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### DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION, COOPERATION AND GLOBAL INTEGRATION IN THE NEW NORMAL

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## TABLE OF CONTENT

### APPLICATION OF TECHNOLOGY AND BIG DATA IN THE FIELDS OF FINANCE, ACCOUNTING AND AUDITING IN THE CONTEXT OF GLOBALIZATION

BANK RUN AND SILICON VALLEY BANK .....	1
Lam Dang Xuan Hoa, Ho Minh Khoa, Huynh Vo Nhat Linh .....	1
BIG DATA AND INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY RIGHTS.....	14
Le Thi Minh, Vo Trung Hau .....	14
THE EFFICIENCY OF THE INTERNAL CONTROL SYSTEM IN RISK MANAGEMENT AT THE NAM A COMMERCIAL JOINT STOCK BANK .....	23
Truong Thanh Loc, Tran Ngoc Thanh.....	23
VIETNAM - AUSTRALIA ECONOMIC AND TRADE COOPERATION IN THE NEW NORMAL: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR VIETNAMESE INVESTORS.....	30
Nhu Nguyen Phuc Quynh*, Anh Nguyen Thi Nguyet, Duy Nguyen Anh .....	30
IMPACTS OF CREDIT GROWTH AND CREDIT RISK ON THE PROFIT OF VIETNAM JOINT STOCK COMMERCIAL BANKS .....	43
Dao Le Kieu Oanh*, Tran Thi Huong Ngan .....	43
FACTORS AFFECTING CUSTOMERS' DECISIONS TO USE E-BANKING AT JOINT STOCK COMMERCIAL BANKS IN HO CHI MINH CITY .....	57
Nguyen Duy Khanh <sup>1</sup> , Pham Quoc Tham <sup>2</sup> .....	57
HOW CHINA_USA POLITICAL TENSIONS AFFECT STOCK MARKET RETURN OF CHINA AND THE USA? A QUANTILE VAR CONNECTEDNESS APPROACH .....	70
Hao Wen Chang <sup>1</sup> , Tsangyao Chang <sup>2</sup> and Mei-Chih Wang <sup>3</sup> .....	70
BANKING HUMAN RESOURCES BEFORE THE DEVELOPMENT OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AI .....	92
Nguyen Huynh Chi.....	92
IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF TRAINING THROUGH IMPROVEMENT OF STUDENT TESTING AND ASSESSMENT – CASE IN ACCOUNTING BRANCH, UNIVERSITY OF ECONOMICS AND FINANCE .....	102
Thuy Thi Ha .....	102
ACTIVITIES OF DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION IN VIETNAMESE COMMERCIAL BANKS: AN OVERVIEW DURING THE COVID-19 RECOVERY PERIOD.....	109
Nguyễn Thị Quỳnh Châu, Đào Lê Kiều Oanh .....	109
OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR VIETNAM IN ATTRACTIVE FDI IN GLOBAL MINIMUM CORPORATE TAX IMPLEMENTATION .....	117
Ngo Hoang Thong .....	117

## **DIGITAL ECONOMY IN VIETNAM, TRENDS AND POTENTIABILITY**

DEVELOPING SMART HOME MODEL FOR APARTMENTS IN HO CHI MINH CITY BASED ON INTERNET OF THINGS (IoT) TECHNOLOGY .....	182
Dang Thanh Thuy <sup>1</sup> , Nguyen Thanh Dien <sup>2</sup> .....	182
TRANSPARENCY OF ACCOUNTING INFORMATION OF CONSTRUCTION ENTERPRISES IN HO CHI MINH CITY – CASE STUDY OF APPLICATION OF ACCRUAL ACCOUNTING .....	193
Truong Thanh Loc <sup>1*</sup> , Pham Thi Yen Nhi <sup>2</sup> .....	193
FACTORS AFFECTING THE QUALITY OF FINANCIAL STATEMENTS OF MANUFACTURING ENTERPRISES IN HO CHI MINH CITY .....	207
Truong Thanh Loc <sup>*</sup> , Dang Nguyen Tuong Han, Nguyen Ngoc Mai Phuong, Nguyen Thi Quynh Huong .....	207
THE CRITICAL FACTORS OF COLLEGE STUDENTS' INTENTION TO USE METAVERSE TECHNOLOGY FOR SUBJECTS RELATED TO IMPORT-EXPORT LEARNING .....	221
Van Thuy Nguyen Ho, Chau The Huu, Luan Thanh Nguyen <sup>*</sup> .....	221
CONSUMER PERCEPTION ABOUT THE SUSTAINABILITY COMMITMENT OF LUXURY BRANDS IN VIETNAM AND CHINA MARKETS.....	233
Tran Minh Tu <sup>1</sup> .....	233
INFLUENCE OF WOM AND EWOM IN MAKING DECISION BUYING GOODS .....	247
Doan Anh Tu <sup>1</sup> , Kim Phi Rum <sup>2</sup> , Nguyen Pham Hai Ha <sup>3</sup> .....	247
DIGITAL ECONOMY AND DEVELOPMENT POTENTIAL IN VIETNAM.....	257
Hoang Thi Chinh, Nguyen Hoang Phan .....	257
BLOCKCHAIN APPLICATION IN MODERN LOGISTICS: INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE AND SOME RECOMMENDATIONS FOR VIETNAM .....	266
Nguyen Nu Tuong Vi.....	266
FACTORS AFFECTING THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE DIGITAL ECONOMY IN VIETNAM .....	272
Vo Tien Si .....	272
LEGAL FRAME FOR THE OPERATION OF THE REAL ESTATE BUSINESS UTILIZING THE BLOCKCHAIN PLATFORM IN VIETNAM.....	284
Le Thi Khanh Linh.....	284

