Experiential learning model and its impact on the employability competence of Chinese Studies students

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ABSTRACT: *In the context of globalization and increasing labor market competition, higher education is expected not only to transmit disciplinary knowledge but also to enhance students' employability. This study aims to develop and validate an experiential learning model and examine its impact on the employability competence of Chinese Studies students in Vietnam. Data were collected from 312 third- and fourth-year students through a questionnaire using a five-point Likert scale. PLS-SEM was employed to test the second-order structural model.*

The results indicate that experiential learning has a positive and statistically significant impact on overall employability competence ($\beta = 0.79$; $p < 0.001$), with a relatively high explanatory power ($R^2 = 0.62$). Among the dimensions, the strongest effect was observed for intercultural communication competence, followed by professional competence and career adaptability. The model demonstrates good reliability, convergent validity, discriminant validity, and strong predictive capability.

This study provides empirical evidence supporting experiential learning theory in the context of language and area studies education and offers implications for curriculum design aligned with practice to enhance students' employability competence.

KEYWORDS: *Experiential learning; Employability competence; Graduate employability; Chinese Studies education; Work-integrated learning; Intercultural communication.*

I. INTRODUCTION

In the context of globalization and intensifying labor market competition, higher education is no longer limited to the transmission of disciplinary knowledge but must also aim to enhance graduates' employability. Employability is regarded as a critical indicator reflecting educational quality, representing the extent to which students possess the knowledge, skills, and competencies necessary to adapt to dynamic and multicultural professional environments (Yorke, 2006; Tomlinson, 2017).

To meet these requirements, higher education institutions increasingly emphasize practice-oriented teaching approaches. Experiential learning is considered an effective approach to connecting academic training with professional contexts (Kolb, 1984). According to experiential learning theory, knowledge is constructed through a cycle comprising concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Through this transformation of experience, learners not only acquire knowledge but also develop the capacity to apply it in real-world situations.

In the Vietnamese educational context, many institutions have gradually integrated experiential learning into Chinese Studies programs through mandatory internships, project-based learning, professional simulations, and collaboration with enterprises. These activities provide students with direct exposure to workplace environments, enabling them to apply linguistic and cultural knowledge in practice while developing communication skills and adaptability within multicultural contexts.

However, despite the increasing implementation of experiential learning, empirical evidence examining the extent and mechanism of its impact on the employability competence of Chinese Studies students remains limited. This issue is particularly important for Chinese Studies - an interdisciplinary field combining language, culture, and economics - where intercultural communication competence and labor market adaptability are of distinctive importance.

Accordingly, this study aims to develop and validate an experiential learning model and examine its impact on the employability competence of Chinese Studies students using PLS-SEM.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT
2.1. Experiential learning theory

Experiential Learning Theory (ELT), proposed by Kolb (1984), posits that knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. According to this model, learning is a cyclical process consisting of four stages: (1) concrete experience, (2) reflective observation, (3) abstract conceptualization, and (4) active

experimentation. This cycle emphasizes the central role of learners in constructing knowledge through interaction with real-world environments.

In higher education, experiential learning is implemented in various forms such as corporate internships, project-based learning, professional simulations, and industry partnerships (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). Recent studies indicate that this approach not only enhances student engagement but also promotes the development of professional skills and adaptability (Jackson, 2015; Clarke, 2018). Importantly, experiential learning enables students to connect theory with practice, thereby increasing the applicability of academic knowledge.

For Chinese Studies - an interdisciplinary field encompassing language, culture, commerce, and services - the application of experiential learning models is particularly significant. Students need exposure to real-world environments such as import-export enterprises, tourism companies, international cooperation organizations, or cultural exchange projects to develop comprehensive employability competence.

2.2. Employability competence

Employability refers to a set of knowledge, skills, competencies, and personal attributes that enable individuals to obtain and maintain appropriate employment (Yorke, 2006). In recent years, this concept has been expanded into the notion of "graduate capital," including human capital, social capital, and cultural capital (Tomlinson, 2017).

