondents widely acknowledged the growing importance of soft skills such as teamwork, presentation, and problem-solving abilities. Some perceived these skills as insufficiently integrated into the curriculum, while others credited extracurricular or volunteer experiences for their development.

“Add more speaking and listening practice so students feel more confident during interviews and meetings” (Female, 2023).

“Students should keep improving soft skills and take practical short courses beyond the syllabus” (Male, 2019).

Consistent with global and regional findings (OECD, 2023; ASEAN Secretariat, 2025), these results point to the necessity of embedding communication and interpersonal competencies into graded coursework, rather than offering them as optional workshops.

Curriculum Alignment and Relevance

Many graduates explicitly linked employability to the relevance and responsiveness of the curriculum. Comments reflected frustration with theoretical or outdated modules that lacked connection to evolving industry requirements. Respondents proposed integrating case studies, applied projects, and cross-disciplinary subjects that mirror real-world complexity.

“Update courses to match labor-market trends and combine theory with company projects” (Female, 2021).

“Some subjects overlap or feel outdated; they should be reviewed and adjusted” (Male, 2022).

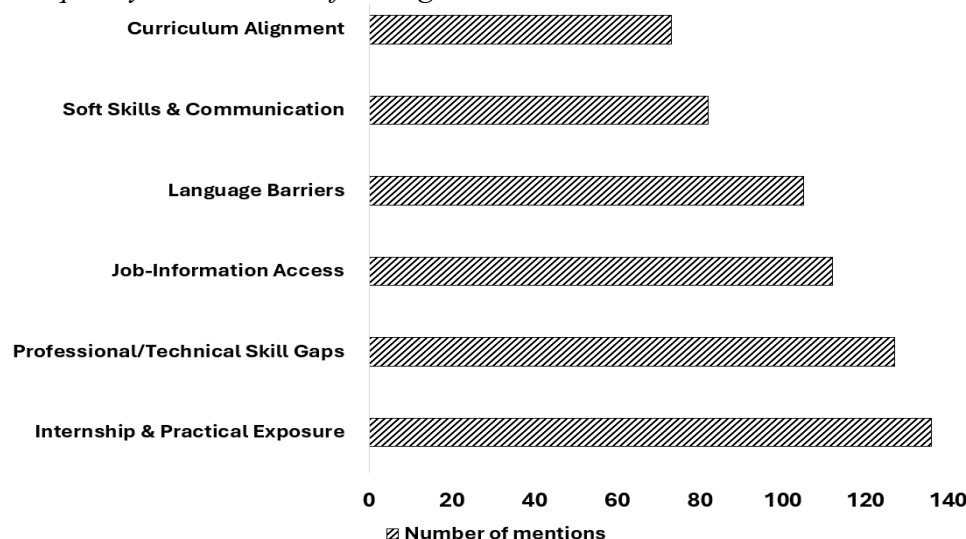
Graduates articulate a clear demand for curriculum modernization through joint academic–industry review mechanisms, outcome-based education (OBE) design, and employer co-teaching to maintain currency and relevance.

Summary of Thematic Prevalence

Quantitative coding revealed the following frequency distribution (Figure 2). Internship and practical exposure (136 mentions), skill gap (127), job-information access (112), language barriers (105), soft skills (82), and curriculum alignment (73). Together, these six clusters accounted for more than 80 percent of all coded responses. The prevalence of interrelated themes suggests that graduates view employability as an ecosystem of capabilities, a combination of practical experience, specialized knowledge, and institutional support rather than any single factor.

Figure 2

Frequency Distribution of Emergent Themes



Discussion

The qualitative findings reveal an interdependent ecosystem of factors shaping graduate employability in Vietnam’s higher-education landscape. Graduates perceive employability not as a single outcome but as a cumulative process of skill development, practical exposure, and institutional support that begins long before graduation. This view aligns with contemporary global models of “embedded employability,” where universities integrate workplace readiness across curricular, co-curricular, and career-service dimensions (OECD, 2023; Oliver, 2015; Yorke & Knight, 2006).

Interpreting the Six Themes

Internship and practical exposure. The prominence of internship-related feedback echoes the global consensus that WIL is among the most effective mechanisms for improving graduate outcomes (ASEAN Secretariat, 2025; Oliver, 2015). Graduates call for earlier, longer, and better-supervised internships indicate a need to institutionalize WIL as a core component rather than an optional activity. Compared to ASEAN benchmarks, where multi-semester internships and cooperative education models are increasingly normalized, most Vietnamese programs still

treat internships as short-term “end-of-study” requirements. Scaling structured, credit-bearing internships, with defined learning outcomes and employer evaluations, could meaningfully narrow the classroom-to-career gap.

Professional and technical skill gaps. The emphasis on technical or professional skill deficiencies aligns with regional employer surveys that consistently cite “skills mismatch” as a key constraint to productivity (Economist Impact, 2023; World Bank, 2013). In particular, the call for up-to-date technical and digital literacy suggests universities should adopt a modular curriculum architecture, enabling rapid introduction of new topics such as data analytics, sustainability management, or AI applications without overhauling entire degree programs. Industry co-design of such modules would also ensure responsiveness to evolving sectoral demands.

