

PART-TIME EMPLOYMENT AS EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING: SOFT SKILL DEVELOPMENT IN ENGLISH-MAJOR UNDERGRADUATES IN VIETNAM

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of part-time employment as a form of experiential learning that fosters soft skill development among undergraduate students majoring in foreign languages at Tay Nguyen University, Vietnam. Adopting a mixed-methods approach grounded in educational science theories—namely student involvement (Astin, 1984), identity development (Chickering & Reisser, 1993), and experiential learning (Kolb, 1984)—the research combines survey data (n = 247) with semi-structured interviews to explore students' perceptions and experiences. Findings indicate that part-time work positively contributes to the development of key soft skills, including communication, time management, problem-solving, and teamwork. However, risks such as job mismatches, excessive workloads, and lack of guidance present notable challenges. Statistical analyses reveal a positive correlation between moderate work intensity and skill enhancement, whereas excessive work (>30 hours/week) is negatively associated with academic performance. The study underscores the potential of part-time employment to serve as a meaningful educational context when integrated into a supportive institutional framework. It concludes with targeted recommendations for students, universities, employers, and families to maximize the developmental value of student part-time work and align it with the goals of holistic education. Additional analysis highlights specific risks such as job mismatches, lack of institutional guidance, and exploitative practices (e.g., late payment).

Keywords: *part-time work, soft skills, experiential learning, foreign language education, higher education, Vietnam.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In the context of competency-based education and the global shift towards learner-centered pedagogies, the cultivation of transferable soft skills has become an indispensable objective of higher education institutions. For students majoring in foreign languages, particularly those preparing for multilingual and multicultural work environments, competencies such as communication, teamwork, time management, problem-solving, and critical thinking are considered core elements of professional readiness and career adaptability.

One of the increasingly common avenues through which undergraduates develop these skills is through part-time employment. While financial necessity remains a primary motivation for student labor, part-time work—when approached with intentionality—can serve as a form of experiential learning that extends beyond the boundaries of the classroom. Numerous studies have demonstrated that part-time jobs, particularly those aligned with students' academic and professional trajectories, can contribute to the development of self-efficacy, practical knowledge, and soft skills (Curtis & Shani, 2002; Mokhtar & Ramli, 2019).

Several recent Vietnamese studies (Ngo 2024; Do 2019; Duong & Nguyen 2024) have demonstrated that parttime employment enables students to apply academic learning in realworld contexts, develop soft skills (e.g., communication, teamwork, time management), and enhance career readiness—while soft skills remain unevenly developed among students. However, unregulated or misaligned employment can also lead to negative academic outcomes, mental health strain, and diminished motivation (Greenberger & Steinberg, 1982; Mortimer & Kumka, 1982).

Theoretically, this study is grounded in three interrelated frameworks from educational science:

- **Astin's theory of student involvement** (1984), which posits that students' developmental gains are directly proportional to the quantity and quality of their investment in academic and co-curricular activities;

- **Chickering and Reisser's identity development model** (1993), which highlights the significance of structured, real-world engagement in fostering autonomy, competence, and purpose among undergraduates;

- **Kolb's experiential learning theory** (1984),

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which underscores the role of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation in meaningful skill acquisition.

Despite a growing body of literature on student employment, relatively few studies focus specifically on foreign language undergraduates in the Vietnamese context—a group uniquely positioned at the intersection of linguistic, cultural, and professional demands. Moreover, the literature often lacks insight into students' own perceptions of the benefits and limitations of part-time work, particularly regarding its alignment with soft skill development. In the Central Highlands (Tay Nguyen) context, foreign language undergraduates often face limited job opportunities directly related to their field of study. As a result, part-time work is typically concentrated in tutoring and service sectors, which underscores the need for targeted support from universities. Here, 'student part-time work' refers to employment undertaken by undergraduates to support both financial and developmental needs, not child labor.

