

# SKILL DEVELOPMENT: VOCATIONAL EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS & INDUSTRY ENGAGEMENT IN THE GARMENT AND TEXTILE INDUSTRY

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## Abstract

**Purpose of the study:** Due to changes in the occupational structure and the new regulations in all global industries, skill development is critical for stakeholders from the local governments and industry persons. This study explores how companies and technical vocational education and training (TVET) institutions in Vietnam can promote new ways of skill development for the future workforce in the garment and textile industry. It aims to address issues that impede collaboration among both parties to promote the development of key future skills in the garment industry.

**Methodology:** Qualitative approach, using personal interview and secondary data, is adopted in this study. The research team conducted 54 semi-structured interviews with key informants in the garment industry and the vocational education and training sector. They include managers, teachers, and trainers, and students, the content analysis was performed in the data analysis process.

**Main Findings:** This study shows some complacencies in strong supports among stakeholders in the garment industry. Training institutions need to be upgrading their teaching staff and their skills, the institution curriculum, and the relationship with industry. Developing a relevant curriculum that meets the required skills is a starting point for TVET institutions in Vietnam. To strengthen the collaboration between institutions and enterprises, the government needs policies that support formal training and ongoing training, allowing the skill development for new employees as well as upgrading the skills of existing employees.

**Applications of this study:** The results of this study can be adopted by TVET institutions aiming at improving their industry engagement and skill-building for future graduates. Moreover, it can be used as a basis for policy development in skill development. Skill gaps are one of the key determinants of training investment made by firms and workers in the garment industry. Given the changing face of the labor market, both workers who are just entering the labor force and those that are already in the workforce have to be willing to learn new skills.

**Novelty/Originality of this study:** The study is specific to the global garment and textile industry, which is important and somewhat underestimate. The findings from this study can also apply to garment and textile from most developing countries aiming at improving their industry-education engagement strategies, by some Governments and policymakers in TVET.

**Keywords:** Skills, Industry Engagement, TVET, Vocational Education, Garment and Textile, Vietnam.

## INTRODUCTION

It is expected that the global garment and textile market is projected to reach US\$1.23 trillion by 2025 ([Lea-Quyen, 2010](#)). Vietnam will enjoy the growth of the global textile industry since foreign direct investment (FDI) is turning to Vietnam to leverage its good experiences from the industry, low labor costs, and proximity to key markets, which makes it an ideal hub for textile manufacturing.

The garment and textile industry is the second largest industry in Vietnam, with a strong export orientation. The Vietnamese garment industry was the fifth largest garment exporter in the world ([World Bank, 2015](#)). As the global pioneer in the garment industry, Vietnam is currently competing with the new powerful player in this industry, such as Cambodia, Russia, and Turkey. To maintain the international competencies in this industry, the Vietnamese government has been focusing on the promotion of the integration of resources from key educational and industrial partners to co-create skilled workforce in this industry ([Nguyen, DC. et al., 2013](#)).

Having established that, Vietnam is currently suffering from a skills shortage in its workforce ([Montague, 2013](#); [Nankervis, Verma, & Montague, 2016](#)). The national data indicates an alarming downward trend in the number of graduates possessing TVET qualification in Vietnam ([GSO, 2014a](#)). The labor market shares of those who were trained with vocational skills were only 15.4%, while 84.6% of the employed workforce had no technical or vocational training ([Collins, 2009](#)). This point is also confirmed by a study by [GSO \(2014b\)](#) that this industry remains labor-intensive, and much of the workforce is only trained for basic skills. It is an alarming issue that the garment and textile industry should plan to support their workforce with technical and soft skills if they need to be the global leader in the garment and textile industry.

According to the Skills Toward Employment and Productivity (STEP) Employers Survey in Vietnam, a majority of employers highlighted the lack of appropriate skills of the labor force ([World Bank, 2015](#)). Employers struggle to recruit

applicants with suitable skills despite a large available labor pool. Concerns were expressed that graduating students were poorly prepared for the workplace (Huynh, 2011; Montague, 2013; Nankervis et al., 2016; Tran, 2013; Trung & Swierczek, 2009).

The literature has not addressed the relationship between vocational education and training (VET) institutions and enterprises within the context of Vietnam's garment industry (Montague, 2013). To improve skill development in Vietnam's garment industry, a holistic understanding of education-industry engagement in skills development for front line managers is required.

