

The Inter-play of Teacher Agency and Student Agency in Enhancing Graduate Employability: A Study of the International Career-Oriented Programs in Vietnam

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Abstract

Although the Vietnamese government has launched numerous initiatives to develop employability for students, half of its university graduates are unable to find jobs in their area of specialization. In order to address this issue, the Vietnamese higher education sector has introduced international career-oriented programs (ICOPs) to position the quality of Vietnamese graduates on par with international standards. This research focuses on three ICOPs to explore the interaction between teacher and student agency in enhancing graduate employability. This research draws on Bourdieu's concepts of field, capital, and habitus to investigate how academics and students perceive and exercise their individual agency. The position theory is adopted to shed light on how academics and students either comply with or disrupt the traditional hierarchical positioning within education systems to practice their co-agency. The study employs a qualitative approach with various data collection methods, including document analysis, interviews, and focus groups on exploring the role of teacher agency, student agency, and their co-agency in enhancing graduate employability in Vietnam. The preliminary findings show that students have a more in-depth understanding of employability than academics. The research data also reveal the ICOPs provided opportunities and imposed challenges for academics and students to manifest their individual agency. This research proves the intrinsic motivation of academics and students enabled them to become agentic in developing students' employability. However, their co-agency was not strong enough to be a push and pull factor in achieving the programs' goals.

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Introduction

In Vietnam, rapid changes in the massification of higher education (HE) and the graduate labor market under globalization have called for responsiveness to growing concern over graduate jobs supply, skill utilization, career opportunities and graduate employability globally (L. H. N. Tran, 2018; T. T. Tran, 2019). Accordingly, the Vietnamese government has taken numerous measures to enhance graduate employability in order to meet demands from the domestic labor market and international markets (Be, 2020; L. H. N. Tran, 2020; T. T. Tran, 2016a; T. T. Tran, 2016b; Truong et al., 2018). One of these efforts was the introduction of international career-oriented programs (ICOPs), which originated from the Profession Oriented Higher Education (POHE) in the early 2000s (Nguyen, 2017). The ICOPs exemplify new curriculum initiatives which aim to increase the quality of the Vietnamese labor force by placing it on par with international standards by combining "international training" and "professional training".

This research investigates the interaction between teacher agency and student agency in enhancing graduate employability because they are the two key players in university teaching and learning. Teacher agency and student agency have been the subjects of considerable research in the *Journal of Comparative & International Higher Education* (Yu, 2021; Liu, 2021; Qin, 2022). However, less attention has been given to the role of their individual and respective agency in graduate outcomes (Nicol, 2010) and what is neglected is the interplay of teacher agency and student agency in developing graduates' employability (Pham et al., 2019). This research takes a step toward this goal by investigating how individual agency and co-agency of academics and students are exercised to target the goals of the ICOPs by seeking answers to three research questions: (1) What are the institutional policies and practices of employability enhancement at Capital University? (2) How do academics and students conceptualize, perceive and exercise their agency in developing students' employability in the ICOPs? (3) How do academics and students impact each other's agency in developing students' employability in the ICOPs?

Theoretical Framework

This research draws on Bourdieu's Practice Theory (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990) as the overarching framework in order to explore the extent teachers and students perceive and exercise their individual agency through the concepts of field, capital and habitus. Positioning Theory (Harre, 2012; van Langenhove & Harré, 1999) is adopted to examine how academics and students conceptualize and position their agency as well as how they position each other's agency in developing graduate employability. Positioning Theory can also help to explain how students and academics might either comply with or disrupt the traditional positioning within education systems.

Research Method

This research uses a qualitative approach to explore the role of teacher agency and student agency in enhancing employability at Vietnamese HE. This approach can provide the researcher with an understanding of participants' perceptions, practices, motivations, and meanings (Bryman, 2008; Creswell, 2003; Miles et al., 2014). A case study is a suitable design for this study because it provides unique examples of real people in real situations. Thus, the findings can be gained through different sources of information with thick and vivid description from participants' experience, thoughts and feelings of the situation (Cohen et al., 2000). For this qualitative research, purposeful sampling is employed as the strategy for selection of participant, which allows the researcher to select a diverse sample and hear the opinion of experts in the particular topic of interest (Patton, 2015).

Capital University (a pseudonym) is recognized as one of the top business universities in Vietnam, with high-quality teaching and learning. The university aims to produce competent graduates with employability skills by equipping students with economics knowledge, foreign language proficiency, and work readiness. Capital University has been very proactive in enacting the employability agenda by offering the International Career-Oriented Programs since the academic year 2016-2017 in three selected disciplines i.e. Finance, Logistics and International Business.

My study draws on three ICO programs including Accounting Program, Logistic Program and International Business Program as three cases which were based the management mechanism of the High-Quality Programs of Capital University, but specifically focused on occupational training. These programs aim at exposing Vietnamese students to career knowledge and practices by cooperating with offshore institutions and occupation associations. The curriculum is partially translated from the standard curriculum, and is enhanced by adopting and adapting to the curricula of various foreign HEIs and professional associations (Nguyen, Walkinshaw, & Pham, 2017). Students enrolling in these programs must obtain the National Exam benchmark set by institutions for specific disciplines and pass the university's English test. In addition, textbook selection for the courses prioritized English texts published in English speaking countries and occupational materials published by the counterpart institutions and associations.