This study, therefore, seeks to address the following research objectives:

(1) To examine the prevalence and characteristics of part-time employment among foreign language students at Tay Nguyen University;

(2) To analyze students' perceptions of the purposes, impacts, and educational value of part-time work;

(3) To assess the differential effects of various job types on specific soft skill domains.

By reframing student labor as a potential site of informal, experiential learning, this paper contributes to ongoing conversations about student development, employability, and holistic education in Vietnamese higher education.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1. Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods design to capture both the breadth and depth of student experiences with part-time employment. The rationale for this approach lies in the complementary strengths of quantitative and qualitative methods: while survey data provide statistical generalizability, qualitative narratives offer rich, contextualized insights into students' perceptions, motivations, and challenges. The integration of both data types allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how part-time work intersects with skill development and educational trajectories.

2.2. Participants and Sampling

The target population comprised undergraduate students enrolled in the Faculty of Foreign Languages at Tay Nguyen University during the 2023–2024 academic year ($N = 735$). A stratified random sampling method was used to ensure proportional representation across academic years. Based on Cochran's formula with a 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error, the minimum sample size was calculated at 259. To enhance reliability, a total of 270 questionnaires were distributed, and 247 valid responses were collected and analyzed.

2.3. Quantitative Instrumentation and Procedures

A structured questionnaire was developed, informed by theoretical models on student development (Astin, 1984; Chickering & Reisser, 1993) and validated instruments on soft skills assessment (e.g., Agyeman & Ofei, 2021; Mokhtar & Ramli, 2019). The questionnaire was divided into four sections:

- 1) Demographic and academic background
- 2) Part-time work characteristics (e.g., job type, hours, duration)
- 3) Perceived impacts of part-time work
- 4) Self-assessed soft skill development across six domains: communication, teamwork, time management, problem-solving, planning, and critical thinking

Responses were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). The instrument underwent expert validation and a pilot test with 15 students for clarity and internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.86$).

Quantitative data were processed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze distributions. Pearson correlation tests examined associations between work-related variables and skill development outcomes, while linear regression was employed to identify predictors of academic performance and soft skill gains.

2.4. Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis

To complement the survey findings, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 stakeholders, including current students with part-time experience, alumni, faculty members, and local employers. Interviews explored participants' experiences, perceptions of skill transfer, and views on the role of part-time work in personal and academic development. Participants were selected based on diverse criteria, including academic year, type of part-time work, and richness of experience, to ensure maximum variation. A flowchart illustrating the integration of quantitative and qualitative phases has been added (Figure 1).

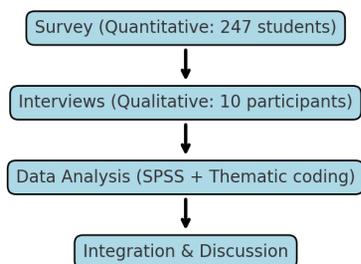


Figure 1. Flowchart of the mixed-methods research design

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic coding. A hybrid approach combining inductive and deductive coding was applied. Key themes were identified through iterative review and triangulated with quantitative findings to enhance interpretive validity and ensure methodological rigor.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Prevalence and Types of Part-Time Work

Among the 247 surveyed students, 50.6% reported having engaged in part-time work during their undergraduate studies. The most common job types were tutoring (47.6%), teaching assistantships (33.9%), and food service roles (11.3%), as shown in the table below

Table 1. Distribution of part-time job types among students

Job Type	Percentage (%)
Tutoring	47.6
Teaching Assistant	33.9
Food Service	11.3

These findings reflect both the academic alignment of student preferences and the accessibility of education-related jobs for foreign language majors. The dominance of tutoring and teaching assistantships suggests a strong inclination toward jobs that reinforce pedagogical and communication competencies—skills directly relevant to students’ academic training and career trajectories.

3.2. Motivations and Perceptions

Financial necessity was the primary motivation for part-time work, cited by 98% of respondents. However, a significant majority (97.3%) also perceived part-time employment as an avenue for soft skill enhancement and career preparation. These dual motivations align with Astin’s (1984) assertion that student involvement in co-curricular activities contributes to holistic development, par-

ticularly when such experiences are perceived as purposeful.