## **DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION – COOPERATION – GLOBAL INTEGRATION IN BUSINESS**

FACTORS INFLUENCING BUSINESS ACCEPTANCE OF INDUSTRY 4.0 TECHNOLOGY APPLICATIONS IN DONG NAI PROVINCE.....	291
Thanh-Thu Vo*, Minh-Huong Tang.....	291
DIGITAL ORIENTATION, INNOVATION CAPABILITY AND FIRM PERFORMANCE: A PROPOSAL RESEARCH MODEL .....	298
Nguyen Van Hau .....	298
PREDICTION OF STUDENT'S BEHAVIORAL INTENTION TO USE SMART LEARNING ENVIRONMENT: A COMBINED MODEL OF SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY AND TECHNOLOGY ACCEPTANCE .....	309
Nguyen Thi Hai Binh <sup>1</sup> , Dao Y Nhi <sup>2</sup> , Nguyen Thanh Luan <sup>3</sup> , Dang Quan Tri <sup>4</sup> .....	309
THE PEDAGOGICAL IMPACT OF GRAMMARLY ON EFL WRITING COMPETENCY: AN EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION CONTEXT. ....	323
Nguyen Thi Hong Lien <sup>1</sup> , Nguyen Truong Gia Minh <sup>2</sup> , Nguyen Ngoc Vu <sup>3*</sup> .....	323
FACTORS AFFECTING PURCHASING DECISION OF THE YOUTH ON TIKTOK .....	336
Ngoc Pham <sup>1</sup> , Thanh Cong Tran*.....	336
FACTORS AFFECTING OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY BEHAVIORS OF WORKERS DIRECT PRODUCTION AT CU CHI POWER COMPANY.....	345
Minh Luan Le, Thi Trang Tran.....	345
CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AND EMPLOYEES' ORGANIZATIONAL CITIZENSHIP BEHAVIOUR.....	355
Nguyen Xuan Hung <sup>1</sup> , Ha Le Thu Hoai <sup>1</sup> , Nguyen Huu My Truc <sup>2&amp;3</sup> , Pham Tan Nhat <sup>2&amp;3</sup> .....	355
THE INNOVATION CAPACITY - THE ROLE OF LEADERS OF SMALL AND MEDIUM ENTERPRISES IN HO CHI MINH CITY, VIETNAM.....	365
Huynh Nhut Nghia .....	365
PEOPLE'S THOUGHTS ON THE IMPACT OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE ON BUSINESS .....	376
Ton Nguyen Trong Hien, Bui Tuyet Anh .....	376
FACTORS AFFECTING BRAND SWITCHING INTENTION IN THE CONTEXT OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN VIETNAM .....	382
Ly Dan Thanh, Nguyen Phu Quoi, Tran Hoang Nam, Vo Hong Son, Nguyen Ngoc Thuy Tien .....	382
ENHANCE THE DIGITAL COMPETITIVENESS .....	398
Tran Quang Canh, Hoang Thi Chinh.....	398

ASSESSING PATIENT SATISFACTION (BRAND) AFTER THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AT THU DUC CITY HOSPITAL.....	408
Nguyen Hoang Dung <sup>1*</sup> , Nguyen Huynh Bao An <sup>2</sup> , Van Phuong Trang <sup>2</sup> .....	408
INDUSTRIAL AND HUMAN RESOURCES FORM THE FOUNDATION FOR BINH DUONG'S SUSTAINABLE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT .....	408
Hoang-An Nguyen .....	417
IMPACT OF ORGANIZATIONAL FAIRNESS ON THE EMPLOYEES' KNOWLEDGE SHARING IN TRAVEL AND TOURISM ENTERPRISES IN HO CHI MINH CITY .....	426
Le Thi Nhu Quynh <sup>1,2</sup> , Le Thi Giang <sup>2</sup> , Truong Quang Dung <sup>1</sup> .....	426
THE EFFECT OF PERSONAL MOTIVATION ON THE TACIT KNOWLEDGE SHARING BEHAVIOR OF 5-STAR HOTELS' EMPLOYEES IN HO CHI MINH CITY .....	440
Le Thi Giang, Nguyen Bach Hoang Phung.....	440
DIGITAL COMPETITIVENESS AND OPERATIONAL EFFICIENCY OF ENTERPRISES IN THE DIGITAL ERA: THE CASE OF VIETNAMESE ENTERPRISES .....	453
Diep Nguyen Thi Ngoc <sup>1*</sup> , Canh Quang Tran <sup>2</sup> , Anh Bach Hoang Ngoc <sup>1</sup> .....	453
FACTORS INFLUENCING PARENTS' SELECTION OF PRIVATE PRESCHOOLS IN THU DUC CITY .....	466
Thi-Trang Tran <sup>1</sup> , Thi-My-Dung Pham <sup>2</sup> , Thi-Bich-Diep Le <sup>1*</sup> .....	466

## **RECOVERY COMMUNICATIONS IN THE TOURISM AND HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY AFTER THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

DEVELOPING A SPIRITUAL TOURISM DESTINATION IMAGE MEASUREMENT SCALE OF AN GIANG .....	474
Nguyen Vuong Hoai Thao <sup>1</sup> , Nguyen Quyet Thang <sup>2</sup> .....	474
PROSPECTS OF VIRTUAL REALITY TOURISM APPLICATION IN VIETNAM TOURISM PROMOTION .....	487
Nguyen Thi Hong Ha, Pham Thi Huong Giang.....	487
PERSONALIZATION TRAVEL TRENDING IN HO CHI MINH CITY IN THE CONTEXT OF POST COVID-19 .....	497
Duong Bao Trung.....	497
IMPACTS OF MEDIA ON CUSTOMERS' DECISION TO CHOOSE FOOD AND BEVERAGE SERVICES POST THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC .....	511
Nguyen Thi Bich Van .....	511
DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION APPLICATION TO PROMOTE THE RECOVERY AND DEVELOPMENT OF INBOUND TOURISM IN HO CHI MINH CITY .....	521
Tran Trong Thanh .....	521
VIETNAM TOURISM AFTER COVID-19 PANDEMIC .....	527
Nguyen Hoang Phan <sup>1</sup> , Hoang Thi Chinh <sup>2</sup> .....	527
NAVIGATING THE EVOLVING LANDSCAPE OF SOCIAL MEDIA DATA MINING AND PRIVACY .....	537
Pham Thai Hien .....	537
THE CORRELATION BETWEEN STUDENT SELF-REPORTED GENERAL WELL-BEING AND PERCEIVED SUPPORT FROM FRIENDS, TEACHERS, AND UNIVERSITY .....	545
Virginia Kelsey <sup>1</sup> , Đặng Thị Mai Ly <sup>2*</sup> , Nguyễn Anh Khoa <sup>2</sup> , Nguyễn Văn Tường <sup>2</sup> .....	545