Job-information access and career intermediation. Graduates expressed difficulties in accessing reliable job information confirm the limited reach of university career services in Vietnam (World Bank, 2023a). International studies demonstrate that career intermediation infrastructure, including job portals, alumni networks, and labor-market analytics, significantly increases the transparency of employment opportunities and reduces search friction. The creation of a centralized, digital career platform at the faculty or university level, linked to national graduate tracking systems, would not only help students but also generate valuable longitudinal data for policymakers.

Foreign-language competence. Language barriers emerged as a recurrent and self-critical theme, even among students from language-intensive majors. This suggests a disconnect between academic language instruction and workplace communication needs. As English and Japanese continue to dominate cross-border business and technology sectors in Vietnam, embedding LSP courses and professional communication training across disciplines could strengthen graduates’ mobility and employability (ASEAN Secretariat, 2025; OECD, 2023).

Soft skills and communication. Consistent with global research, communication and interpersonal skills remain central to graduate perceived employability (OECD, 2023; Yorke & Knight, 2006). However, the persistence of this gap implies that such skills are still treated as peripheral or extracurricular. Integrating assessed soft-skill components, for example, presentations, teamwork evaluations, and client simulations, into core coursework would create accountability and signal institutional prioritization.

Curriculum alignment and relevance. These perceptions echo recent international evidence showing that misalignment between curriculum content and labor-market requirements remains a persistent barrier to graduate employability, particularly when programs emphasize theoretical coverage over applied learning and industry engagement (H. Tran et al., 2023). The call for continuous curriculum renewal reflects a universal challenge of higher education systems in rapidly industrializing economies. Many Vietnamese curricula still emphasize content coverage over problem-solving and innovation. The shift toward OBE frameworks and industry-academic advisory boards can institutionalize periodic curriculum audits, ensuring that programs remain responsive to national and global labor-market dynamics (OECD, 2023; World Bank, 2013).

Implications, Contribution and Limitations

The findings underscore that improving graduate employability requires systemic coordination rather than separate interventions. The following strategic levers emerge:

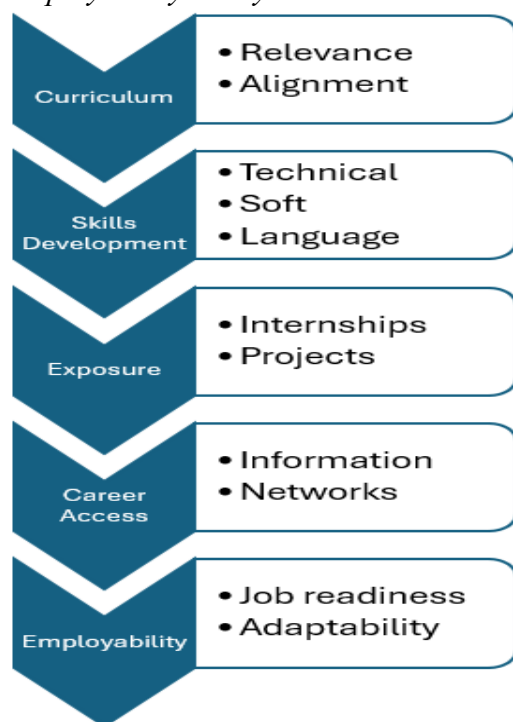
- Curriculum modernization: Institutionalize annual curriculum reviews involving employers, alumni, and accreditation agencies to ensure alignment with national skills frameworks and emerging sectors.
- Integrated work-based learning: Expand multi-semester internships and capstone projects with clear performance criteria and reflective assessment.
- Career intelligence systems: Build university-wide digital career platforms that connect students, alumni, and employers, supporting both job-matching and skills-tracking.
- Language and transversal skills integration: Embed English and Japanese for professional communication, teamwork, and problem-solving modules into credit-bearing courses.

All together, these interventions can shift universities from producing “graduates seeking jobs” to nurturing “graduates creating employability”, individuals with adaptive competencies, networked opportunities, and lifelong learning capacities. From the results, a conceptual employability ecosystem model for Vietnamese universities could be suggested (Figure 3).

The implications extend beyond a single institution. Embedding work-integrated learning, language-for-work pedagogy, and career intelligence systems into higher-education structures can enhance both national competitiveness and social equity. In a region characterized by rapid technological and demographic transformation, the ability of universities to adapt curricula, partner with industries, and continuously update competencies will determine not only graduate success but also the resilience of the wider labor market. Ultimately, the voices of graduates serve as both evidence and mandate for reform to move higher education toward a model that produces employable, adaptable, and globally oriented professionals. Complementary research from Japan suggests that academic inquiry into migrant groups, such as Vietnamese communities, can serve as a critical knowledge base for improving mutual understanding and informing culturally responsive policy frameworks in education and labor governance (H. N. Tran, 2023).