3.3. Impact on Soft Skills

Students were asked to rate the extent to which their part-time jobs contributed to improvements in various soft skill domains. The results are summarized in Figure 2.

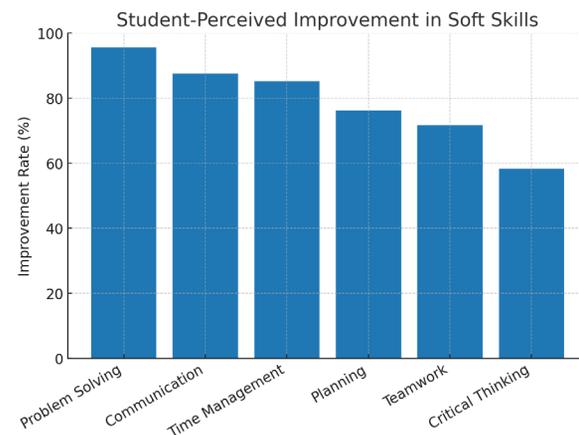


Figure 2. Improvement rates of soft skills as perceived by students

Key findings include:

- Problem-solving was the most positively affected skill (95.6%), likely due to the real-time decision-making required in teaching and service contexts.

- Communication (87.5%) and time management (85.1%) also ranked highly, confirming that part-time work fosters both interpersonal and organizational competencies.

- Critical thinking (58.3%), while the lowest-rated, remains significant given its abstract and integrative nature. The relatively lower improvement in critical thinking (58.3%) can be attributed to the nature of common part-time jobs (e.g., food service, retail), which emphasize immediate customer interaction over analytical reflection. Conversely, jobs such as translation, tutoring, or research assistance may better nurture critical thinking skills by requiring evaluation, synthesis, and problem framing.

These outcomes are consistent with Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning theory, which emphasizes the importance of concrete experience and active reflection in skill development. The tasks involved in part-time roles evidently provided opportunities for students to apply theoretical knowledge in authentic, often unpredictable settings.

3.4. Threshold Effects and Risks

Statistical analysis revealed that students working less than 21 hours per week experienced significant gains in communication ($r = .78$), time management ($r = .85$), and teamwork ($r = .72$).

Conversely, those exceeding 30 hours per week reported diminished academic performance ($\beta = -0.27, p < .05$), suggesting a critical threshold beyond which work intensity compromises academic focus and well-being. This negative effect is particularly pronounced in service-oriented jobs (e.g., restaurants, cafés) that demand long shifts with little connection to academic development, leading to fatigue and reduced study time.

In interviews, students also expressed concerns about job mismatches, exploitation (e.g., late or withheld wages), and time overload—echoing earlier research on the risks of unsupervised student labor (Greenberger & Steinberg, 1982; Mortimer & Kumka, 1982). These risks underline the importance of institutional and familial support structures in regulating and guiding student employment. For instance, one interviewed student reported delayed wages despite repeated requests, while another described being required to work extended hours in a service job that negatively impacted health and study time (cases anonymized).

4. CONCLUSION AND EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

4.1. Conclusion

This study explored part-time employment as a potentially valuable site of experiential learning for undergraduate students majoring in foreign languages at Tay Nguyen University. By integrating theoretical models from educational science with empirical findings, it offers a nuanced understanding of how student employment interacts with soft skill development and educational outcomes.

The quantitative and qualitative data reveal that, when appropriately managed, part-time work contributes significantly to students' development of essential soft skills such as communication, time management, teamwork, and problem-solving. These competencies are vital in preparing students for increasingly complex and interdisciplinary professional environments. However, the benefits are not uniform. Students working beyond 30 hours per week reported negative impacts on academic performance and overall well-being, and many-faced challenges including job mismatches, poor guidance, and exploitative conditions.