## **DIGITAL VERSUS NON- DIGITAL**

PROVIDING CONVENIENCE TO CUSTOMERS IN THE DIGITAL MARKETING ERA: OBSERVATIONS FROM COMMERCIAL BANKS IN HO CHI MINH CITY .....	556
Nguyen Quang Trung .....	556
VIRTUAL REALITY: AN INNOVATIVE TOOL IN TOURISM EXPERIENTIAL MARKETING .....	564
Thanh Nguyen Ngoc Le <sup>1</sup> , Khuong Thanh Nguyen <sup>2</sup> .....	564
THEORETICAL CONCEPTS OF STRATEGIC POSITIONING FOR PLACE BRANDING: A CASE STUDY OF DONG THAP PROVINCE .....	580
Phan Bao Giang.....	580
LITERATURE REVIEW ON THE IMPACT OF DIGITAL MARKETING ON VIETNAM'S SMALL AND THE MEDIUM BUSINESS ENTERPRISES (SMEs) .....	587
Lê Kim Nguyên * .....	587

## **CHALLENGES FACED BY TEACHERS IN NON-TRADITIONAL EDUCATION**

PROPOSE AN ONLINE TEACHING COMPETENCE SCALE FOR UNIVERSITY LECTURERS

.....596

Duong Thi Kim Oanh\*, Dang Thi Dieu Hien .....596

EXAMINE USAGE OF LEARNING MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS (LMSS) BY FACULTY  
STAFF AT UNIVERSITY OF ECONOMICS (UEF) AND FINANCE WITH EXPANDED  
TECHNOLOGY ACCEPTANCE MODEL (TAM).....608

Ha Truong Minh Hieu, Ngo Minh Hai\*, Mach Tran Huy.....608



## **DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION AN INDISPENSABLE EVOLUTION FOR SUSTAINABLE CORPORATES**

FACTORS AFFECTING THE APPLICATION OF STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT ACCOUNTING AT MANUFACTURING ENTERPRISES IN BINH DUONG PROVINCE .....	618
Truong Thanh Loc <sup>1*</sup> , Nguyen Thi Thanh Truc <sup>2</sup> .....	618
HRM DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION: TAKING A ROAD OF SUCCESSION PLANNING ..	629
Trương Phan Hoàng Anh, Giang Ngọc Anh.....	629
THE IMPLICATION OF CONTACTLESS SERVICE AS A TOOL TO IMPROVE CUSTOMER REVISIT INTENTION .....	640
Linh, Nguyen Duy Yen* .....	640
TOURISM BRAND LOVE IN THE DIGITAL AGE: THE ROLE OF ONLINE TOURIST EXPERIENCES, TOURIST-BRAND RELATIONSHIP QUALITY AND SUSTAINABILITY .....	651
Thanh Nguyen Ngoc Le .....	651
CONDUCTING FOCUS GROUPS IN CROSS-CULTURAL SCHOLARSHIP OF TEACHING AND LEARNING (SoTL): A COMPARATIVE CASE STUDY .....	662
Punithan Moganathas <sup>1</sup> , Jenny Hill <sup>2</sup> , Andy V.-M. Kok <sup>2</sup> , Matt Barr <sup>2</sup> , Ruffin Relja <sup>2*</sup> , Philippa Ward <sup>2</sup> , Duong Tran Quang Hoang <sup>3</sup> , Quynh Phuong Tran <sup>3</sup> .....	662
LEVERAGING DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION FOR SUSTAINABLE CORPORATE EVOLUTION IN VIETNAM .....	677
Nguyen, Tan Dat <sup>1</sup> , Le, Dinh Thang <sup>2</sup> .....	677

## INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY AND APPLICATIONS

FB-PROPHET MODEL FOR TIME SERIES FORECASTING IN SALES .....	691
Thanh Cong Tran .....	691
USING AI CODE IN C# PROGRAMMING .....	698
Nguyen Ha Giang.....	698
DETERMINANTS OF CONTINUANCE USAGE INTENTION OF MOBILE FOOD ORDERING APPLICATIONS (MFOAS) AMONG VIETNAMESE USERS: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF E- SATISFACTION .....	705
Lam Hoang Phuong <sup>1*</sup> , Nguyen Thi Kim Lien <sup>2</sup> , Tien Hung Nguyen <sup>3</sup> , Vinh Long Nguyen <sup>4</sup> .....	705
DECODING MARKETING INSIGHT: INSIGHT FROM OUTSIDE.....	718
Hoàng Thị Hằng, Trần Thành Công* .....	718
DIGITAL DISRUPTION AND DATA SECURITY: HOW FINTECH IS RESHAPING BANKING ...	724
Hoàng Văn Hiếu, Trần Ngọc Thiên Ngân.....	724

