

AN EVALUATION OF THE GRADUATION PAPERS AT THE FACULTY OF LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SCIENCE (FLIS), HANOI UNIVERSITY OF CULTURE (HUC), FROM 2004 – 2008

NGUYEN CUONG LINH

Faculty of Library and Information Science, Hanoi University of Culture

418 La Thanh road, Hanoi, Vietnam

Email: nclinh11@gmail.com

Abstract

Purpose: The paper aims to provide an overall picture of the quality of the graduation papers of undergraduate students at FLIS-HUC. The focus of the research was general features of such papers as well as their structure, research methodologies, and citations and references.

Design/methodology/approach: Content analysis was used in terms of quantitative approach. A checklist as a research instrument was developed based on a basis of ideas synthesized from literature. Data were collected by browsing, scanning throughout the papers as well as reading thoroughly the introduction sections and references. Then, Microsoft Excel was utilized as a main tool to synthesize and analyze data.

Findings: While all graduation papers of undergraduate students at FLIS-HUC presented a good-looking appearance, they still show a lack of essential components in structure, a serious absence of research methodology section, and a shortage of standard citations and references.

Recommendations and conclusions: Four main recommendations were proposed including a revision and update of curriculum for the research methods subject, improvement of lecturers' capacities in doing and supervising scientific research, building 'standards' or 'criteria' as guidance for students, and development of policies in managing LIS graduation papers at HUC. The study also suggests some potential areas for future research.

1. Overview of LIS education in Vietnam and at the FLIS-HUC

Vietnam has an increasing number of library and information science (LIS) schools. As of 2007, three schools offer LIS programs at postgraduate level and 8 schools offer LIS education at undergraduate level (Thuvientre, 2007). At the same time, at least three institutions offer courses at immediate levels and tens of institutions offer short courses with certificates.

While Hanoi University of Culture (HUC) offers all above levels of LIS education, it is currently the first and the only institution in Vietnam offering LIS education at Doctorate level (HUC, 2008). However, there are two faculties in charge of LIS education at HUC. The faculty of postgraduate is responsible for Master and Doctorate levels and the faculty of library and information science (FLIS) is in charge of undergraduate and other levels.

FLIS is the oldest faculty at HUC and also the most ancient one in LIS education in Vietnam with 45 years of experience (Nguyen, 2004; Tran & Gorman, 1999). In recent years, more than one hundred students have been awarded the bachelor degree of library and information science at FLIS-HUC every year. Only students with the first three-year average score of at least 7.0 (out of 10.0) are eligible to do a research paper as a part of their LIS course. Such research papers are implemented in the final semester (five months) under supervision of a lecturer. Students must also uphold successfully their graduation papers as a requirement for awarding the bachelor degree in LIS.

2. Problem statement and research questions

Being able to do research in library and information environment is an essential qualification of librarians and information professionals. Especially in the today LIS environment, librarians and professionals have to cope with a wide range of new issues such as the diversity of information needs, an increasing number of information sources and many emerging new technologies. Doing research can improve librarians and information professionals' ability to think critically and analytically and more importantly, it also enhances the library's status in the community (Powell & Connaway, 2004). In order to emphasize the role of research in the library and information profession, Busha & Harter (1980) endorse Kunge's opinion, that "learning to master theoretically and in practical application, the ground rules of research creates the best foundation for continuing growth in a profession".

Meanwhile, LIS education and research in Vietnam is in a critical circumstance. National Library of Vietnam (2006) restates the words of the head of library department, Ministry of Culture and Information that "the curriculums and teaching methods in Vietnamese LIS schools were out of date, just focusing on quantity but not

quality, especially at undergraduate level". According to Bui (2004), one of the most important factors that directly affects the quality and effectiveness of LIS education is the competency of lecturers in doing research. However, she also shows that Vietnamese LIS lecturers are very limited in doing research. Therefore, it is challenging for students to implement a research paper as well as to gain satisfactory results. In addition, in a survey of quality of librarians at National Library of Vietnam, Pham (2004), the director of the library found that 52% librarians at National Library of Vietnam graduated from FLIS-HUC and 53% of those librarians did not satisfy with the quality of LIS education in the university.