With the rapid movement from global challenges in the garment industry and the local forces in education quality, this study addresses the following question *"To what extent are vocational education and training institutions (VET) collaborating with enterprises to improve skills requirements for managers in Vietnam's garment industry."*

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Skill Shortages in Vietnam

Vietnam's garment industry is well known as "a Cut-Make-Trim (CMT) professional exporter" (Le, TN & Wang, 2017). This CMT production modality accounted for 73 % of total exports and is considered the most appropriate one for developing countries like Vietnam (Vu & Pham, 2016), to take advantage of the low-cost labor force. With this CMT production modality, garment enterprises concentrate on the manufacturing process without considering sourcing material, designing, or branding. Organizing and managing the production process effectively is one of the critical factors to improve the competitive advantages for Vietnam's garment enterprises (N. T. Le, 2017; Lea-Quyen, 2010).

While unemployment among university graduates is not new in Vietnam, graduates from the vocational section are in short supply creating critical skill shortages across manufacturing industries (World Bank, 2015). The education system, especially TVET, has not met the training requirements of garment enterprises. In addition, the engagement between education and garment enterprises is weak and ineffective in addressing the problem of skills development.

Since student enrolments in the TVET system have declined in Vietnam (GSO, 2014b), the result is that the Vietnamese education system is falling behind in terms of generating skilled graduates (Trung & Swierczek, 2009). The challenging skills shortage and skills development problem requires closer connections between employers, TVET and tertiary institutions, and the government (World Bank, 2015). With suitable preparation and sustainable strategies for skills development, Vietnam's garment industry will be able to meet development and export objectives.

Indeed, employers struggle to recruit the right applicants with suitable skills despite an extensive list of applicants applying. The skills shortage reflects a mismatch between the labor supply skills and those skills required to meet existing jobs. Vietnamese employers are looking for skilled workers that are in high demand, but they are unable to attract them (Bodewig, Badiani-Magnusson, & Macdonald, 2014). Employers suggest that graduates are not equipped with the necessary skills and suitable vocational skills to access jobs. The challenging situation of skill mismatch requires closer examination among stakeholders in this industry (Painter, 2005).

Developing the skills of the workforce in the garment and textile industry is crucial in the context of the increasing pressures of global competition. Constructive programs are required, as for example, Bangladesh's garment industry introduced specific development programs for training front line managers. With effective training of frontline managers, these cohorts will be responsible for developing unskilled labor force in their own enterprise through on the job training activities, leading to productivity improvement in their enterprises (Painter, 2005).

In the past, low labor costs were considered a dominant element for developing countries to attract foreign investment (Nankervis, Compton, Baird, & Coffey, 2011). However, this trend no longer fits with the actual needs of developing countries (Collins, 2009). In fact, with the shortage of skilled labor, these countries cannot develop production to higher levels and compete with other countries (Thang & Quang, 2005; Watson, Webb, & Johnson, 2006). Developing skills add to the cost of employing skilled workers, but if enterprises do not upskill then, productivity growth is reduced (Ketels, Cung, Anh, & Hanh, 2010; Warner, Goodall, & Ding, 1999; Ying Chu & Siu, 2004). Skills increase worker productivity, but this then contributes to poaching, job turnover, and wage increases (Shen & D'Netto, 2012). Given the economic importance of skills, a central issue for countries is how to improve training systems and raise skills, and at the same time retain skilled workers (Ketels et al., 2010).

Montague (2013) suggests that formal education and workplace learning are fundamental factors in facilitating skills development. Through developing a skilled workforce, enterprises will encourage the abilities of problem-solving, communication, and teamwork, improve job performance, and increase the productivity of their enterprises (Montague, 2013). However, in many developing countries, higher education systems are often underfunded and do not produce graduates equipped with essential skills for subsequent employment (Collins, 2009).

The development of the education system will serve various purposes, such as catering to the needs of economic and social development and addressing the emerging skills gap (Chand, Duncan, & Quang, 2001; Hayden & Lam, 2007). However, in many emerging economies, the education system will need to be improved to address these challenges

(Oostendorp & Doan, 2013). And it will take some time for domestic institutions to prepare graduates for effective workforce participation (Hayden & Lam, 2007; Wright, Cushman, & Nicholson, 2002).

While the Vietnamese education system has achieved positive results in increasing literacy rates (Tran, 2013), however, to be successful, the workforce needs to be equipped with relevant and marketable skills to respond to the pressures of global competition facing many industries (Trung & Swierczek, 2009).