## **TRENDS AND ISSUES IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION AND RESEARCH**

EFL LEARNERS' ATTITUDES AND LEARNING ENGAGEMENT IN COMMUNICATIVE GAME-BASED GRAMMAR TEACHING .....	736
Nguyen Thi Thanh Huyen <sup>1</sup> , Tran Quoc Thao <sup>2</sup> .....	736
APPROACHES TO TEACHING L2 LISTENING:.....	749
CLOSING THE GAP BETWEEN REAL-LIFE AND CLASSROOM-BASED LISTENING .....	749
Luu Thi Mai Vy .....	749
DEFINING ROLES OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN THE 21ST CENTURY LANGUAGE CLASSROOM .....	755
Ho Xuan Tien, Duong My Tham.....	755
EFL STUDENTS' ATTITUDES AND LEARNING INVESTMENT IN PORTFOLIO - BASED ENGLISH WRITING LEARNING: A LITERATURE REVIEW .....	763
Ly Gia Huy <sup>1</sup> , Tran Quoc Thao <sup>2</sup> .....	763
EXPLORING EFL LEARNER IDENTITIES IN PROJECT-BASED LANGUAGE LEARNING AT A HIGH SCHOOL IN AN GIANG PROVINCE .....	774
Nguyen Hong Thien <sup>1</sup> , Tran Quoc Thao <sup>2</sup> .....	774
THE VALUES OF SYNTACTIC COMPLEXITY IN ACADEMIC WRITING: A LITERATURE REVIEW .....	791
THE ISSUE OF AMBIGUITY IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE.....	801
Nguyen Dinh Tuan .....	801
RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES ON JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL EFL STUDENTS' MOTIVATION IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING .....	812
Huynh Thanh Nhon <sup>1</sup> , Tran Quoc Thao <sup>2</sup> .....	812
EXPLORING THE INFLUENCE OF WRITING ANXIETY ON VIETNAMESE ESL UNDERGRADUATES' WRITING PERFORMANCE: A QUANTITATIVE STUDY.....	821
Nguyen Ngoc Nguyen, Nguyen Hoang Phan.....	821
THE APPLICATION OF THE “FLIPPED CLASSROOM” MODEL IN TEACHING ENGLISH IN THE VIETNAMESE UNIVERSITY EDUCATION ENVIRONMENT .....	838
THE USE OF RESOURCE MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES IN EFLFLIPPED CLASSROOMS .....	847
Nguyen Quynh Thao Vy <sup>1,*</sup> , Duong My Tham <sup>2</sup> .....	847
INSIGHTS INTO ENGLISH MAJOR STUDENTS' USE OF PHRASAL VERBS IN ACADEMIC WRITING.....	860
Do Thi Thanh Thuy, Tran Quoc Thao .....	860

## **LAW IN THE CONTEXT OF INTERNATIONAL INTEGRATION**

LEGALISING INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY INFRINGEMENTS IN RUSSIA – A WAR TACTIC IN THE CONTEXT OF RUSSIA’S INVASION OF UKRAINE.....	869
Bui Thi Hong Ninh* .....	869
MODEL OF ASSET REGISTRATION WORLDWIDE AND LESSONS FOR VIETNAM IN IMPROVING ASSET REGISTRATION LAWS.....	880
Vu Anh Sao <sup>1,2</sup> , Nguyen Thi Xuan Mai <sup>2</sup> .....	880
LEGAL ISSUES ARISING FROM THE DEVELOPMENT, IMPLEMENTATION, AND USE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI) - INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCES AND LESSONS FOR VIETNAM .....	887
Le Hoang Minh Huy*, Nguyen Thi Thu Ha, Dao Trong Duc, Ky Dieu Linh, Bui Thi Thuy Linh, Nguyen Nam Trung.....	887
SOUTH KOREA’S EXPERIENCES ON PROPERTY REGISTRATION LAW - LESSONS FOR VIETNAM .....	896
Vu Anh Sao, Pham Huynh Bao Oanh.....	896
THE RISE OF REMOTE WORK: LEGAL CHALLENGES AND IMPLICATIONS FOR EMPLOYMENT LAW IN VIETNAM .....	903
Nguyen Thi Xuan Mai <sup>1</sup> , Nguyen Thi Ngoc Loan <sup>2</sup> .....	903
CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK IN THE EMERGING AGE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE.....	910
Nguyen Thi Thu Trang .....	910
THE IMPACTS OF GLOBAL MINIMUM TAX ON FOREIGN DIRECT INVESTMENT (FDI) CORPORATIONS IN VIETNAM.....	921
Trần Ngọc Thanh <sup>1</sup> .....	921
CROSS-BORDER E-COMMERCE ACTIVITIES AND TAX MANAGEMENT ISSUES .....	933
Le Huynh Phuong Chinh, Ngo Thi Khanh Linh, Pham Ngoc Lan Anh.....	933
EXPERIENCE IN KOREA AND CHINA ON TAX MANAGEMENT FOR CROSS-BORDER E-COMMERCE ACTIVITIES .....	941
Duong Anh Son <sup>1</sup> , Tran Vang Phu <sup>2</sup> .....	941
LEGAL PERSPECTIVE ON REGULATIONS RALATED TO PERSONAL INCOME TAX WHEN EARNING INCOME THROUGH E-COMMERCE PLATFORMS IN VIETNAM, TAKING THE CASE OF INDIVIDUALS DOING BUSINESS THROUGH TIKTOK APPLICATION.....	946
Nguyen Duc Tri <sup>1</sup> , Hoang Minh Châu <sup>2</sup> .....	946
THE COMPATIBILITY ON THE SCOPE OF MUTUAL LEGAL ASSISTANCE (MLA) IN CRIMINAL MATTERS AND THE CONDITIONS OF REFUSAL MLA IN CRIMINAL MATTERS BETWEEN VIETNAMESE LAW AND INTERNATIONAL TREATIES WHICH VIETNAM HAS SIGNED. ....	956