Moreover, the co-operation in LIS research between the FLIS-HUC and the postgraduate faculty is feeble. There is an absence of information systems or the like to manage graduation papers of FLIS-HUC and those of the postgraduate faculty. Such papers are only managed in .doc or .xls files which lead to amusing situations. For example, in a graduation paper protection session in 2008, the chair of the scientific committee recognized the title of a graduation paper is almost completely same as one of a thesis paper at master level 2 years ago. Recently, in a graduation paper protection session for gaining the bachelor degree in LIS at FLIS-HUC, the head of professional department, National Library of Vietnam commented that the quality of graduation papers is somewhat in low quality because of the plagiarism.

A study draws an overall picture of the quality of the graduation papers of undergraduate students at FLIS-HUC, therefore, is necessary for not only students and lecturers at FLIS-HUC, but also useful for other LIS schools in Vietnam. In addition, LIS students and lecturers in other developing countries may find this study beneficial once they desire to promote or review LIS research in their institutions. The above context has raised a research problem that is stated as follows:

What is the quality of graduation papers of undergraduate students at FLIS-HUC?

Based on this research problem, research questions are indicated as follows:

1. *What are general features of graduation papers of undergraduate students at FLIS-HUC?*
2. *Do these papers include necessary parts of academic research papers?*
3. *Do these papers describe the research methodology (or explain how they were done)?*
4. *Are references and citations clear, correct and consistent?*

3. Research design

3.1. Research method

This study used content analysis in terms of the quantitative approach. Allen & Reser (1990) assert that "content analysis is used to identify and record the meaning of documents and other forms of communication in a systematic and quantitative way". Also, Krippendorff (1980) confirms that content analysis is context sensitive, accepts unstructured material, can process symbolic forms, and can deal with large volumes of data. The above characteristics and advantages of content analysis made it the most appropriate method for this research.

3.2. Research sample

According to Nguyen (2008), the library of the FLIS is holding graduation papers of undergraduate students from 1999 to 2008 with the total of 241 volumes. However, this study only chooses graduation papers in a period of five years (2004-2008) with the total of 141 volumes (volumes numbered 196 - 336). The reason for this sample method is that this is the most current period witnessing a number of changes in training programs and teaching methods at FLIS-HUC. Also, the population of the study is suitable and feasible for implementing.

3.3. Development of a research instrument

Due to the absence of generally accepted criteria or standards to evaluate graduation papers of students at undergraduate level and the fact that criteria may be diversified between universities. Therefore, the author developed his own research instrument in a form of a checklist to collect data for the research. The development of the checklist was synthesized ideas from literature.

3.4. Gathering data

Data for the research were collected in the first week of the academic year (from 18 August 2008 to 22 August 2008). During this time, all graduation papers were returned to the library and there was almost no borrowing request for this type of material.

Data for the checklist were collected by the following techniques:

- Browse each graduation paper for general features (appearance, paper size, etc.) and quickly scan for spelling mistakes, punctuations and headings, etc.
- Scan each paper for general structure then focus on the first part of the paper (the part before the research findings section) for detailed structure
- Thoroughly read the first part (the part before the research findings section) to see how the papers were implemented
- Examine references/bibliographies of papers for references and citations errors

Above 4 steps were compared against the checkpoints (questions/criteria) in the checklist.

3.5. Data analysis

Statistical techniques were used to analyze data based on the filled checklist. The checklist was converted into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. Each checkpoint in the checklist was assigned a value either 1 or 0 (Yes or No answers). These values were input directly in the spreadsheet (checklist) and then the 'SUM' function of Excel was used to calculate the overall score of each paper as well as each checkpoint. Each category was divided into a small table. Then, the following formula was used to calculate percentages of checkpoints in each category:

Total of 'Yes' answers of each checkpoint x 100 / total number of graduation papers

4. Results and discussions

4.1. General scores

Table 1 shows general scores of 141 graduation papers at FLIS-HUC from 2004 to 2008. As can be seen from the table, the total score of each paper ranges from 12 to 19 (out of 35 points). The lowest quality paper gained only one third of the maximum point and the best one gained just over a half of the maximum point. The mean point of 15.5 indicates that such graduation papers generally obtain under a half of the maximum point with only 44.3%.