In this study, employability competence is conceptualized as a second-order construct comprising four dimensions:
- Professional competence: mastery of disciplinary knowledge and professional skills.
- Soft skills: communication, teamwork, and problem-solving abilities.
- Intercultural communication competence: the ability to interact effectively in multicultural environments - particularly critical for Chinese Studies students.
- Career adaptability: the ability to adjust and respond to changes in the labor market.

Numerous empirical studies demonstrate that participation in practice-oriented learning activities is positively associated with the development of these employability dimensions (Jackson, 2015; Clarke, 2018).

2.3. The relationship between experiential learning and employability competence

According to experiential learning theory, learners develop competencies through interaction, reflection, and the application of experience in new contexts (Kolb, 1984). When students participate in real-world activities, they accumulate disciplinary knowledge while simultaneously strengthening soft skills, enhancing intercultural communication competence, and reinforcing adaptability.

Research in vocational education indicates that experiential learning positively influences career confidence, problem-solving ability, and work readiness after graduation (Jackson, 2015). Moreover, reflection following experience helps students develop analytical thinking and knowledge transfer capabilities, thereby enhancing overall employability competence.

Based on these theoretical arguments and empirical findings, this study proposes that experiential learning positively influences the employability competence of Chinese Studies students.

2.4. Hypothesis development

Based on the theoretical foundation and prior research, the following hypotheses are proposed:
H1: Experiential learning positively affects the professional competence of Chinese Studies students.
H2: Experiential learning positively affects the soft skills of Chinese Studies students.
H3: Experiential learning positively affects the intercultural communication competence of Chinese Studies students.
H4: Experiential learning positively affects the career adaptability of Chinese Studies students.
H5: Experiential learning positively affects the overall employability competence of Chinese Studies students.
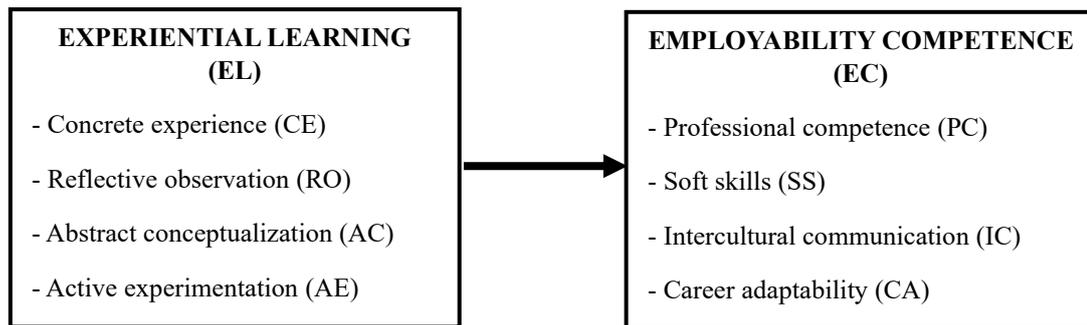
2.5. Proposed research model

Based on the above hypotheses, a second-order structural model is proposed in which:

Experiential Learning (EL) is a second-order independent construct comprising four dimensions: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation.

Employability Competence (EC) is a second-order dependent construct comprising four dimensions: professional competence, soft skills, intercultural communication, and career adaptability.

The model assumes that EL has a direct effect on EC.

| EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING (EL)

- Concrete experience (CE)

- Reflective observation (RO)

- Abstract conceptualization (AC)

- Active experimentation (AE) | → | EMPLOYABILITY COMPETENCE (EC)

- Professional competence (PC)

- Soft skills (SS)

- Intercultural communication (IC)

- Career adaptability (CA) |

Figure 1. Proposed research model

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a quantitative research design to examine the impact of experiential learning on the employability competence of Chinese Studies students. Data were collected using a cross-sectional survey design through a structured questionnaire.

The target respondents were third- and fourth-year Chinese Studies students. Convenience sampling was applied, with a minimum target sample size of 300 valid observations.