In particular, Vietnam needs to increase skilled workers to address skill shortages in management and professional occupations (Collins, 2009; Neupert, Baughn, & Thanh Lam Dao, 2005). In Vietnam, there is a limited connection between employers, students, and universities. The key stakeholders do not interact with each other. In particular, universities are providing skills that do not respond to the requirements of the labor market (Bodewig et al., 2014).

This study is framed in the context of the skills shortages in the Vietnamese garment industry, especially in managerial positions. The purpose is to examine the interaction between the key stakeholders and to suggest how the skills gap can be addressed.

### **Situated-Learning Theory**

To develop the necessary skills of graduates in Vietnam's garment industry, situated learning theory developed by Brown, Collins, and Duguid (1989) and further developed by Lave and Wenger (1991) will be used as the theoretical lens to examine the engagement of TVET institutions and enterprises. Brown et al. (1989) revealed that today's education system deals with challenges regarding a mismatch between what learners are learning and what they are applying in practice. Lave and Wenger (1991) argue that social engagements in the learning process play a fundamental role in skill acquisition. It is stressed that learners may not gain abstract knowledge and then reapply in the working environment. Instead, skills acquisition needs to engage in the process under the condition of legitimate peripheral participation. To shed light on a research problem of a mismatch of skills that are supplied by TVET institutions and are required by garment enterprises, situated learning theory is considered as an appropriate guide for an investigation.

Situated learning theory focuses on situations in the workplace (Brown et al., 1989; Lave & Wenger, 1991) but dismisses the role of formal education in the process (Fuller, Hodkinson, Hodkinson, & Unwin, 2005). Hager, Holland, and Beckett (2002) reported that formal education is a special variant of embodied learning. This type of learning becomes an essential element of wider learning within a community of practice. However, it is not guaranteed that this type of learning works best in the community practice concerned (Fuller et al., 2005). In terms of the Vietnamese context, the education system plays an important role in the formation of initial and fundamental skills for learners. This study will focus on the role of formal education, especially TVET institutions and extend situated learning theory towards the engagement of education and industry in skills development for graduates to the garment sector.

Research on situated learning theory has largely been conducted in the Western learning environment. This study is important as to date here is no evidence that skills-development-style research has been conducted in the context of Vietnam's garment industry. Under the lens of situated learning theory, this study contributes to a greater understanding of barriers in collaboration of both education and industry sectors to develop skills in the Vietnam context.

### **METHODOLOGY**

In this project, we adopted a qualitative approach to understanding the research question. We also collected both primary and secondary data to help us to understand the extent to which TVET institutions engage with garment enterprises.

#### **Data**

Primary data for this study were collected from stakeholders from the educational and industrial sectors. With the garment sector, the participants included 18 front line managers, 9 production managers, and 9 chief executive officers. Each participant was selected base on their experiences engaging with the education sector in Vietnam.

For key informants from the education sector, we selected participants who understand and engage with the garment industry in the last three years. They include 9 lecturers in the faculty of garment technology and 9 heads of faculty or department of garment technology. We also adopted a snowball technique to obtain more heads of garment technology in this study.

When it comes to secondary data linked to skills and training in the garment sector, we gathered documents and archival records in Vietnamese and English from the local and international academic publications, company reports, and government reports from 2007 to 2017. This data provided context, the scale of the challenges, and outlined current programs for the sector. Second, primary data was collected through semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, namely employer representatives and staff in training and education institutions. Third, field notes were taken during all of the interviews to record the feeling, observations, and thoughts of the researcher across the research process (Flick, 2014).

## Data Collection

Participants were selected purposively to fulfill specific conditions of each study that allowed the researcher to get a deeper understanding of the research problem (Patton, 2002; Robson & McCartan, 2016). All interviews were conducted face-to-face in the Vietnamese language (both personal and group). All interviews were audio-recorded upon participants' permission, and field notes were taken. Data collection was carried out in the South of Vietnam, where 62 % of Vietnam's garment enterprises are located (Lopez-Acevedo & Robertson, 2012).

In order to obtain reliability, we adopted the respondent validation concept by inviting participants to comment on the interview transcript and whether the final themes and concepts created adequately reflect the phenomena being investigated. We also practiced the data triangulation process by comparing data from personal and group interviews. This process helps produce a more comprehensive set of findings (Patton, 2002).

## Data analysis

All the interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder during the fieldwork. Recordings were transcribed verbatim into a text-based document after each interview was completed. It took the researcher from 12 to 15 hours to transcribe each interview, and there were 54 interviews in total in this study. All interviews were conducted in Vietnamese, and the transcriptions were translated into English by the researcher. To ensure the accuracy of the English translation, verification and validation were undertaken with the support of two English speaking lecturers. After the translation was completed, data in the text-based version were ready for the coding process. Coding was performed manually by the researcher and was based on research questions.