Table 1: General scores of graduation papers

Level gained (Points/Percentage)	Number of paper gained this point	Notes
12 (34.3%)	1	
13 (37.1%)	9	
14 (40.0%)	13	
15 (42.9%)	48	
16 (45.7%)	27	
17 (48.6%)	28	
18 (51.4%)	12	
19 (54.3%)	3	
Mean point: 15.5 (44.3%)		

4.2. Category 1: General features

Table 2: Scores and percentages of graduation papers under the "General features" category

General features	Scores by each checkpoint	Percentages of papers with this checkpoint criteria)
Is it a neat paper?	141	100.0
Are page numbers included?	141	100.0
Is there a title page?	141	100.0
Are all headings consistent (same font size, font type, etc.)?	141	100.0
Is it a free of typing errors paper?	106	75.2
Are punctuations sufficient and consistent?	128	90.8

Table 2 presents general features of graduation papers with 6 checkpoints. According to the result, all papers had a good looking appearance. All of them are bound by hard covers, illustrated by copper-colored cover page and typewritten on one side of A4 paper. They all presented a consistency of headings (the same heading levels had the same font sizes and font types). Page number was included, however, some papers numbered all pages from beginning to the end (including title page, appendices and blank pages before the back cover).

Papers free of typing errors accounted for 75.2%. Nearly 25% of the papers committed errors such as crossing out, highlighting and inserting hand-written words. Just over 90% of the papers had sufficient and consistent punctuation marks. The rest (nearly 10 %) either did not have such marks at the end of paragraphs or used these marks randomly at the end of paragraphs or at the end of headings and subheadings. Besides, some headings in the papers used colons at the end of headings and sub-heading while the others did not.

4.3. Category 2: Structure

Table 3: Scores and percentages of graduation papers under the “Structure” category

Structure	Scores by each checkpoint	Percentages of papers with this checkpoint (criteria)
Is there an acknowledgement page?	6	4.3
Is there an abstract of the paper?	0	0.0
Is a table of contents included?	141	100.0
Are there keywords represented the paper's content?	0	0.0
Is there a statement of the problem?	48	34.0
Is there (a) research problem(s)?	0	0.0
Are there research questions?	0	0.0
Are there research objectives?	35	24.8
Is there a delimitations and limitations section?	19	13.5
Is the paper included a literature review?	0	0.0
Is there a research design section?	0	0.0
Is there a results/findings and discussions section?	141	100.0
Is there a conclusions section?	141	100.0
Are there recommendations in the paper?	141	100.0
Are references or bibliographies included?	141	100.0
Others (appendices, list of figures, ...)	137	97.2

A sufficiency of necessary components plays an important role towards graduation papers. Graduation papers must be in a formal academic style that somewhat be represented in the structure of the papers. As **Table 3** shows, very few papers had an acknowledgement page. It is usual practice to acknowledge supervisors, sponsors and any persons or organizations offering significant assistance. Such a page should be the first page of the paper (after the title page) to express the sincere thanks to particular supports. Most of the 141 graduation papers had a few words somewhere in the ‘introduction’ section of the papers. However, such words are usually placed randomly somewhere in the ‘introduction’ section.

It may be seen clearly from the **Table 3** that the result also shows a complete lack of an abstract and keywords page. It is vital to have a page presenting a brief abstract of the paper for readers to quickly and systematically comprehend content. Similarly, while only 34% papers had something similar to ‘statement of the problem’, 100% of the papers did not have a research problem and research questions (or sub-problems). As Creswell (2003) emphasizes, “it is important to clearly identify for the reader the issue or problem that leads to a need for the study”. Once students do not clearly identify the problem or know what exactly they want to investigate or have to answer, they will be easily digressed from their purposes and objectives of the research and will not know how to solve it. The only section that all papers had is ‘introduction’ that included all things from

something like problem statement to research methods and acknowledgement. According to the result, although all papers contain a one to three pages ‘introduction’, this section commonly presented a very general problem that was not convincing and embraced the papers’ topics.

Likewise, none of the 141 graduation papers had a ‘literature review’ and a ‘research design’ section. The result indicates that students could not differentiate ‘literature review’ and ‘research methods’. Therefore, they probably implemented their research by the guidance of their feeling instead of a specific methodology (*details are discussed under the ‘Category 3: Research design’ heading*).

Similarly, without a specific problem statement, research questions, literature review and research methodology, all papers still discussed their results and findings as well as made recommendations and drawn conclusions. Consequently, it is hard to ensure the objectiveness and impartiality of their research results/findings.