All constructs were measured using a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). Experiential learning comprises four dimensions: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation (Kolb, 1984). Employability competence consists of four dimensions: professional competence, soft skills, intercultural communication, and career adaptability (Yorke, 2006; Jackson, 2015). All indicators were measured reflectively.

Data were analyzed using PLS-SEM in SmartPLS 4.0. The analytical procedure included: (1) assessment of the measurement model using Cronbach's alpha, Composite Reliability (CR), Average Variance Extracted (AVE), and HTMT; and (2) assessment of the structural model using path coefficients, bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples, R^2, and f^2. The second-order constructs were estimated using the two-stage approach.

IV. RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.1. Description of the research sample

A total of 325 questionnaires were collected from Chinese Studies students. After excluding 13 invalid responses due to missing data or inconsistent answering patterns, 312 valid observations were retained for analysis, yielding a usable response rate of 96.0%. This sample size exceeds the minimum threshold recommended for PLS-SEM analysis and ensures adequate statistical power for the second-order structural model.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the sample (N = 312)

Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	112	35.9
Female	200	64.1
Year of study		
Year 3	152	48.7
Year 4	160	51.3
Internship experience		
Completed internship	225	72.1
No internship experience	87	27.9
Primary career orientation		
Tourism – Services	118	37.8
Commerce – Import/Export	96	30.8
Translation and Interpretation	72	23.1
Others	26	8.3

(Source: Survey results)

The gender distribution indicates that female students account for 64.1% of the sample, reflecting the common demographic characteristics of language and area studies programs in Vietnam. Although there is a gender imbalance, it does not significantly affect the representativeness of the sample, as gender differences were not examined in this study. The relatively balanced distribution between third-year (48.7%) and fourth-year (51.3%) students suggests that most participants had completed core disciplinary courses and had substantial

exposure to experiential learning activities. This ensures that evaluations of experiential learning and employability competence are grounded in practical experience rather than purely theoretical perceptions.

Notably, 72.1% of students had previously participated in internships or practical projects. This proportion indicates a relatively high level of experiential engagement within the sample, providing favorable conditions for testing the relationship between experiential learning and employability competence. If the majority of respondents lacked practical experience, the ability to accurately assess the study variables would be limited. Regarding career orientation, students were relatively diversified across tourism and services (37.8%), commerce and import-export (30.8%), and translation and interpretation (23.1%). This diversity reflects the interdisciplinary nature of the Chinese Studies program and enhances the generalizability of the findings within the field. It also underscores the practical relevance of intercultural communication competence and career adaptability across various career pathways.

Overall, the sample structure demonstrates strong alignment with the research objectives. The sample size satisfies the technical requirements of PLS-SEM, while participant characteristics accurately reflect the educational and professional context of Chinese Studies students. This strengthens the content validity and reliability of subsequent analyses.

4.2. Measurement model assessment

Before testing the research hypotheses, the measurement model was evaluated to ensure reliability and validity of the scales. The assessment was conducted using internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's alpha, Composite Reliability), convergent validity (AVE), and discriminant validity (HTMT), following the recommendations of Hair et al. (2022).

Reliability and convergent validity

The results indicate that all constructs achieved high internal consistency reliability. Cronbach's alpha values ranged from 0.83 to 0.88, while Composite Reliability (CR) values ranged from 0.88 to 0.92, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70. This demonstrates satisfactory internal consistency among the indicators of each construct.

The AVE values ranged from 0.64 to 0.74, all above the minimum threshold of 0.50. Therefore, the latent constructs explain more than 50% of the variance of their respective indicators, confirming convergent validity. All outer loadings exceeded 0.70 and were statistically significant ($p < 0.001$), indicating that no indicators were removed from the model.