From an educational science perspective, these findings suggest the need to reposition part-time

employment within the broader framework of university-led student development. Rather than treating it as an external, incidental activity, institutions should conceptualize student work as a form of informal and non-formal learning that, if scaffolded correctly, can complement academic curricula and enhance graduate attributes.

4.2. Recommendations

For students: Students are encouraged to select part-time positions aligned with their field of study and career goals—such as tutoring, teaching assistance, or translation work—to ensure maximum developmental value. Moreover, they should limit work hours to no more than 20–25 per week and actively reflect on workplace experiences as part of their personal and professional growth.

For universities: Institutions should develop structured support systems, including career counseling, mentoring programs, and approved job listings in partnership with reputable employers. Soft skill training should also be embedded into the formal curriculum to reinforce transferable competencies. Specifically, universities should establish structured career counseling programs where faculty mentors guide students in selecting appropriate jobs, and organize monthly soft skill workshops drawing on students' part-time experiences.

For employers: Employers offering student jobs should collaborate with universities to design work experiences that provide genuine learning opportunities. Transparent contracts, fair compensation, and feedback mechanisms are essential to protecting students' rights and promoting meaningful engagement.

For families: Parents and guardians can play a key role by guiding students toward responsible work choices, encouraging balance between work and study, and offering emotional support during transitions. Regular communication about students' employment experiences can help identify early signs of burnout or disengagement.

By integrating part-time employment into the holistic educational framework, stakeholders can transform student labor from a coping mechanism into a developmental pathway—enriching the university experience and preparing students more fully for the challenges of modern work and life.

VIỆC LÀM THÊM NHƯ HỌC TẬP TRẢI NGHIỆM: PHÁT TRIỂN KỸ NĂNG MỀM Ở SINH VIÊN CHUYÊN NGỮ TẠI VIỆT NAM

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TÓM TẮT

Nghiên cứu này khảo sát vai trò của việc làm thêm như một hình thức học tập trải nghiệm, góp phần phát triển kỹ năng mềm ở sinh viên Khoa Ngoại ngữ, Trường Đại học Tây Nguyên. Với cách tiếp cận phương pháp hỗn hợp (mixed-methods) được đặt trên nền tảng lý thuyết khoa học giáo dục – cụ thể là lý thuyết về sự tham gia của sinh viên (Astin, 1984), phát triển bản sắc cá nhân (Chickering & Reisser, 1993), và học tập trải nghiệm (Kolb, 1984) – nghiên cứu kết hợp dữ liệu khảo sát (n = 247) với phỏng vấn bán cấu trúc để khám phá nhận thức và trải nghiệm của sinh viên. Kết quả chỉ ra rằng việc làm thêm có tác động tích cực đến việc phát triển các kỹ năng mềm quan trọng như giao tiếp, quản lý thời gian, giải quyết vấn đề và làm việc nhóm. Tuy nhiên, các rủi ro như công việc không phù hợp, khối lượng lao động quá mức và thiếu định hướng vẫn là những thách thức đáng kể. Phân tích thống kê cho thấy có mối tương quan thuận giữa mức độ làm việc vừa phải và sự phát triển kỹ năng, trong khi làm việc quá 30 giờ/tuần lại có tác động tiêu cực đến kết quả học tập. Nghiên cứu nhấn mạnh tiềm năng của việc làm thêm như một bối cảnh giáo dục có ý nghĩa nếu được lồng ghép trong một hệ thống hỗ trợ thể chế phù hợp. Bài báo đưa ra các khuyến nghị cụ thể dành cho sinh viên, nhà trường, người sử dụng lao động và gia đình nhằm tối đa hóa giá trị giáo dục từ lao động sinh viên và gắn kết hoạt động này với mục tiêu giáo dục toàn diện.

Từ khóa: Việc làm thêm, kỹ năng mềm, học tập trải nghiệm, giáo dục ngoại ngữ, giáo dục đại học, Việt Nam.

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