Managing Quality of Pre-Service Teacher Training in Vietnam: An Institutional Case

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Abstract

Teacher training quality has long been in focus of attention, particularly when many radical changes have been made for Vietnamese higher education renovation in recent decades [5]. Among various problems identified by policy makers and academia, weaknesses in the state management and higher education management are deemed to cause most of the systematic shortcomings of Vietnamese education. The government determined that traditional management of higher education should be replaced with quality-oriented management [8, 9, 11]. In reality, while teacher quality and teacher training in Vietnam have been commonly under investigation, there is little literature on how quality of teacher training is managed [7, 10]. The research explores the practice of quality management of pre-service teacher training (PTT) at a Vietnamese university which specialises in teacher training. With the purpose of showing a real picture of the quality management at operational level, the research investigates the perceptions of key stakeholders about the PTT quality and the implementation of quality management in respect of three dimensions including quality control, quality assurance, quality enhancement. Findings indicate the incomplete implementation of quality assurance due to organisational culture and a shortage of expertise and resources, particularly at institutional level. Evidence shows that there are signs of dominance in informal activities over formal exercises in the process of managing quality of the programmes. The research is envisaged to make a contribution to the body of knowledge relating to quality management associated with teacher training in Vietnam.

Keywords: *quality management; quality assurance; teacher training; higher education.*

1. Introduction

It is widely accepted that quality of teacher training is proven by quality of the teachers receiving the training. In Vietnam, pre-service teacher training (PTT) has been predominantly undertaken by universities of education. The issue of quality of teaching force is concerning since the effectiveness of teacher training emerged as a problem and a considerable number of teachers did not satisfy the requirements of the innovation and development of Vietnamese education [5]. Among various problems identified, the systematic shortcomings are deemed to stem from the weaknesses of educational management at multiple levels. This paper presents part of a qualitative research being conducted at a university of education in Vietnam. It focuses on researching perspectives of key stakeholders regarding quality management in PTT provided by a social science department.

2. Studies on quality management in higher education

To date, significant aspects emerging from the discussion on quality management is quality control, quality assurance, quality enhancement. An enormous literature has grown up around the three dimensions [1, 2, 3, 4]. Whilst some types of quality management have been used in higher education institutions in Vietnam, many universities of education still lack a workable system of managing quality of PTT programmes which are their principal provision. A comprehensive understanding of the current quality-oriented policy as well as appropriate alternatives to quality management in practice is significant to these PTT providers.

3. Research questions

The research addresses these two major questions:
1. What are the perceptions of key stakeholders regarding quality of pre-service teacher training at the university?
    This leads to an investigation of the perceptions of policy makers, the university leaders, senior managers, lecturers, students, headteachers and teachers in schools in partnership with the university.
2. How in practice does the university manage quality of pre-service teacher training?

This entails an evaluation of quality provision in pre-service teacher training at the University as perceived by the key stakeholders. Addressing this question involves an examination of management practice where implications for quality management of the training is explored.

4. Methodology

As the research questions focused on meaning and experience with reference to a particular group of participants, an interpretive paradigm based on social constructivism was adopted. A phenomenological approach was used in order to investigate how the meanings of quality were made by different individuals and how the realities of quality management were constructed from dissimilar perspectives.

The data collection methods comprised documentary analysis, meeting observation and in-depth semi-structured interviews. For the departmental part of the research, respondents included the head, deputy head, four lecturers and eight students from four different cohorts. The analysis of interview data juxtaposed with policy documents and observational data provided a platform for the perceived reasons for possible gaps between policy and implementation.

5. Findings and discussion

5.1 How do the department leader, the academic staff and the students conceptualise quality of pre-service teacher training?

From a departmental leader perspective, it was asserted that 'quality is demonstrated in the capacities of the graduate' (Deputy Head). Training output standards were referred to as a significant conception of quality. Both the head and the lecturers expressed a strong belief that a training provider should regard quality of training as their commitment to the community who would precisely tell what the quality of training looked like.

The staff believed there is a close relationship between quality of a training process and quality of the output. For example, a respondent stated that 'quality is shown in quality of output, quality of the students, particularly how effectively the graduates can work, and how they are recruited into educational organisations' (Lecturer 2).