Table 2. Reliability and convergent validity of the measurement scales

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	CR	AVE
CE (Concrete Experience)	0.85	0.89	0.67
RO (Reflective Observation)	0.83	0.88	0.65
AC (Abstract Conceptualization)	0.86	0.90	0.69
AE (Active Experimentation)	0.84	0.88	0.64
PC (Professional Competence)	0.87	0.91	0.72
SS (Soft Skills)	0.85	0.89	0.68
IC (Intercultural Communication)	0.88	0.92	0.74
CA (Career Adaptability)	0.86	0.90	0.70

(Source: Survey data analysis results)

Discriminant validity

Discriminant validity was assessed using the HTMT criterion. All HTMT values between construct pairs were below 0.85, indicating clear discriminant validity among the constructs. This is particularly important given the potential conceptual correlations among the dimensions of experiential learning and employability competence.

In summary, the measurement model satisfies all reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity criteria, allowing for further assessment of the structural model.

4.3. Structural model assessment

After confirming the validity of the measurement model, the structural model was evaluated to test the proposed hypotheses.

Coefficient of determination (R²)

The results show that the coefficient of determination for overall employability competence (EC) is $R^2 = 0.62$. According to Hair et al. (2022), this represents a substantial level of explanatory power in social science research. This indicates that experiential learning explains 62% of the variance in employability competence, highlighting its central role in the model.

At the dimensional level, R² values for professional competence (PC), soft skills (SS), intercultural communication (IC), and career adaptability (CA) ranged from 0.34 to 0.44, indicating moderate to substantial explanatory power.

Hypothesis testing

Bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples indicates that all path coefficients are statistically significant at $p < 0.001$.

The path coefficients reveal that experiential learning has the strongest effect on intercultural communication competence ($\beta = 0.66$). This finding aligns with the distinctive characteristics of Chinese Studies, where intercultural interaction plays a pivotal role.

The impact of experiential learning on soft skills ($\beta = 0.58$), although slightly lower than other dimensions, remains substantial. This suggests that soft skills may also be influenced by additional factors beyond experiential learning.

All five hypotheses (H1–H5) are supported.

Table 3. Structural model results

Hypothesis	Relationship	β	t-value	Conclusion
H1	EL → PC	0.63	12.45	Supported
H2	EL → SS	0.58	10.87	Supported
H3	EL → IC	0.66	13.21	Supported
H4	EL → CA	0.61	11.34	Supported
H5	EL → EC	0.79	18.92	Supported

(Source: Survey data analysis results)

Effect size and predictive relevance

The effect size (f²) of experiential learning on overall employability competence is 0.49, indicating a large effect. Additionally, the predictive relevance value ($Q^2 = 0.41 > 0$) confirms that the model has strong predictive capability.

These findings demonstrate that the model is not only statistically significant but also practically meaningful in predicting employability competence based on students' level of experiential learning.

V. DISCUSSION

The findings confirm that experiential learning has a positive and statistically significant impact on the employability competence of Chinese Studies students. The proposed model achieves substantial explanatory power ($R^2 = 0.62$), indicating that experiential learning is a critical factor in shaping employability competence within the higher education context.

First, the results reinforce the core argument of experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984), which posits that knowledge is not merely transmitted theoretically but constructed through the transformation of experience. When students engage in internships, real-world projects, or professional simulations, they encounter practical situations, reflect upon them, and adjust their behaviors accordingly, thereby developing professional competence and practical skills. This finding is consistent with prior research in vocational education (Jackson, 2015; Clarke, 2018), which suggests that practice-integrated learning enhances graduates' work readiness.

A notable finding is that experiential learning has the strongest effect on intercultural communication competence ($\beta = 0.66$). This reflects the distinctive characteristics of Chinese Studies, a field requiring interaction within multicultural and transnational environments. Exposure to enterprises, partner organizations, and real-world settings enables students to better understand cultural differences, communication styles, and behavioral norms, thereby improving effective interaction competence. This finding extends the application of experiential learning theory to language and area studies education, where cultural factors play a central role.

Furthermore, the positive effects on professional competence ($\beta = 0.63$) and career adaptability ($\beta = 0.61$) suggest that practical experience strengthens disciplinary knowledge and enhances adaptability to changing work environments. This aligns with Tomlinson's (2017) concept of "graduate capital," whereby human and cultural capital are accumulated through learning and social interaction.

