

# DEVELOPING 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY SKILLS OF VIETNAMESE STUDENTS THROUGH THE “GREEN SUMMER” MOVEMENT

*Le Van Hao, PhD  
Nha Trang University, Vietnam*

## **Abstract**

Quality in higher education is reflected mainly in how the university graduates perform and behave in the social and workplace contexts. In the light of this view, in recent decades, universities around the world have placed an emphasis on developing 21st century skills for their students as these skills can significantly contribute to the quality of university graduates themselves. This paper presents a number of definitions on 21st century skills which have emerged recently and contrasts them with the traditional generic skills before introducing the Green Summer movement in Vietnamese universities. The Green Summer movement provides activities aimed at developing 21st century skills in students and is attracting so many students in Vietnam. Recommendations from the author include enhancing ICT literacy activities in the Green Summer movement, improving the role of the youth unions in Vietnamese universities, and increasing the collaboration among ASEAN countries or universities for promoting the Green Summer of Vietnam and such a movement in other ASEAN countries. Such collaboration will foster not only the 21st century skills for ASEAN students, but also the mutual understanding among ASEAN members and the solidarity of the organization.

**Key words:** *21<sup>st</sup> century skills, generic skills, youth union, Green Summer movement*

## **What are 21<sup>st</sup> century skills?**

In a frequently cited example, the Assessment and Teaching of 21 Century Skills (AT21CS) consortium which includes Australia, Finland, Portugal, Singapore, the United Kingdom, and the United States organizes 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, knowledge, and attitudes, values, and ethics into the following four categories (Saavedra & Opfer, 2012):

1. Ways of Thinking: creativity and innovation, critical thinking, problem solving, decision making, and learning to learn (or metacognition)
2. Ways of Working: communication and teamwork
3. Tools for Working: general knowledge and information communication technology (ICT) literacy
4. Living in the World: citizenship, life and career, and personal and social responsibility, including cultural awareness and competence.

Another definition comes from the book *The Global Achievement Gap* by Tony Wagner (2008), co-director of the Harvard Change Leadership Group. Informed by several hundred interviews with business, nonprofit, and education leaders, Wagner proposes that students need seven survival skills to be prepared for 21st century life, work, and citizenship:

1. Critical thinking and problem solving
2. Collaboration and leadership
3. Agility and adaptability

4. Initiative and entrepreneurialism
5. Effective oral and written communication
6. Accessing and analyzing information
7. Curiosity and imagination.

The Partnership for 21st Century Skills <sup>1</sup> (Minnesota, US) developed a unified, collective vision for 21st century learning that will strengthen American education. The Partnership defined 21<sup>st</sup> century skills are the skills students need to have in order to succeed in work, school and life. They include:

1. Core subjects (Economics, English, Government, Arts, History, Geography, Reading or language arts, Mathematics, Science, World languages, Civics)
2. 21st century content: global awareness, financial, economic, business and entrepreneurial literacy, civic literacy and health and wellness awareness
3. Learning and thinking skills: critical thinking and problem solving skills, communications skills, creativity and innovation skills, collaboration skills, contextual learning skills and information and media literacy skills
4. Information and communication technology literacy
5. Life skills: leadership, ethics, accountability, adaptability, personal productivity, personal responsibility, people skills, self-direction and social responsibility

In contrasting the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills with the traditional generic skills which have been mentioned since the last century, we can refer to the following definitions:

*A generic (transferable) skill is one which is not specific to work in a particular occupation or industry, but is important for work, education and life generally.*<sup>2</sup>

*A generic skill is a skill which can be applied across a variety of subject domains, and takes longer to acquire than domain-dependent (subject-area) skills*<sup>3</sup>.

*In any job you have worked in, you will have been developing a set of generic skills. These are skills you can use again in another job, even if it is a different job or in a different industry. You also might hear generic skills referred to as key competencies, core skills, transferable skills or employability skills*<sup>4</sup>.

A definition contrast can reveal that the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills cover not only generic skills but also understanding and values, and they put much emphasis on aspects of contemporary life such as ICT literacy, global awareness, and entrepreneurialism.

### **Why students need 21<sup>st</sup> century skills**

The reasons that our university students need 21<sup>st</sup> century skills can be identified in the followings (Saavedra & Opfer, 2012):

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.21stcenturyskillsmn.org/About.html>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.igi-global.com/dictionary/generic-skills/12058>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.indiana.edu/~idtheory/methods/m7a.html>

<sup>4</sup> [https://nationalvetcontent.edu.au/alfresco/d/d/workspace/SpacesStore/b7da0007-4160-44e4-8d69-c5708b9a4a36/ims/content/u1\\_gettingstarted/wkpl\\_genericskills.htm](https://nationalvetcontent.edu.au/alfresco/d/d/workspace/SpacesStore/b7da0007-4160-44e4-8d69-c5708b9a4a36/ims/content/u1_gettingstarted/wkpl_genericskills.htm)

- As computers and machines can cost-effectively do more and more jobs, the workplace will soon need fewer people with only basic skill sets and more people with higher-order thinking skills.
- Supply and demand in a global marketplace increases competition for workers who can add value through applying non-routine, complex thinking and communication skills to new problems and environments.
- To promote civic engagement, the students also need to learn how and why to be engaged citizens who think critically—so that they can be able to solve problems or review policies to address social challenges.
- The students need to be able to work with others, need to be able to communicate effectively orally and in writing so that they can share their opinions, defend their rights, propose new policy, etc.
- The interconnectedness among countries created by globalization requires students around the world to learn how to communicate, collaborate, and solve problems with people beyond national boundaries.