This research employs three main methods of data generation: document analysis, interviews and focus groups. As documents are useful to convey meaning, develop understanding about the insights into its research problem (Merriam, 1998), the selected documents for this study come from national and institutional levels to provide information about the policy settings for enhancing graduate employability. Institutional documents also reveal how these national visions are translated into strategic plans by HE through institutional strategies and initiatives for employability enactment by increasing teacher agency and student agency.

Semi-structured interviews with three targeted groups including one university executive, three faculty executives and nine academics from three ICOPs to understand what academics and students perceive employability, how they practice their individual agency and how they exercise their co-agency. Each interview was audio-recorded with the permission of the participants, and later transcribed for thematic analysis. The first and the second group of interviewees are expected to provide ideas about and intention behind the national and institutional policies in employability development at HE because they have good insight into the institution and the programs. The third group includes nine academics from the three programs who have been working in the programs for at least two years to ensure that they have sufficient lived experience within the institution and the program. They will talk about their agency and their students' agency in developing employability, and will reveal how they conceptualize, perceive and exercise agency in equipping students with employability.

Focus group were conducted among 36 students from three programs to explore what students think about their role and what strategies they employ to enhance their employability. This data collection method enables the researcher to describe complex interactions with rich responses, because the interactive environment enables students to discuss the issue with each other freely. For each program, there will be three focus groups, each of them consists of four to six students, who will be invited to join the focus group to discuss the topic under research. The discussions will be held separately, using identical questions and prompts to seek the participants' opinions on their agency, their teachers' agency and their influence on their teachers' agency in developing employability.

Preliminary Findings

Based on academic data, employability is viewed as the ability to get a job, including highly desirable jobs. In their understanding, those equipped with employability have ability or capability which constitutes soft skills and hard skills and a set attitude, skills and knowledge. In the meantime, students in this research held a number of different perceptions beside sharing similar conception of employability with their academics. As such, students' conception of employability is not only

about the ability to get a job but also about the dispositions to maintain the job and succeed in their future career. As discussed earlier, in this research, I employ the employability definition given by Yorke (2006) and the Confederation of British Industry (CBI, 2007) to shed light for further investigation of graduates' employability in the ICO programs at Vietnamese higher education: “*Graduate employability is understood as the combination of "a set of achievements" and "capabilities" that graduates need to not only find a job but sustain a job, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy*” (p. 11). This concept is particularly relevant to the research on graduates' employability and agency in the Vietnamese context.

In this research, teacher agency and student agency were constructed through the opportunities and challenges presented in the field of the ICOPs. The research unearthed the enablers and barriers to teachers and students manifesting their agency, including the university's policies, the objectives of the ICOPs, the labor markets' demands and the Vietnamese economy's current operation. The data analysis revealed that academics' habitus was evidenced in their motivation to join in the ICOPs, and their competence and dispositions as their source of power to overcome challenges in the new teaching contexts. Through the lens of The Theory of Social Practice (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990), the research explored four forms of capital provided by the ICOPs, which was a source of support for the research participants in facing challenges and tackling obstacles. The participants placed more significant emphasis on cultural and social capital in assisting them to develop students' employability and their career prospects. Another noted finding was that academics' habitus played the most important role in deciding the success or failure of the strategies they devised. Accordingly, it was concluded that habitus significantly influences teacher agency. Five types of agency practiced by the participants under investigation (i.e., becoming agency; needs-response agency; struggle and resistance agency; supporting agency; and connecting agency) were identified. Among these forms of agency, becoming agency and needs-response agency played more important roles than the others, as they provided drivers and tools for academics and students to handle challenges.

In the following chapters, the research is expected to explore how teachers and students interact to develop employability through the lens of Positioning Theory (Harre, 2012; van Langenhove & Harré, 1999). It also unearths the influencers on their co-agency in developing students' employability in order for the implications to enhance graduate employability in the ICOPs in Vietnam.

Contribution to International Higher Education

This research makes a significant contribution to the literature of the global internationalization landscape from implementing International Career-Oriented programs. The findings in this research have implications for building the conceptualization of employability for university graduates. Although teacher agency and student agency has been heatedly discussed in the context of international higher education, there is not sufficient research on the inter-play between teacher agency and student agency in the context of internationalization. My research contributes to the literature by filling a gap based on empirical data about co-agency of academics and students' in enhancing graduate employability. Through the lens of Bourdieu's Theory of Social Practice and the positioning theory, my research suggests a list of individual agency and co-agency that teachers and students manifested to enhance graduate employability. In the meantime, it unearths enablers and disablers of individual agency and co-agency in specific contexts, thus leading to theoretical contributions to studies on agency, co-agency and employability.

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