Although the impact on soft skills ($\beta = 0.58$) remains substantial, it is relatively lower than other dimensions. This may be explained by the fact that soft skills are influenced not only by experiential learning but also by individual characteristics and broader social environments, such as extracurricular involvement or prior personal experiences. This suggests that comprehensive soft skill development may require additional activities beyond formal coursework.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes in two ways. First, it empirically validates the experiential learning model in the context of Chinese Studies education, an area that has received limited empirical attention. Second, the use of a second-order structural model allows for the examination of both the

overall effect of experiential learning and its differential impact across specific competence dimensions, thereby clarifying the mechanism through which experiential learning enhances employability.

From a practical standpoint, the findings highlight the importance of designing curricula that closely integrate theory and practice. Expanding internship opportunities, strengthening project-based learning, and implementing structured reflection mechanisms may effectively enhance employability competence among Chinese Studies students. Sustainable collaboration between universities and industry partners plays a crucial role in ensuring the practical relevance of training activities.

In summary, the findings not only reinforce the theoretical foundation of experiential learning but also provide empirical evidence for its role in enhancing the employability competence of Chinese Studies students within the Vietnamese higher education context.

VI. CONCLUSION, THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

This study aimed to develop and validate an experiential learning model and examine its impact on the employability competence of Chinese Studies students within the higher education context in Vietnam. The PLS-SEM results indicate that experiential learning has a positive and statistically significant impact on all four dimensions of employability competence, including professional competence, soft skills, intercultural communication, and career adaptability. The model demonstrates relatively high explanatory power ($R^2 = 0.62$), indicating that experiential learning is an important factor in enhancing students' employability competence.

Notably, the strongest effect was observed for intercultural communication competence, reflecting the distinctive characteristics of Chinese Studies, where interaction in multicultural environments is essential. This finding confirms that integrating internships, real-world projects, and professional simulations into the curriculum has substantial practical significance for the comprehensive development of students' competencies.

Overall, the study provides empirical evidence supporting the role of experiential learning in enhancing the employability of Chinese Studies students and clarifies the mechanism through which this pedagogical approach operates within the higher education context.

Theoretical implications

This study contributes to experiential learning theory in two primary ways. First, the findings reinforce Kolb's (1984) argument regarding the role of experience and reflection in transforming knowledge into practical competence. Second, the application of a second-order structural model enables the assessment of both the overall impact of experiential learning on employability competence and its differential effects on specific dimensions. This approach extends the application of experiential learning theory to language and area studies education—an area that has received limited empirical investigation.

Additionally, the findings contribute empirical evidence to the theoretical framework of employability (Yorke, 2006; Tomlinson, 2017), demonstrating that employability competence is not formed solely through knowledge transmission but also through participation and real-world interaction.

Practical implications

From an educational management perspective, the findings suggest that Chinese Studies programs should strengthen the integration of experiential learning activities into the curriculum. Expanding mandatory internship opportunities, designing project-based courses, and organizing professional simulations may contribute to enhancing students' professional competence and intercultural communication skills.

Furthermore, institutions should establish structured reflection mechanisms following experiential activities to help students systematize their experiences and transform them into sustainable knowledge. Close collaboration between universities and enterprises plays a crucial role in ensuring the practical relevance and effectiveness of these activities.

Limitations and future research directions

Although the study yields meaningful results, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the data were collected using a cross-sectional design, which does not capture changes in employability competence over time. Future research may adopt a longitudinal design to assess the long-term effects of experiential learning.

Second, the sample was collected using convenience sampling from selected institutions; therefore, the generalizability of the findings remains limited. Future studies may expand the scope to multiple universities or conduct comparative analyses across different academic disciplines.

Third, this study focused on the direct relationship between experiential learning and employability competence. Future research may examine the mediating roles of variables such as learning motivation, career self-efficacy, or student engagement to further clarify the underlying mechanisms.

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