Pham Huynh Bao Oanh.....	956
TAX POLICY FOR E-COMMERCE OF COUNTRIES IN THE WORLD AND RECOMMENDATIONS TO VIETNAM.....	967
Nguyen Thanh Minh Chanh, Ha Thi Van Anh, Pham Lam Tam Nhu .....	967
LEGAL REGULATIONS FOR ENTERPRISE OBLIGATIONS TO PROVIDE INFORMATION ON E-COMMERCE PLATFORM .....	974
Truong Kim Phung*, Nguyen Hoang Chuong .....	974
“ROBOT TAX” – RECOMMENDATIONS FOR VIETNAM.....	981
Gian Thi Le Na, Pham Phuong Doanh.....	981
WTO APPELLATE BODY REFORM IN THE CONTEXT OF ESCALATING GEOPOLITICAL TENSIONS.....	988
Nguyen Nam Trung.....	988

IMPACTS OF STATE OWNERSHIP AND BUSINESS CHARACTERISTICS ON TAX AVOIDANCE: EVIDENCE IN VIETNAM.....	128
Huyen Ngoc Nguyen, Thanh Dan Bui .....	128
RUSSIA'S IMPACTS AND SCENES ON BEING BANNED FROM SWIFT .....	143
Lam Dang Xuan Hoa <sup>1</sup> , Phan Ngoc Anh <sup>2</sup> .....	143
THE ROLE OF ACCESS TO FINANCE AND THE ENTREPRENEURIAL INTENTION OF YOUNGERS IN THE SOUTHWESTERN PROVINCE, VIETNAM.....	151
Vu Truc Phuc*, Nguyen Dang Hat, Nguyen An Phu, Dao Le Kieu Oanh .....	151

## INSIGHTS INTO ENGLISH MAJOR STUDENTS' USE OF PHRASAL VERBS IN ACADEMIC WRITING

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### ***Abstract***

*This study investigated the use of phrasal verbs in academic writing by English major students at a university in Binh Duong. Data were collected through small group interviews and a corpus of 150 academic writings. The findings revealed that particle verbs, prepositional verbs, and phrasal-prepositional verbs were the most commonly used types of phrasal verbs. The functions of phrasal verbs included expressing cause and effect, describing processes, and signaling transitions between ideas. The reasons for the use of phrasal verbs in academic writing by English majored students were related to linguistic factors, such as the desire for variety and the influence of L1 transfer, and academic factors, such as a lack of awareness of the expectations of academic writing in English. This study contributes to understanding the utilization of phrasal verbs in academic writing by English major students. The findings highlight the types and functions, providing valuable insights into their role in academic writing.*

***Keywords:*** *academic writing, English, function, phrasal verb, reason*

### **1. Introduction**

English is an international language used to present scientific research at conferences around the world. However, using English fluently is a challenge for people from non-English speaking countries, including Vietnam and other countries around the world. To write a scientific article in English, English as Second Language (ESL) learners must spend a lot of time learning and looking up how to use unknown phrases (Vu and Burns, 2014). If a student learns the grammar in general and the verb phrase well, the language they use will become natural and the student's English level will also improve. Phrasal verbs are widely used by the native speakers of English in oral and written communication. According to Mahmoud. (2015) states that most native English speakers often use one or more phrasal verbs in their daily life. It can be said that most of the sentences, paragraphs, novels, films, speech in English use phrasal verbs. It means as the learner of English, the students could not ignore the use of phrasal verbs in their daily life.

Academic writing plays a crucial role in higher education, particularly in the context of A university in Binh Duong in Vietnam, where students are expected to produce high-quality academic papers, including scientific research and theses. However, many English learners, including English majored students at a university in Binh Duong, struggle with using phrasal verbs in their writing, which can result in imprecise language and lower grades. Therefore, This study is designed to examine the utilization of phrasal verbs in academic writing by English majored students at a university in Binh Duong. Accordingly, this study addresses the following research questions: (1) What are the types of phrasal verbs used in academic writing by English majored students at a university in Binh Duong? (2) What are the functions of phrasal verbs in academic writing by English majored students at a university in Binh Duong? (3) What are the underlying

reasons for the use of phrasal verbs in academic writing by English majored students at a university in Binh Duong?

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1. Definitions of phrasal verbs**

There are many definitions of phrasal verbs. According to Alexander Longman noted by Side (1990), one of the outstanding features of verbs in English is that it can be combined with prepositions and nouns. Broadly speaking people call this association the phrasal verbs. Meanwhile, Hornby (1995)'s definition says that phrasal verbs (also called verbs of more than one word: multi-word verbs) are verbs consisting of two or three words. One of the words must be a verb and it is followed by an adverb or a preposition or both. According to Randolph Quirk and Sidney Greenbaun (1973), at University Grammar of English-Longman Group UK Limited, the definition of verb phrases is used a lot as that a phrasal verb is a verb with two elements, the main verb and a sub-verb that follows it

### **2.2. The use of phrasal verbs in academic writing**

Stemming from the perception that there is a connection between syntax and semantics, authors such as Fortescue (2010), Goddard (2009), Brems (2010) argue that different syntactic frames (Goddard), different syntactic behavior (syntactic behavior, Fortescue), different textures (construction by Goldberg) or different combinations (combinatorics, Evan and Winlkins) are often the basis for separating polysemy. The problem is, all dictionary compilations are based on the grammatical model to separate multiple meanings, but the number of meanings for each case of multiple meanings is still not the same. In fact, if students absolutize this criterion, they will not be able to deal with the cases where the polysemy is noticeably clear but share the same grammatical form.