In order to promote 21<sup>st</sup> century skills for students, countries around the world have their own strategies and policies. The Figure 1 provides such strategies and policies from a number of countries (Saavedra & Opfer, 2012).

Hong Kong	Japan	China	Finland	Singapore	United States
Learning to Learn reform addresses applied learning and “other” learning experiences, including service and workplace learning <sup>6</sup>	Zest for Living education reform stresses the importance of experimentation, problem finding, and problem solving instead of rote memorization <sup>7</sup>	Greater emphasis on students’ ability to communicate and work in teams, pose and solve problems, and learn to learn <sup>8</sup>	New focus on “citizen skills”: (1) thinking skills, including problem solving and creative thinking; (2) ways of working and interacting; (3) crafts and expressive skills; (4) participation and initiative; and (5) self-awareness and personal responsibility <sup>9</sup>	New Framework for 21st Century Competencies and Student Outcomes is intended to better position students to take advantage of global opportunities <sup>10</sup>	Common Core State Standards Initiative redefines standards to make them “inclusive of rigorous content and applications of knowledge through higher-order skills, so that all students are prepared for the 21st century” <sup>11</sup>
2000	2006	2010	2010	2010	2010

Figure 1: How education systems are addressing 21st century skills

### History of the Green Summer movement

Traditionally, universities in Vietnam often have their own programs in bringing their students to local communities to participate in activities which help to protect the environment or improve people literacy, especially in remote areas. These activities are often held in summer time (July and August) when almost all students have finished their academic year.

In 1994, The Ho Chi Minh City's Youth Union initiated the Summer Culture Light (Anh Sang Van Hoa He) movement which united all mentioned-above summer activities organized by universities located in Ho Chi Minh City. In 1997, The Ho Chi Minh City's Youth Union renamed this movement to Voluntary Green Summer Movement which is presently often called in short Green Summer (Mua He Xanh). In 2000, the Vietnam Youth union decided to use the name Green Summer for all students' summer community-based programs in Vietnam<sup>5</sup> and it is organized by the youth unions (including the Communist Youth Union and the Student Union) at each university during the summer time.

The number of students participated in this movement has been increasing quickly in recent years. At Ho Chi Minh City, in 2014, over 90,000 students have registered in different programs<sup>6</sup>, compared with 57,000 students in 2013<sup>7</sup>. By the time, the movement has not been limited within Vietnam but gradually broadened to some countries in ASEAN such as Laos and Cambodia, and sometimes participated by volunteers from other countries, such as Korea and The United States in 2007<sup>8</sup>, Malaysia in 2014<sup>9</sup>.



Figure 2: A painting class organized by Green Summer volunteers in Laos



<sup>5</sup> <http://hssv.tienphong.vn/hoc-sinh-sinh-vien/nguoi-gieo-hat-mua-he-xanh-611838.tpo>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.thanhvien.com.vn/pages/20140714/hon-90000-sinh-vien-tham-gia-mua-he-xanh.aspx>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.thanhvien.com.vn/pages/20130714/hon-57-000-sinh-vien-tham-gia-mua-he-xanh.aspx>

<sup>8</sup> <http://vietbao.vn/The-gioi-tre/Rao-ruc-Mua-he-xanh-tinh-nguyen/45246578/275/>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.thanhvien.com.vn/pages/20140713/soi-dong-chien-dich-tinh-nguyen-mua-he-xanh-lan-thu-21.aspx>

Figure 3: Road construction in Mekong Delta area conducted by Vietnamese and foreign Green Summer volunteers

### **Goal and activities of the Green Summer**

The ultimate goal of the Green Summer, through community-based activities, is *to enhance students' perception about society, improve their self consciousness and creativity, to link practice with learning, reality with theories and society with schools*<sup>10</sup>. This movement can be compared to place-based or community-based learning/education in Western countries. Based on this goal, popular activities held by universities in Vietnam are to help local communities in:

- cleaning up the environment (roads, beaches, rivers, etc.)
- repairing or building public infrastructure (bridges, roads, canals, etc.) and houses for the poor people
- enhancing children's capacity in writing, reading or using computer
- organizing short courses and transferring technology/techniques in different careers (mainly in agriculture sector)
- organizing culture and sport activities, mainly for the kids

### **Why the Green Summer attracts so many students**

Every year, thousands of students around Vietnam participated in the Green Summer. The question may arise that why this movement can attract such a huge number of volunteers. According to Mr. Nguyen Phu Binh (recognized as the founder of the movement), there are four main factors that make the movement attractive to students<sup>11</sup>:

- The movement exploits typical personalities of the youth: involving and volunteering
- The movement has well inherited from the past initiatives, been broadened (to other groups of people and organizations) and socialized naturally (invested/funded by different organizations)
- The movement is recognized as an effective approach in educating young citizens, in training future leaders and therefore it is supported by all universities
- The movement has its own romantic style as the youth can find friendship, love and share their dreams during the activities

### **Which 21<sup>st</sup> century skills the Green Summer provides**

Through the activities provided by the Green Summer, students can get a number of skills which depend on the type and duration of the activities. The Figure 4 provides an estimate by the author about the student's attainment levels of 21<sup>st</sup> century skills through the Green Summer activities, based on the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills definition of AT21CS Consortium mentioned at the beginning.

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<sup>10</sup> <http://svtnhamrong.vicongdong.vn/news/view.aspx?newsId=48693600>

<sup>11</sup> <http://hssv.tienphong.vn/hoc-sinh-sinh-vien/nguoi-gieo-hat-mua-he-xanh-611838.tpo>

<b>21<sup>st</sup> century skills</b>	<b>Levels of attainment</b>
<b>Ways of Thinking:</b> - creativity and innovation - critical thinking - problem solving, decision making - learning to learn	✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓
<b>Ways of Working:</b> - communication - teamwork	✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓
<b>Tools for Working:</b> - general knowledge - ICT literacy	✓ ✓ ✓
<b>Living in the World:</b> - citizenship - life and career - personal and social responsibility	✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓

Figure 4: 21<sup>st</sup> century skills attainment levels through the Green Summer

Beside the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills that students can get through the Green Summer, discussions with those students have discovered that the movement also helps them to recognize their real abilities, to be much more confident in applying their abilities in real world. In addition, they become much more open in communication and life, much more responsible in their learning.

### **Advantages and challenges of the Green Summer**

In comparison with the university youth unions around the world, the youth unions in Vietnamese universities have great advantages in having their official role in universities which is reflected in the Education Act and the Higher Education Act, and they are organized and directed systematically from the central unions to university classes. However, as reflected in annual reports from the Central Communist Youth Union Committee (2013, 2014), activities (including the Green Summer) organized by the university youth unions are facing typical challenges as follows:

- Do not have enough fulltime staff for managing and organizing activities as most of the staff in the unions are selected from the students and teaching/administrative staff and they work on a part-time or extra-work basis.
- Budget share (from the university budget) for the youth union activities is very limited so that the unions have to search donations from business for most of their activities.
- For maximizing the attainment of the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, university students should have opportunities to participate in voluntary activities at national or regional levels. However, limited budget as mentioned above and lack of support from regional countries have hindered significantly such opportunities.

## Conclusions and recommendations

The above analysis has identified the importance of the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills to university students and contributions of the youth unions in Vietnamese universities on supporting them to attain those skills. In order to enhance such contributions, many efforts are needed and much support should be provided. The following recommendations aim to provide some solutions for such issues:

1. As evaluated (by the author) on the Figure 4, ICT literacy is the least attainment that students can get through the Green Summer programs because few programs adapt to this needs. This result is not only for the students involved in the programs as volunteers, but also for the young people in the communities participated in the programs. Therefore, the movement should create much more activities which can enhance ICT literacy for the youth.
2. The Green Summer movement cannot be successful without the participation and leadership of the youth unions in Vietnamese universities. However, their roles in Vietnamese universities are not always fully recognized, especially in investing human resource and finance. The universities should provide enough fulltime administrative/skillful staff and budget for the union activities.
3. In order to help university students to learn how to communicate, collaborate, and solve problems with people beyond national boundaries and enhance their global awareness, especially within the region (ASEAN), formal supportive agreements among regional countries or universities for the Green Summer of Vietnam and such a movement in other ASEAN countries are necessary. Such collaboration will foster not only the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills for ASEAN students, but also the mutual understanding among ASEAN members and the solidarity of the organization.

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## Author's Biography



### **Le Van Hao, PhD**

Dr. Hao graduated in physics in 1981, followed by a Masters in education at Simon Fraser University, BC, Canada in 1996, and then earned his PhD in higher education at the University of Melbourne, Australia in 2001. His areas of higher education expertise include educational research, teaching and assessment methodology, quality assurance and accreditation, and university management. Since 1981, he has been a physics lecturer at Nha Trang University, Nha Trang, Vietnam where he became Vice-director of the Academic Affairs in 2001, in charge of quality assurance and teaching staff's capacity development. Dr. Hao has been appointed as Director of Quality Assurance and Testing (Quality Assurance and Inspection at the present time) at Nha Trang University since 2007. During 2008-2009, Dr. Hao was a VEF visiting scholar at Washington State University, US.

Contact: +(84) 905102855 (Cell), [haolv@ntu.edu.vn](mailto:haolv@ntu.edu.vn), [haolevan@yahoo.com](mailto:haolevan@yahoo.com)