By amplifying the lived experiences of Vietnamese graduates, this study contributes to a growing Southeast Asian corpus that contextualizes employability as both a policy agenda and a student experience (ASEAN Secretariat, 2025; OECD, 2023). This approach is consistent with recent employability research that argues for centering graduate perspectives as a legitimate and policy-relevant evidence base for curriculum reform (H. Tran et al., 2023). The findings corroborate the argument that employability should be treated as a shared responsibility among students, educators, employers, and government actors (Oliver, 2015). Furthermore, the integration of qualitative voice into national tracer systems enhances their diagnostic value, providing not only statistical indicators but also narratives of transition, which are essential for designing responsive, human-centered education policy.

Figure 3
Employability Ecosystem Model



The study relied on self-reported perceptions from a single public university, which may limit generalizability. The timing of data collection may have introduced retrospective bias. Respondents who remain unemployed or changed careers might recall their university experience differently from those successfully employed. Future longitudinal designs could compare perceptions across multiple time points to capture the dynamic evolution of employability. Qualitative translation from Vietnamese to English introduces potential semantic distortion. The dataset represents only graduates from one faculty, not the entire institution. Faculty-specific factors such as internship arrangements, employer networks, or academic culture could shape distinct employability trajectories. Finally, researcher subjectivity remains inherent in theme development.

Conclusion

This qualitative exploration of graduate feedback from a public university in Vietnam reinforces the global and regional consensus that employability is a multidimensional construct, including knowledge, technical competence, transferable skills, and contextual readiness. Graduates articulated an urgent need for earlier and more structured internships, stronger linkage between curriculum and labor-market requirements, enhanced communication and language training, and improved institutional support for job search and networking. By positioning graduates as co-interpreters of educational effectiveness, this study provides a bottom-up perspective often missing from policy and institutional reports. Their narratives reveal that employability is not merely the responsibility of individual students but the outcome of a coordinated ecosystem connecting universities, employers, policymakers, and communities.

References

- ASEAN Secretariat. (2025). *Graduate Employability in ASEAN The Contribution of Student Mobility*. https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Graduate-Employability-in-ASEAN_The-Contribution-of-Student-Mobility_2022.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com
- Bhandari, R. (2023). *Bridging the skills gap: Fuelling careers and the economy in Vietnam*. Economist Impact. <https://impact.economist.com/new-globalisation/bridging-skills-gap-fuelling-careers-and-economy-vietnam>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide*. SAGE Publications.
- Demombynes, G., & Testaverde, M. (2018). Employment Structure and Returns to Skill in Vietnam: Estimates Using the Labor Force Survey. *Policy Research Working Paper*. World Bank, 8364. <https://hdl.handle.net/10986/29458>
- Nowell, L. S., Norris, J. M., White, D. E., & Moules, N. J. (2017). Thematic Analysis: Striving to Meet the Trustworthiness Criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 16(1), 1609406917733847. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847>
- OECD. (2023). *Skills Strategy Southeast Asia*. https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/IASP_Synthesis-Report_FA_DIGITAL.pdf?
- Oliver, B. (2015). Redefining graduate employability and work-integrated learning: Proposals for effective higher education in disrupted economies. *Journal of Teaching and Learning for Graduate Employability*, 6(1), 56–65. <https://doi.org/10.21153/jtlge2015vol6no1art573>
- Tran, H., Marinova, K., & Nghiem, H. (2023). Exploring Perceived Speaking Skills , Motives , and Communication Needs of Undergraduate Students Studying Japanese Language. *Education Sciences*, 13(6), 550.
- Tran, H. N. (2023). The Trend of Betonamujinron Research in Japan: Implications for Mutual Cultural Understanding and Policy. *The Asian Political & International Studies Association Annual Congress 2023*, 95–104.
- World Bank. (2013). *Skilling up Vietnam: Preparing the workforce for a modern market economy Vietnam Development Report 2014*. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/610301468176937722/pdf/829400AR0P13040Box0379879B00PUBLIC0.pdf>
- World Bank. (2023a). *Green Jobs: Upskilling and Reskilling Vietnam's Workforce for a Decarbonized Economy*. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099091823063517461/pdf/P1781121e19c8506719ff81042e6be4e00b.pdf>

World Bank. (2023b). *Identifying Skills Needs in Vietnam: Survey of Detailed Skills (SDS)*.
<https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099508509112311079/pdf/IDU02fc96fcf0484a04e6a08f250cc05bc09f72a.pdf>

Yang, J., & Tran, A. T. B. (2022). *Connecting Vietnam's youth to high-skilled jobs: What does it take?* World Bank Blog.
<https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/eastasiapacific/connecting-vietnams-youth-high-skilled-jobs-what-does-it-take>

Yorke, M., & Knight, P. T. (2006). *Embedding Employability into the Curriculum*.
<https://www.qualityresearchinternational.com/esecttools/esectpubs/yorkeknightembedding.pdf>

Contact email: tran@tokushima-u.ac.jp