In academic writing, the verb is especially important because it shows the reader how the research is "done." Essay writing is nothing but documenting the process of "doing" research. Precise use of verbs is the key to describing research accurately (Trebits, 2009). In academic writing, verb phrases are less formal. This is mainly because phrasal verbs often have multiple meanings and are not concise enough. To distinguish between formal and informal expressions just pay attention to the following two points. First, formal expressions are usually made with exact and specific words with unique meanings. Second, formal expressions, especially in scientific research, are usually more concise than informal ones. Obviously, verbose expressions will reduce the efficiency of information transmission (Alsagoafi, 2013). Verbs are especially important in academic writing because they show readers how research is "done." Writing a dissertation is simply documenting the "doing" of the research process. Accurate use of verbs is the key to accurately describing research

### **2.3. Functions of phrasal verbs**

The functionality of phrasal verbs is divided into: Semantic functions and Syntactic functions. In particular, Semantic functions of phrasal verbs are divided into Idiomatic meanings ((Rushdi-Saleh et al., 2011) and Non-idiomatic meanings (Cappelle, Shtyrov, and Pulvermüller, 2010). For Syntactic functions, Depending on the presence of phrasal verbs, the usage of the affixes and modifiers surrounding the verb center will also change The double structure of the phrasal verb center is a feature that exists in most languages of the world. Parallel existence of phrasal verbs, in which the preceding verb denotes state (modus) and the verb after the dictum shows that it is impossible to define the secondary main relationship between the verbs and the particles.

### **2.4. Reasons for using phrasal verbs**



Phrasal verbs are one of the most frequent multi-word units in English language. Phrasal verbs play a particularly important role in everyday communication. Accordingly, instead of just using learned words to speak or write, they often replace them with phrasal verbs with similar meanings. It is very normal for native speakers to use phrasal verbs because they are familiar with and understand the meaning of those multi-word units (Trebits, 2009). With the use of phrasal verbs, students can use a variety of expressions to express their desires with their diverse linguistic knowledge. For example, it can be said that (LOI English, 2021; 7ESL (2021):

E.g.: He made up this story. (He made this up) or He made this story up.

But it cannot be used: He made up it.

E.g.: We always respect our teachers. (We always respect our teachers)

Student can use the verb look up to = respect

E.g.: We always look up to our teachers.

## **2.5. Previous studies**

Many researchers have performed studies and literature reviews on phrasal verbs. Zubir, Ghazali, & Ridzuan (2011) conducted a study at a high school in Malaysia exploring the two choices of students between phrasal verb and single-word choice in academic writing. The results show that students have preferences to use both phrasal verb and single word in academic writing. However, students also indicate that they often avoid the use of unfamiliar phrasal verbs as well as polysemy phrasal verbs. At the same time, study by Jahedi, & Mukundan, (2015) focuses on the analysis of phrasal verbs used by Chinese students concerning different levels of language skills from intermediate levels to advanced levels. , it shows phrasal verbs is less likely to be preferable by intermediate and advanced Chinese students where they pay more attention to semantic nature of phrasal verbs. However, the raising question on the result of this study is on the size of the experiment.

In Viet Nam, Tran, Huynh and Duong (2015) examined the teaching and using of phrasal verbs with the use of conceptual metaphor at Tra Vinh University. it is affirmed that the conceptual metaphor is being more effective to teach phrasal verbs in academic context in comparison to the use of traditional method. However, this study has not drawn the attention toward the functionality of semantic and syntactic aspects of phrasal verbs in regard to the context of academic writing. Tran and Tran (2019) conduct a study focusing on the use of phrasal verbs in academic writing by ESL/EFL students. The results indicate students to have more tentative attempt to avoid the use of phrasal verb in their academic writing where they often did not use the most 100 common phrasal verbs listed in BNC by Gardner and Davies (2007). At the same time, students in this study tend to use different subcategories in respect to both semantic functions and syntactic functions. At the same time, transitive and inseparable phrasal verbs are more commonly referable in students' proposal with semi-idiomatic and fully idiomatic meanings

## **3. Methodology**

### **3.1. Research method**

This study employed qualitative and quantitative methods to analyze the use of phrasal verbs in academic writing produced by English-majored students at a university in Binh Duong. The former is for analyzing the frequency of phrasal verbs, while the latter is for scrutinizing the functions of the examined phrasal verbs by English majored students and investigate the reasons underlying the use of phrasal verbs in academic writing.

### 3.2. Research participants

Fifty English majored students from a university in Binh Duong were conveniently sampled. The reason for selecting English-majored students is to ensure that all the participants had a moderately high level of English proficiency based on results of their B.A. entrance exams (English language proficiency tests). Furthermore, the corpus consisting of academic writing of English-majored students in English Applied Linguistics show the relatively equal level of the use of English among English-majored students. Students do not have the conditions to practice skills such as listening and speaking because there is no practice room. The knowledge in the textbook is old, not edited. The curriculum is too heavy on grammar, turning them into a "walking grammar book"

### 3.3. Research instruments

To conduct this research, the Research instruments used include: Essays and Semi-structured interview. First, for Essays. This corpus-based research mainly concentrates on investigating the use of phrasal verbs in 150 different academic essays. Furthermore, the study is an attempt to find out the functions of the phrasal verbs used in 150 academic essays in terms of syntax and semantics. Through the support of the department, the research can collect the writing directly from the database source of the university for the period from 1st June 2020 to 30th December 2020. These database source include all exercise and test writing essay from selected course of Academic Reading and Writing at the university. Second, for Semi-structured interview, Twenty students were invited for interviews which were conducted in Vietnamese to make sure that students did not have any difficulties in responding the interview questions. Each interview lasted 30 minutes. All the interviews were recorded with interviewees' permission for later analysis.

### 3.4. Data analysis

**First, For Essay analysis.** The analysis tool uses AntConc, the basic principle of which is to compare the words in a certain text with a certain vocabulary, by observing which words appear or do not appear in the vocabulary and the words that appear in the vocabulary ratio, researchers can know the wording situation of the text (Anthony, 2004).