In order to comprehend skills development and how to nurture these skills in the context of Vietnam's garment industry, thematic analysis is used to analyze the data. Thematic analysis is a tool to identify, analyze, and report themes within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This study adopts the thematic analysis approach recommended by Robson & McCartan (2016, p. 469) including five-phase guidelines: i) familiarising oneself with the data; ii) generating the initial codes; iii) identifying themes; iv) constructing thematic networks; and v) integration and interpretation. This analysis approach is appropriate for this study because it emphasizes on perspectives, knowledge, and experience of participants as the key object of study. The integration of data from various participants will help us to comprehend the grand and complex issues relating to skills development in Vietnam's garment industry.

## FINDINGS

The findings of this study address the research question, "To what extent are vocational education and training institutions (VET) collaborating with enterprises to improve skills requirements in Vietnam's garment industry?" With the specific characteristic of the garment industry and training institutions in the context of Vietnam, the data analysis reveals two main barriers that training institutions are struggling with to collaborate garment industry to develop skills for front line managers.

### THEME 1: Absence of institutions training front line managers

There are a few training institutions offering training programs in the field of garment technology; they mainly focus on design. Enterprises need the current cohort of graduates to not only be aware of design but be capable of being front line managers. The capacity of institutions to train and to meet the demand of enterprises for front line managers is largely absent. Also, despite the great demand of frontline managers, neither enterprises nor training institutions have systematically identified the necessary skills of front line managers to meet the needs of the job.

*"In supplying the necessary skills for the cohort of frontline managers in the garment industry, there is almost no training program to equip essential skills for this cohort."* (Industry Manager)

*"Workers accumulate work experience before they are promoted into the position of frontline manager. Currently, to solve the shortcomings in the training system and to address shortages in the cohort of frontline managers, institutions are providing a short-term course to develop management skills for employees in garment enterprises."* (Head of Education)

*"The training program of the frontline manager is currently unavailable. There is only a refresher course for available frontline managers supported by institutions for enterprises."* (Front line Manager)

The lack of an educational institution's ability to engage with the industry may be influenced by the discrepancy in policies and communication between both parties. We found that views from the TVET institutions in this study tend to be complex and involved a long process. Hence, the industry team may feel reluctant to engage with them because of this complication.

### THEME 2: Poor Curriculum for Skills Development

There is an absence of collaboration between enterprises and training institutions, and as a result, there is no curriculum development to address the emerging training needs of frontline managers. All participants from both sectors agreed that



the development of the modern curriculum would need ongoing support from both parties. However, when it comes to negotiating strategies for the curriculum development for garment workers, there are no attempts to unravel these conundrums.

*"Enterprises give me a sense that we teach so widespread. They suggest us to teach learners a specific position so that they can have a clear career direction. But, both our institution and enterprise have not done yet."* (Lecturer)

*"Currently, the curriculum for garment industry students is academically orientated and removed from the needs of the workplace, especially in terms of managerial skills."* (Industry)

*"As our current curriculum is quite popular and general, our learners can work at the multi-job position rather than solely position. So, students are not good at any specific position."* (Teacher)

*"Currently, institutions teach the immense knowledge for their students. Graduates say to us they can work as a designer, also work as a frontline manager, and also as a sample sewing technician...But, finally, they cannot work in any position in fact. They keep confusing and cannot launch into the workplace."* (CEO)

We learn from the data that most garment companies are not satisfied with the quality of graduates due to the poor curriculum from education institutions training them to work in the garment industry. Interestingly, they have failed to send this message to TVET institutions due to a number of reasons. TVETs institutions explained that key industry players have failed to provide support and/or specific expectations to them.

*"Enterprises often have subjective opinions. They say that institutions train in such a cursory way, so students cannot work after graduation."* (Frontline Manager)

However, during the collaboration process, enterprises cannot confirm what the specific skills they need are. They must first have specific requirements for a specific job position, and then they supply institutions. As for now, institutions do not know any specific requirements from enterprises, so we cannot teach properly.

Compounding the weaknesses of the collaboration is that many of the education training staff lack a working knowledge and expertise in the garment industry.