While quality of students was counted as a significant factor, quality of academic staff was in the focus of attention. A connection between academic staff quality and training quality was given a high regard to, as said that 'lecturers have a very close and the most intimate relationship with the quality of training… If there is good academic force, the quality of training can be assured' (Lecturer 4). To some extent, spiritual characteristics of a lecturer were believed to play a dominant factor in constructing the training quality.

The academic staff fully recognised their role in and responsibilities for the PTT quality. They identified themselves as a key stakeholder in the course of training. They noticed the direct relationship between the department and the whole of university in shaping quality whereby they, in the role of an internal stakeholder, absolutely had direct and profound influences on the operation of the programme

The students highlighted practicability of training as an indicator of quality, in particular the ability to apply knowledge and skills acquired during training process into teaching practice. They showed a strong belief that quality means graduates must have a capacity to respond favourably to practical issues when they work as a teacher in schools. In their view, the ability to translate what they should gain from the training programme into educational workplace was also a crucial indicator of quality.

5.2 How is quality of the training input managed?

The university's student recruitment policy greatly affected the reduction in the annual intake of the department. The staff indicated the decrease in the scale of annual intake. For instance, a lecturer claimed 'last year we only had about 30, 40 students in a cohort while we used to have an annual intake of 100 students before' (Lecturer 1). However, they supported the reduction in student admission quota which could lead to a cut in granted funding. They lecturer argued that careful selection of students would ensure higher quality of input, and that the university's dependence on the state funding, which was closely related to the quota allocation, impeded their determination to pursue student selectivity.

While free tuition fees for the teacher training programmes has been a national policy that has been pursued for decades, it was seemingly not a strong attraction for students in the recent years. The respondents believed that the university should create opportunities for excellent candidates by devising an alternative recruitment strategy.

5.3 How is quality of the training process managed?

The department entirely took responsibilities for formulating the programme which was fundamentally framed in accordance with the central regulation on minimum amount of knowledge and requirements for the learners' competencies.

There was a considerable change in the academic staff's awareness of their role in curriculum development. This notable difference was brought about by a systemic change in programmes of which was a shift from a non-credit based to credit based model.

There are similarities in the students' perceptions of learning and teaching which were particularly reflected in student-lecturer relationships in the programme. All the students made positive comments about the academic staff with respect to the efforts that the lecturers expended on teaching alongside communication for other supports.

In the student views, the academic staff was held in a high regard for their subject matter expertise and professional ethics. There is plentiful evidence on how the students perceived the performance of the lecturers in relation to their studies. For example, a student said 'many lecturers use a lot of methods stimulating students' creativity… When experiencing these methods, we are required to study on our own initiative. I find it very interesting.' (Student G2M)

There was an obvious lack of peer teaching observation. Such a professional activity was required by the performance appraisal system but in actuality it was abandoned without a clear reason. The evidence clearly shows that there was no regulation concerning peer teaching observation at the university. The department therefore managed this activity on an *ad hoc* basis. As there was absence of a peer observation mechanism, the academic staff commonly sought to improve their teaching in their free will. There was a strong tendency among the academic staff to be involved in informal discussions on professional matters.

5.4 How is quality of the training output managed?

There was no evidence on percentage of graduates found a job over the past five year or within a year. There is also a lack of data on graduates remaining to be employed for a certain time, i.e. 1 year after graduation. While there is a distinct lack of statistic evidence on process for measuring stakeholders' satisfaction, the respondents gave examples of quality of the training output based on their general perception. Based on conversations with employers and informal communication channels, the academic staff found that the PTT quality was convincingly demonstrated in professional development of the graduates.

6. Conclusions

There were no contradictory conceptions of PTT quality amongst the stakeholders. The most common conception found is the classic model 'input-process-output quality'. Not only the staff but also the students considered quality of the PTT as being shaped from the output standards. The stakeholders shared the view that quality of teacher training as a phenomenon that should be evaluated by its opportunities of going beyond the walls of the university.

The evidence suggested that the management of the PTT quality was strongly based on the academic staff's attribution since there was a complete absence of a proper quality assurance system at both institutional and departmental level. The quality of the training process was maintained by the well-established tradition of lecturer-student relationship and the expertise and dedication of the academic staff.

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