Table: Framework for essay analysis

Theory	Category	Examples
Akbari (2009)	Transparent phrasal verbs	<i>send back, sat down, take out</i>
	Idiomatic phrasal verbs	<i>Carry out, give up, go off</i>
	Aspectual phrasal verbs	<i>Use up, fill up, play on</i>

**Secondly, for Semi-structured interview.** The content analysis approach was employed for interview data analysis.

## 4. Results and discussion

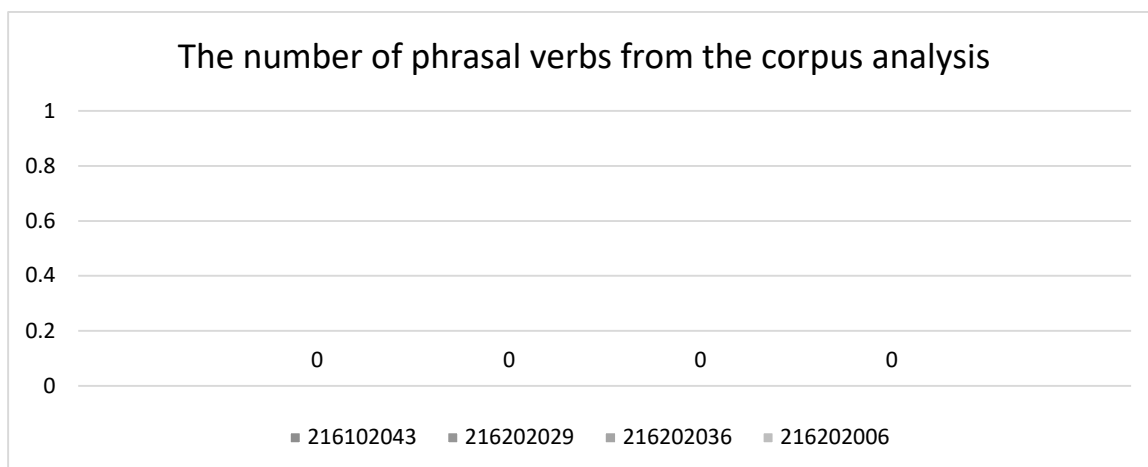
### 4.1. Results

#### 4.1.1. Types and frequency of phrasal verbs used in essays by English majored students

As can be seen in figure 1 from the analysis of corpus transcript, Descriptive essay accounted for the highest frequency of phrasal verbs with 513 (0.28%), followed by Argumentative essay with 359 occurrences of phrasal verbs (0.24%) and Expository essay with 167 occurrences of phrasal verbs (0.21%). The number of phrasal verbs in Narrative essay was the lowest with 70 (0.21%). Similarly, when it comes to the comparison of the number of phrasal verbs in the 4 categories, Descriptive essay ranked first with 103 phrasal verbs, followed by Argumentative essay (59) and Expository essay (40). The lowest frequency of phrasal

verbs was Narrative essay (17). This means that students preferred to use phrasal verbs in the descriptive essays rather than in other types of essays.

**Figure 1:** The number of phrasal verbs from the corpus analysis



Ten most commonly used phrasal verbs were listed as follows. As can be seen in Table 1, FIND OUT ranked first with 69 times of occurrences, accounting for 17.9 % of phrasal verbs used in 19 writings by Vietnamese English-majored students. BASE ON, REFER TO and TURN OUT accounted for 59, 51 and 45 of occurrences, making up to 15.3 %, 13.2% and 11.6 % respectively. The next phrasal verbs of the 10 most common phrasal verbs list in the English-majored writings triggered by SET UP and TAKE ON with the same number (34) and percentage (8.8%). CONSIST OF, which accounts for 30 occurrences, signals up to 7.8 %. Making up of 5.7 % and 5.4 % respectively, DEPENDING ON and POINT OUT ranked eighth and ninth respectively in the list. The least used phrasal verb in the top ten list is CONTRIBUTE TO with 20 occurrences, accounting for only 5.2 %. The number of top ten used phrasal verbs was more than half of all phrasal verbs used in English-majored writings, making up of 62.5%. In comparison with the most frequent adverbial particles and lexical verbs in phrasal verbs through gathering the data from BNC which were conducted using 100-million-word British National Corpus (BNC) by Gardner and Davies (2007), the results from this study showed that only 2 phrasal verbs (CARRY OUT and POINT OUT) appeared in the frequency and coverage of top 100 Phrasal Verb Lemmas in BNC by Gardner and Davies (2007).

Type	Numbers	%
FIND OUT	69	17.9%
BASE ON	59	15.3%
REFER TO	51	13.2%
TURN OUT	45	11.6%
SET UP	34	8.8%
TAKE ON	34	8.8%
CONSIST OF	30	7.8%
DEPENDING ON	22	5.7%
POINT OUT	21	5.4%
CONTRIBUTE TO	20	5.2%

**Table 1:** Top 10 phrasal verbs in academic writing

Below are some examples collected from the students essays for analysis

### **Transitivity**

Example – Descriptive essay

“It favors butterflies and moths for its meals, but will happily **take any insect on** offer. Indeed, it need not even be an insect: particularly voracious orchid mantises have been known to feed on small lizards, frogs, mice and even birds.” (M1)

### ***Intransitivity***

Example – Expository essay

“Harry won’t **join in** with Draco’s put-down and even refuses to shake his hand. Harry is the kind of person who **stands up** for people, while Draco tears them down. But even though Harry and Draco are early enemies, their character traits can be quite similar, too” (M13).

### ***Separability***

Example – Expository essay

“Harry doesn’t respond to Draco’s comment. Even though Harry is from an “old wizarding family” like Draco’s, he is one of those people who had not **heard of** Hogwarts because of his Muggle upbringing. Draco’s negative opinion about families he believes to be “lower” than his family creates his first **conflict with** Harry” (M9).

### ***Inseparability***

Example – Expository essay

“In 1917, Germany tried to coerce Mexico to **declare war against** America, leading President Woodrow Wilson to finally **bring the United States into** the strife” (M26).

#### *4.1.2. The underlying reasons for using phrasal verbs used in essays by English majored students*

The results from interviews have unraveled that English majored students employed phrasal verbs in their essays because of (1) easy structure and syntactic functions, (2) easier to understand the context, and (3) more interesting word choice in the essay.