4.4. Category 3: Research design

Table 4: Scores and percentages of graduation papers under the “Research design” category

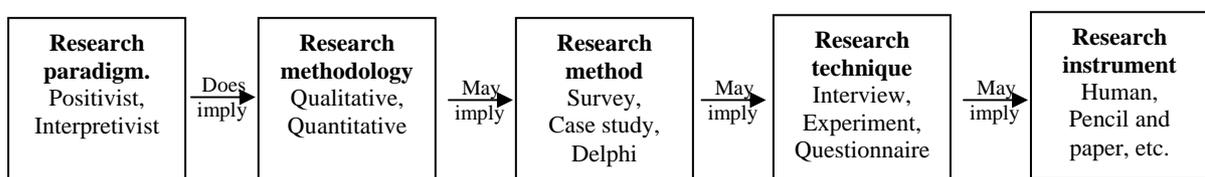
Research design	Scores by each checkpoint	Percentages of papers with this checkpoint (criteria)
Does the paper present a research methodology?	0	0.0
Does the paper present research method(s)	0	0.0
Is there a research procedure and/or timeline?	0	0.0
Does the paper show what the research sample is?	0	0.0
Is there a research instrument to collect data?	29	20.6
Does the paper discuss how to gather data?	0	0.0
Does the paper explain how to analyze data?	0	0.0
Does the paper explain how to synthesize and interpret data?	0	0.0

The ‘research design’ section is one of the most important parts of formal and academic research such graduation papers. Usually, it should:

- Describe how the research was done
- Explain the purpose of the research
- Present key stages of the study (process and methods)
- Demonstrate how data were gathered, analyzed and presented
- Show how any recommendations have been reached
- Discuss how conclusions were drawn

In practice, depending on the scope, purpose and the amount of time for the research, some of the above sections may be reduced or merged. However, they must clearly describe how the research was done in order to readers to be aware of the degree of accuracy and the objectivity of the results. Surprisingly, **Table 4** indicates a serious absence of a research design (or research methodology) section. According to Pickard (2007), a standard research hierarchy should include the following components:

Figure 1: The research hierarchy (Pickard, 2007)



Based on such a research hierarchy, students should discuss reasonably and convincingly why they decide to employ a specific research methodology, a research method, a research technique and research instrument but not the others.

As *Table 4* illustrates, none of the research discussed any of the above levels in the research hierarchy. Just over 20% papers had a research instrument; however, the only form of the research instruments was questionnaires for paper-based surveys. The problem is that they did not discuss what the research methodology or research method was but still included a research instrument in appendices. Some papers just simply named research methods without any discussion or explanation. Commonly, a majority of the papers said that they deployed a wide range of research methods such as synthesizing materials, analysis literature, comparison, observation, interviewing, discussion etc. Some papers named strange ‘research methods’ such as classification, library tour or mix of various methods.

Apart from 20 % papers had a form of a research instrument, 100% did not mention their research procedure, research sample as well as steps to gather data, to interpret data and present result. Together with the lack of a literature review and a research design section as indicated above, the findings and results of these graduation papers are in doubt about accuracy and impartiality.

4.5. Category 4: References and citations

Table 5: Scores and percentages of graduation papers under the “References and citations” category

References and citations	Scores by each checkpoint	Percentages of papers with this checkpoint (criteria)
Is work in the reference/bibliography in the alphabetical order?	117	83.0
Are there any quotations in the paper?	3	2.1
Are the references/bibliographies correct (based on a bibliographic rule)?	126	89.4
Are references/bibliographies in a consistent style?	68	48.2
No other mistakes (coincidence, ...)	121	85.8

It is very important for students to quote and cite references accurately and consistently. This is considered to be a vital requirement for a serious academic study. Hart (2000) points out three basic criteria for citing references: “Clear (citations must give full details of the item), consistent (always cite in the same way) and correct (use the proper structure)”. Also, Pickard (2007) and McQueen & Knussen (2002) distinguish a reference section from a bibliography. References relate to work actually cited while a bibliography is a list of any work that the researcher consulted, browsed or read for background information on the topic of the research. Many research papers indicate that students may not understand thoroughly those rules in doing research. As *Table 3* and *Table 5* display, 100% papers had references but only 2.1% of them included quotations in the text of the papers. Among that 2.1%, none of students cited correctly as they quoted only text without date or other information (but they had such information in the references). The rest of students did not make any acknowledgement even though they refer to the work of others. They were confused between references and bibliographies as all work was listed under the ‘references’ heading. A large number of the papers included some statistical figures, charts or other information without making an acknowledgement. Such information was not extracted or based on a research instrument.