*"The issue is that a cohort of lecturers does not have enough practical experience about production practice to be able to transfer to students. Looking back, we do not want to criticise our current teaching staff. However, most of them have never made products appreciated and used by customers. So, the question is how lecturers can be confident to teach the students about these products."* (CEO)

*"The issue is that a few lecturers used to possess practical production experience. As not participating in the production process, they cannot teach subjects such as technology procedures or the production planning... Meanwhile, young lecturers are now teaching with their outmoded knowledge learned from many years ago in comparison to the continuously updated machinery at enterprises."* (Frontline Manager)

The teaching staff is often not supported by the training institutions in terms of resources, and many do not have the opportunity to update their knowledge base.

*"As most institutions are now managed by the government, the good and the bad lecturers receive the same salary. So, why must these good lecturers try to teach well? Though they can teach better than others, their capacities are not properly evaluated, and even they can be hated by others. The issues that salary is not paid by lecture's capacity and the internal conflict is happening regularly are leading institutions to fall in the vicious circle."* (Head of Education)

The concept of formal learning is quite common among key informants from the education sector in this study. They tend to believe in the effectiveness of face-to-face classroom learning environment. This point is among the major disagreement from the industry. We learn that the industry people can acquire skills in garment and textile by various sets of learning activities such as practicum, industrial supervision, project-based learning, and online training.

## DISCUSSION

The finding indicated two main themes impeding TVET institutions to prepare graduates, and to supply the required skills to graduates for the garment industry. We learn that lecturers did not possess enough practical knowledge to update their curriculum to reflect contemporary developments in the sector. Also, the impediment from the industry can also discourage them from connecting with the management team from the industry.

More importantly, TVET institutions do not evaluate the performance of lecturers when it comes to curriculum development and training strategies for the garment workforce. This point obviously contributes to the stagnation of the curriculum and learning processes. The challenges are exacerbated by the high workloads and limited interaction with the garment sector. Third, the use of external lecturers from industry was limited and was in general, not supported by

training institutions (Wright et al., 2002). One factor here is that there is a gap between the training curriculum and what the sector required; bringing in guest lecturers only highlighted this gap (Nguyen, DC. et al., 2013).

We also learn that the lack of preparation for 'Job-specific/technical skills' for the future workforce in the garment and textile industry can be limited, due to resources and policies from the institutions (Bodewig, C. et al., 2014). In fact, the industry confirmed that job-specific skills are easily recognizable and observable. They include skills and competencies needed to perform a given job, such as the ability to apply knowledge in machine operation for textiles, methods, materials, tools, and instruments for sewing and design and build on combinations of transferable skills. Hence, TVET institutions and industry partners must work together on this important issue (Pimpa, 2019).

Finally, this study suggests that training institutions need to be upgrading their curriculum in consultation with the industry. Developing a relevant curriculum that meets the skill needs of industry is a starting point in vocational education. To strengthen the collaboration between institutions and enterprises, the government needs policies that support formal training and ongoing training, allowing the skill development for new employees as well as upgrading the skills of existing employees (Nguyen, DC. et al., 2013). The policy should be supportive of new and continuous skill development through grants, subsidies, and tax concessions for training expenditure. This will also force training institutions and industry to collaborate more effectively.

### LIMITATION AND STUDY FORWARD

Some methodological issues should be improved for future study. All interviews in this study were conducted with a focused number of participants in the South of Vietnam. The specific geographical location was selected by the research team, due to our connections with the industry and TVET institutions. We also suggested that further study should extend into the North and Central of Vietnam to have a holistic picture of what is happening of skills mismatch and challenges of TVET institutions in collaboration with garment enterprises to develop skills for graduates.

This study was confined to lecturers and head of faculty or department of garment technology in the educational sector. This study can include interviews with student participants, members of the national youth union, and its association because, together with TVET institutions, they are successfully supporting students in developing skills through extra-curricular activities and connect students and employers via career fairs (Nghia, 2017). Interviewing participants who are students and from the youth union and its association can potentially help us to understand challenges that graduates are concerned about their future, as well as their expectations of employers in collaborative activities with TVET institutions to possess the workforce for their enterprises.

When it comes to future consideration, further studies should focus on the drawbacks that internal enterprises are struggling during the collaboration with TVET institutions to develop skills for graduates. Further studies also should investigate factors impacting upon the collaboration between the two key stakeholders. As every stakeholder has different separated functions and interests, there are probably differences in the mindset between two stakeholders in their collaboration. It is necessary to have more studies on those factors to restrain possible conflicts happening during their collaboration.

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This research has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT University, Australia).

### AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

Authors one and three are research supervisors and Author two is a Ph.D. scholar while developing this paper.

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