

English-Majoring Student Teacher Response to Employability in Light of a Transition to Online Learning

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ABSTRACT

This study discussed English student teachers' growth in employability as a driving consequence of the transition to emergency remote learning in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors focused on senior students reaching graduation during this critical time. The learning mode change was believed to have a significant impact on graduates' employability capital, thus influencing their post-study career plans. This quantitative research followed Tomlinson's graduate employability framework, covering five forms of capital explores their perceptions of employability capital and measures how perceptions vary between groups of backgrounds. Specifically, they sought to develop a comprehensive understanding of how the transition to remote learning has challenged students' employability capital, which then affected their career-related decision-making following graduation. The findings suggested, besides implications and limitation, five clustered forms of capital and explained why they were perceived differently.

KEYWORDS

Employability, Employability Capital, English Majors, Remote Learning, Student Teachers, Teacher Education

INTRODUCTION

According to Depaepe (2012), the main purpose of the modern education system is to prepare students for different societal roles, such as workforce member. Hence, higher education (HE) is expected to ensure that students are more competitive and employable in the labor market (Athey & Orth, 1999; Forrier & Seles, 2003). However, in the era of globalization, new career patterns are more likely to be characterized by "flexible employment contracts, multi employers, lateral job moves and multi career changes" (Clarke, 2008, p. 8). Therefore, graduates are often struck with the realization that life-long jobs are disappearing and they require flexibility, forward-looking attitudes towards their career attainments (Tran, 2012), and an focus on their employability development (Tomlinson, 2017).

In the context of Vietnam, the national education system aims to produce an educated labor force that contributes to the modernization and industrialization of the country (Tran, 2010). Attending a university is considered a worthy investment due to the greater likelihood that one will be employed compared to those without HE degrees. Concerning online learning, Le, Tran, and Hunger (2013) reveal that a relatively small number of higher education institutions (HEI) in Vietnam offer remote

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courses that utilize e-learning platforms, even as supplementary sources. In addition, the practice of online teaching and learning “mainly stop[s] at the level of using technology ... [and] ... no pedagogical strategy has been made specifically for Vietnam’s higher education context yet” (Le et al., 2013, p. 240). This may be caused by the stigma that it is less effective than traditional face-to-face instruction (Hodge et al., 2020). However, despite the unfamiliarity and infamy of remote education, particularly in the context of Vietnam, it is undeniable that the flexibility of remote learning is essential for developing graduates’ employability skills (Bowman & Kearns, 2009; Singh & Singh, 2017). In fact, many Vietnamese educators and researchers emphasize its essence and urge for a wider deployment of this form of education, especially in HEI, to continue being one of the best countries controlling the COVID-19 pandemic through long-term remote learning (Pham & Ho, 2020).

This study takes place in the context of Vietnamese higher education, where teaching and learning activities, including English-major teacher education programs, are being remotely delivered (Emergence Remote Teaching) following an official document (No. 1061/BGDĐT-GDTrH) by MOET (2020a). Among majors in the English language, teacher training is the oldest formal program in Vietnam, dating back to 1986. The program’s ultimate goal is to train students to be qualified teachers who hold excellent knowledge of the English language, teaching skills, and ethics (Nguyen, 2018). English language student teachers (ST) generally go through three phases in their formal training: enhancing English language proficiency, disciplinary training of knowledge and skills, and teaching practicum (Nguyen, 2018). All three phases are expected to adequately prepare graduates to take up teaching jobs. This study adopts Tomlinson’s (2017) employability skills framework to unpack Vietnamese English-majoring ST’ beliefs on employability capital, in light of the transition to remote learning in a time of global crisis. The study mainly focuses on the extent to which ST attempted to continue or challenge their capital construction in preparation for future employment. Surprisingly, little attention has been placed on exploring ST’ perceptions concerning the transition to remote learning; therefore, this paper spotlights the once-neglected voice in the matter.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Employability Skills

According to Hillage and Pollard (1998), employability is the capability to gain initial employment, maintain it, and obtain new employment if required. Similarly, Rothwell & Arnold (2007) and Tran (2012) refer to employability as graduates’ ability to get a job and maintain their status of being employed. In addition to defining employability, much of the current employability literature leads discussion on stakeholders’ roles, as well as employability skill frameworks. In general, the stakeholders concerned with graduate employability, including HEI administrators, policymakers, employers, and graduates, hold different views on the issue. Ideally, these four stakeholders would agree on a framework of graduate employability; nevertheless, they often hold different perceptions of employability, which drives their different priorities (Nguyen, 2018; Rothwell & Arnold, 2007; Tran, 2012). As for graduates, there is evidence that they have been more active in enhancing their employability skills. In order to satisfy the dynamic employment market, they tend to accumulate skills beyond their formal academic education training (Harman, Heydon & Pham, 2010; Tran, 2012). Consequently, according to Knight and Yorke (2004), employability should involve not only skill sets and knowledge, but also personal attributes that make a person more likely to become employed and succeed in their chosen occupations. Similarly, value- and identity-driven aspects of employability are also highlighted in Tomlinson (2008, 2017). Thus, suggesting both HEI administrators and students have to acknowledge the need for graduates to equip themselves with a range of skills that go beyond discipline expertise. There is also a body of literature generalizing those employability skills to create a framework. For example, Knight and Yorke (2004) promote a framework that represents four broad employability components: understanding, skillful practices, efficacy beliefs, and metacognition.

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