Similarly, 17% papers sorted items in the list of references randomly while a majority of papers classified items into different categories such as ‘books’, ‘articles’, ‘Internet sources’, ‘electronic sources’ or ‘other sources’. All papers applied ISBD (International Standard Bibliographic Description) rules for references. However, more than 10% did not apply correctly the rules as they lacked punctuation marks or abbreviated randomly. In addition, more than a half of the papers had an inconsistent style of description. They might apply ISBD rules for books and articles but simply listed down URLs for Internet sources without other information. Some papers made indentations for only a few entries in the references but did not do so for the rest. Also, other mistakes were investigated such as making two entries for an item in the references (repetition) and lacking punctuation marks.

5. Recommendations

In order to improve and develop LIS research of undergraduate students at FLIS-HUC, the study proposes the following recommendations. They are either direct or indirect solutions but necessary to be carried out in order to make significant changes and promote the development of LIS research at this institution.

Recommendation 1: Review and update curriculum of the research methods subject

An innovative and updated curriculum of the research methods subject is extremely important. Such a subject must equip students with methodologies that enable them to independently carry out research. It is impossible to produce good research papers without mastering research methodologies, comprehending how to do a literature review or understanding what references and citations are. Also, students should be familiar with doing research via practical exercises which are provided in the research methods subject.

Recommendation 2: Improve lecturers' capacities in doing and supervising scientific research

Lecturers or supervisors play an important role in success of students in doing scientific research. To be a good scientific research supervisor, a lecturer must first be a good researcher who has an excellent understanding of research methodologies and be able to effectively apply methodologies in doing specific research. This requirement becomes more important as undergraduate students are normally not familiar with doing research because they commonly do research at first time (in almost all cases). Lecturers or supervisors, therefore, should have opportunities to do research, to participate in professional workshops, and to attend conferences or forums for discussing and exchanging experience and knowledge with other colleagues.

Recommendation 3: Build 'standards' or 'criteria' as guidance for students

In an academic environment such a university, research papers should be in a formal academic style. Therefore, the FLIS may develop 'standards' or 'criteria' in forms of research handbooks or standard checklists as guidelines for students to follow. The guidance may cover a wide range of issues such as writing a research proposal, planning for research, references and citations, and presentation of the research results, etc. Such guidance enables students to avoid common mistakes in conducting a research paper and to equip them with crucial skills to produce a paper in a professional and academic manner.

Recommendation 4: Develop policies in managing LIS graduation papers at HUC

A database or information system that can be publicly accessed by LIS students and lecturers at HUC is necessary. Researchers (students) and supervisors (lecturers) should be well-informed about what other researchers/authors have been doing. Such a system may reduce the repetition or coincidence in research topics. Moreover, it enables supervisors to keep control of plagiarism problems in LIS research.

6. Conclusions

It could be seen that while graduation paper of undergraduate students at FLIS-HUC presented a good-looking appearance, they still show a lack of vital components in structure, a serious absence of research methodology section and a shortage of correct citations and references.

This research draws an overall picture about the quality of the graduation papers of undergraduate students at FLIS-HUC. It attempts to provide useful information for LIS schools in Vietnam and also other LIS students and lectures in developing countries.

However, due to the time constraint, the study did not employ other methods other than content analysis. A combination of content analysis, survey and interview may collect ideas of LIS students and lecturers and would give different perspectives. Further research in a similar area may be a relationship between LIS research of undergraduate and postgraduate students at HUC and other LIS schools in Vietnam. LIS research of students and their working capacities in practice is also a potential for further investigation.