##### *a. Easy structure and syntactic functions to use in writing*

Interviewed students indicated that:

“Sometimes, it is difficult to understand the meaning of phrasal verbs. Before looking them up in a dictionary, it would be helpful to use the context to understand them” (S2)

“The trick is that every phrasal verb has a distinct meaning, similar to idioms - it’s a combination that has a particular meaning, one that you have to learn.” (S1)

From the point of view of the scoring standards of the composition, whether it is academic writing or informal writing, or postgraduate entrance examination, it is mentioned that:

“The language is natural and smooth, and the vocabulary is rich” (S3)

“And the rich vocabulary includes the use of formal verb phrases” (S2).

Additionally, from the above results, it is noticed that To hang out, to go over, to all back, to work out, to look somebody up and so on are all verb phrases.

##### *b. Easier to understand the context*

Although phrasal verbs are acceptable in spoken English, they are often considered too informal in students’ paper writing. In addition, phrasal verbs usually have multiple meanings. Their goal is to write the thesis in a concise language to make the work clear and concise. Therefore, it is recommended to replace phrasal verbs with formal words.

According to the interviews, the students S1 and S2 agree that:

“Academic writing often uses long words that are difficult to understand and a large number of professional terms, which makes readers feel "tall". However, this is a misunderstanding”.

“Readers mistakenly think that the longer and rarer the word that I used, the more "supple" and the higher the quality of the paper. Short sentences and simple words can also make their papers better”.

*c. More interesting word choice in the essay*

For most of interviewed students, they confirmed that:

“Some complex and advanced words may make their papers interesting or make our papers less readable, which defeats the purpose of academic writing (as clear and concise as possible, use appropriate words to express your argument)” (S1).

To avoid this, interviewed students explained that they used conjunctions or transitional words to guide students’ argument, which can help them clarify their point and present certain information to the reader. These conjunctions can help them organize their thoughts from the overall structure and help readers understand their thoughts.

On the other side, most students thank those phrasal verbs are more common in spoken language. However, it is less formal than its corresponding single verb. In formal writing, authors often prefer to use single verbs, such as examine and design, rather than phrasal verbs, such as look at and come up with.

## 4.2. Discussion

### *4.2.1. The use of phrasal verbs used in academic writing by English majored students, including types, frequency and functions.*

The frequencies of phrasal verbs were distinctive in the 5 categories. Moreover, participants of this study tended to use more phrasal verbs in Descriptive essay, whose frequency is approximately two-third phrasal verbs of Argumentative essay, ranking second in Table 1 and 23 times higher than Narrative essay and Critical essay.

As analyzed above, the structure of an English verb phrase consists of two components, the auxiliary element and the last central element. The structure of a Vietnamese verb phrase in its full form always has three components: the preceding sub-element, the central element and the latter sub-element. Formal English is mainly used in writing. This stylistic format usually has an academic writing tone and is usually found in academic textbooks, university papers, business letters and contracts.

In short, it can be stated that there are some similarities as well as differences. The most prominent similarity is the dominant use of elaborative phrasal verbs by academic writing students. Meanwhile, the most considerable difference is the relationship between characteristics and the frequency of phrasal verbs used.

In this study, it is found that there is a limited number of academic phrasal verbs used in 150 essay writings. It can be concluded that due to the complexity in the semantic and syntactic functions of phrasal verbs, students have a tendency to avoid using phrasal verbs in their essay writing.

### *4.2.2. The underlying reasons for the use of phrasal verbs in academic writing by English majored students*

According to a lot of studies in academic writing, phrasal verbs should be avoided as much as possible, because they may have different meanings in different contexts and are not concise enough. However, the use of phrasal verbs are still popular with students due to the following underlying reasons:

Easy structure and syntactic functions to use in writing

Easier to understand the context

More interesting word choice in the essay

Results of this study revealed that academic writing used more phrasal verbs in their essays than non-academic writing ones. Specifically, they used 877 phrasal verbs while non-academic writing used 865 phrasal verbs. However, the difference in terms of frequencies of phrasal verbs was not significant. The results in these researchers all revealed that non-academic writing used more phrasal verbs than academic writing. Regarding sub-classes of phrasal verbs, it was showed that Vietnamese non-academic writing used more sub-classes in their essays than academic writing ones, 38 in compared with 35. Once again, it was obvious that the difference as regards the frequencies and sub-classes of phrasal verbs were not significant.

## 5. Conclusion

The results of the study showed that the total number of phrasal verbs used in English essays was rather low. Instead, the students used more one-word verbs, which means they have a tendency to avoid using phrasal verbs in their B.A. English essays. On the basics of these findings, some implications may be suggested for Vietnamese EFL teachers, learners, and students. Culture shapes a language. It is an important element to well represent historical and social changes and events. Common English phrases often denote cultural images. Every English phrase is due to some cultural phenomenon. In the pedagogical context, teachers ought to raise awareness of learners about how to use Phrasal verbs adequately in appropriate context. For students, it is essential for them to have an awareness of how to take all advantages of forms and functions of Phrasal verbs.

A limitation of this study is that the quite small size of the data used for analysis. With the number of 150 essays, the data is, obviously, not large enough. A small-scale study may signify that the findings are not conclusive and may lead to the restriction of quantitative analysis. Another limitation is that this study only focuses on investigating frequencies, sentence position, syntactic categories, and functions of Phrasal verbs in order to explore the differences between the Phrasal verbs usage of Vietnamese students.

Therefore, further work needs to be done in order to achieve more explorations of phrasal verbs in the context of Vietnam. In addition, more research is needed to achieve a more insight into how phrasal verbs have been used by Vietnamese students in various genres of discourse. Accordingly, there is a hope that findings from such kinds of research might contribute to literature of English linguistics in general and the sub-field of language and gender in particular.

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