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A linguistic analysis of social attitudes towards the quality issues of postgraduate education in Vietnam

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Abstract

This paper proposes the PhD project *A linguistic study on social attitudes towards the quality of postgraduate education in Vietnam*. The study uses Appraisal theory as the framework to analyse interviews with different stakeholders involved in the postgraduate education sector, namely bureaucrats, management, academics and students. The study aims to find out:

- What the stakeholders' perceived quality issues in relation to MA and PhD education in Vietnam are
- Who the stakeholders' believe to bear the responsibility for the quality issues are.

Taking into account the facts that the quality of postgraduate education in Vietnam is in question and the fact that the Minister of Education and Training has recently urged an increase in the number of MA and PhD holders in education sectors, this study is significant in the sense that it will provide explanations for some of the problems concerning the quality of postgraduate education in Vietnam as well as thoughts for changes to improve the present situation.

Keyword: Educational Policy, Administration and Management, Attitudes and Practices in postgraduate education, Appraisal theory, Systemic Functional Linguistics

1. Introduction

The beginning of the 21st century has been witnessing changes in education trends in Vietnam. More and more people are furthering their study to a Masters or even a PhD to satisfy the requirements of recruiters. According to statistics by the Ministry of Education and Training (MoET) (Ministry of Education and Training 2006), at present, there are approximately 32,205 academic staff at education and training institutions, around 30% of whom hold an MA and 17% hold a PhD degree (Ministry of Education and Training 2006). The situation of higher degree study is becoming more “heated” due to the urging of the current Minister of Education and Training for higher education institutions in Vietnam to increase the number of PhD holders to 19,000 by the year 2015. This means that approximately 40% of academic staff will have to hold an MA and 25%, a PhD by then. These ratios are expected to rise to 60% and 35% respectively in 2020.

In the wake of the Minister’s statement, many people worry that there is a race for quantity that will give rise to counterfeit and low quality outcomes.

2. Research questions

The study aims to find out the stakeholders’ views by answering the following questions:

- What are the practices of MA and PhD education in academic institutions?
- What are the stakeholders’ perceived quality issues of postgraduate education in Vietnam?
- According to the stakeholders, who should bear the most responsibility for the quality issues?
- What role do the stakeholders think they play in the system of postgraduate education in Vietnam?
- To what extent do the stakeholders think they are empowered to enact change?
- What changes are needed?

3. Method

The project uses Appraisal theory (Martin and White 2005) as the framework to analyse interviews with different stakeholders involved in the postgraduate education sector, namely management, academics and students. The Appraisal analysis will look into 1) the attitude of the stakeholder (how they feel, how they judge others and what they think of the situation); 2) the engagement condition (the source of opinions, who says what); and 3) the degree of evaluation (how strongly they feel, how negatively/positively they judge etc).

4. Results

After the appraisal analysis, the following generalizations can be drawn from the major stakeholders: education management, teachers (supervisors) and postgraduate students.

Discussed items	management	teachers	students
PG quality	low	low	low
the most responsible?	students	students	managers
difficulties	managing the present system is a hard job	teaching/supervising with low salary is a hard job	studying while working is a hard job
domestically trained PhD holders	not as good as supposed to be	not good	not good
problems	students, teachers, the system	management, policies, finance, equipment, marking culture, English qualification.	unfair marking, teaching method, and courseware, the motivation of studying for a PG degree, facilities, training, English qualification, the management of the

			'brainy'
thesis quality	low	low	low
responsibility for thesis quality	students, teachers, and the system, not management (!)	students	teachers, management
cheating	aware and claim to strictly punish	aware but ignore	aware but don't talk much about
Minister's plan	doubt but strong support	support but doubt	most doubtful, least supportive
stakeholders' role	talk least about themselves, students and teachers as most decisive	praise themselves by talking about their effort, enthusiasm and achievement.	all 3 groups of stakeholders are supposed to have similar active roles in the quality issues but students should be the most responsible for their study.
suggestions for improvement	mostly related to management and teachers (human, effort, appropriate application of foreign education teaching methods, courseware content, enabling conditions, facilities, international cooperation, enterprise investment,	management, finance, enabling conditions and policies, international exchange, facilities, scholarship for students, overseas training for teachers, ignorance of personal relation, and improvement of foreign language	facilities, int'l cooperation, teaching method, training, regulation, foreign language upgrading, investment, teacher training-talent attraction, ISO application, stricter management, attitude to study, control of PG specialization.

	regulation, policies, and management)	proficiency	
talking about quality issues	less direct	less direct	most direct
talking manner	implicit but very assertive	explicit but less assertive	explicit but less assertive

5. Conclusion

In short, all the three sectors of interviewees admit that the quality of postgraduate education in Vietnam is low and worrying. However, the problems each group of stakeholders raise are various. While students emphasize on issues like motivation of study, facilities, and the management of the brainy, teachers are more concerned about management, finance, policies, and marking culture and the management complain about students, teachers, and especially the “system” as a whole. Both the interviewed management and teachers find students the most responsible for the quality issues while students blame the managers for the problem. Students also blame both the management and teachers for the poor quality of their theses.

While the management and teachers are less direct in talking about quality issues, the students sound more direct. Similarly, the managers use more implicit strategies while the teachers and students refer to the issues in a more explicit way. However, the managers appear to be the more assertive in discussing the problem than the other 2 groups of stakeholders.

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