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Appendix: Evaluation checklist applied for graduation papers of undergraduate students at FLIS-HUC (abridged checklist)

No.	CHECKPOINTS	GRADUATION PAPER NUMBER												Notes
		196	197	198	199	200	...	...	332	333	334	335	336	
1	Is it a neat paper?	1	1	1	1	1	...	...	1	1	1	1	1	
2	Are page numbers included?	1	1	1	1	1	...	...	1	1	1	1	1	
3	Is there a title page?	1	1	1	1	1	...	...	1	1	1	1	1	
4	Are all headings consistent (same font size, font type, etc.)?	1	1	1	1	1	...	...	1	1	1	1	1	
5	Is it a free of typing errors paper?	1	0	0	0	1	...	...	1	0	1	0	1	
6	Are punctuations sufficient and consistent?	0	0	0	0	1	...	...	1	0	1	1	1	
	CATEGORY 2 - STRUCTURE													
7	Is there an acknowledgement page?	0	0	0	0	0	...	...	0	0	0	0	0	
8	Is there an abstract of the paper?	0	0	0	0	0	...	...	0	0	0	0	0	
9	Is a table of contents included?	1	1	1	1	1	...	...	1	1	1	1	1	
10	Are there keywords represented the paper's content?	0	0	0	0	0	...	...	0	0	0	0	0	

1 1	Is there a statement of the problem?	1	1	0	0	1	...	...	1	1	0	1	1	
1 2	Is there (a) research problem(s)?	0	0	0	0	0	...	...	0	0	0	0	0	
1 3	Are there research questions?	0	0	0	0	0	...	...	0	0	0	0	0	
1 4	Are there research objectives?	0	1	0	0	0	...	...	1	0	1	0	1	
1 5	Is there a delimitations and limitations section?	1	1	0	0	0	...	...	0	1	0	0	1	
1 6	Is the paper included a literature review?	0	0	0	0	0	...	...	0	0	0	0	0	
1 7	Is there a research design section?	0	0	0	0	0	...	...	0	0	0	0	0	
1 8	Is there a results/findings and discussions section?	1	1	1	1	1	...	...	1	1	1	1	1	
1 9	Is there a conclusions section?	1	1	1	1	1	...	...	1	1	1	1	1	
2 0	Are there recommendations in the paper?	1	1	1	1	1	...	...	1	1	1	1	1	
2 1	Are references or bibliographies included?	1	1	1	1	1	...	...	1	1	1	1	1	
2 2	Others (appendices, list of figures, ...)	0	1	0	1	1	...	...	1	1	1	1	1	
	CATEGORY 3 - RESEARCH DESIGN													
2 3	Does the paper present a research methodology?	0	0	0	0	0	...	...	0	0	0	0	0	
2 4	Does the paper present research method(s)	0	0	0	0	0	...	...	0	0	0	0	0	
2 5	Is there a research procedure and/or timeline?	0	0	0	0	0	...	...	0	0	0	0	0	
2 6	Does the paper show what the research sample is?	0	0	0	0	0	...	...	0	0	0	0	0	
2 7	Is there a research instrument to collect data?	0	0	0	1	0	...	...	1	0	1	0	0	
2 8	Does the paper discuss how to gather data?	0	0	0	0	0	...	...	0	0	0	0	0	
2 9	Does the paper explain how to analyze data?	0	0	0	0	0	...	...	0	0	0	0	0	
3 0	Does the paper explain how to synthesize and interpret data?	0	0	0	0	0	...	...	0	0	0	0	0	
	CATEGORY 4 - REFERENCES AND CITATIONS													
3 1	Is work in the reference/ bibliography in the alphabetical order?	0	0	1	1	1	...	...	1	1	1	1	1	
3 2	Are there any quotations in the paper?	0	0	0	0	0	...	...	0	1	0	0	1	
3 3	Are the references/bibliographies correct (based on a bibliographic rule)?	0	1	0	0	0	...	...	1	1	1	1	1	
3 4	Are references/bibliographies in a consistent style?	0	1	1	1	1	...	...	0	0	0	0	0	
3 5	No other mistakes (coincidence, ...)	1	1	1	1	0	...	...	1	1	1	1	1	
	TOTAL SCORE OF EACH PAPER	13	16	12	14	15	...	...	18	16	17	15	19	

About the Author

Nguyen Cuong Linh earned a Master of Library and Information Studies degree from Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand, a Bachelor of Information Technology from National University of Vietnam. He is currently a lecturer at Hanoi University of Culture, Vietnam and specialized in Internet searching, information/knowledge management, electronic libraries, organization of information in digital libraries, and research methods in library and information management.