QUALITY MANAGEMENT OF TEACHING AND LEARNING IN VIETNAM’S TERTIARY EDUCATION: SIGNIFICANCE OF THE OUTCOME-BASED APPROACH

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Abstract: This paper discusses the significance of the application of Outcome-Based Education (OBE) approach to optimizing the quality management of teaching and learning in Vietnam’s tertiary education. The paper consists of four main parts: Part (1) provides an overview of the practices of OBE in Vietnam’s tertiary education; Part (2) analyzes the significance of the application of OBE to teaching and learning quality management; Part (3) mentions the principles for the application of OBE; and Part (4) presents the challenges of the implementation of OBE in Vietnamese context. Results show that there exist big gaps between the current practices and the principles of OBE implementation. The discussion in this paper may inspire further discussion and may be of interest to educational administrators and instructors at tertiary level.

Keywords: quality management, teaching and learning, tertiary education, Vietnam, Outcome-Based Education.

I. INTRODUCTION

As a result of globalization and integration in Vietnam, requirements for the workforce have been increasingly demanding, thus emphasizing continuous improvement of tertiary education quality. However, it has been widely recognized that despite continual efforts by Vietnam’s Government, the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), and Vietnamese universities, Vietnam’s overall tertiary education quality has not been improved as much as expected, exemplified by the fact that many graduates are unable to meet the reality requirements. This highlights the pressure for the application of Outcome-Based Education to quality improvement at tertiary level in Vietnam in order to foster student employability and workplace readiness. For that reason, this paper discusses the significance of the outcome-based approach to the quality management of teaching and learning in Vietnam’s tertiary education, as a measure for quality improvement.

II. OVERVIEW OF THE APPLICATION OF OBE IN VIETNAM’S TERTIARY EDUCATION

The term “learning outcomes” (LOs) first appeared in the official documents issued by the MOET in Directive 7823/CT-BGDDT in October 2009 (Vu, 2001). This Directive highlighted the tasks for the academic year of 2009-2010: “Implementing management renovation, improving quality, and fostering education based on societal needs” (MOET, 2009, p. 1).

In addition, on April 22nd 2010, the MOET issued an official document entitled “Guideline for Generating and Publicizing Programme Learning Outcomes”, numbered 2196/BGDDT-GDDH. In the Guideline, the MOET emphasized that the key task for Vietnamese tertiary institutions during the academic year of 2010-2011 was to generate and publicize their programme learning outcomes, affirming that this was one of the measures to improve institutional and national education quality at tertiary level, and that this would serve as the institution’s commitment of their education quality to the society.

Through the Directive and Guideline, the MOET placed emphasis on the significance of the outcome-based approach to improving Vietnam’s tertiary education quality, requiring Vietnamese institutions to be ready for this approach. Accordingly, in 2010, the majority of Vietnamese colleges and universities publicized the learning outcomes for their degree programmes. As stated by Vu Thi Phuong Anh (2001), many institutions have merely created ILOs which sound “reasonable” and then publicized them in an effort to comply with the MOET’s request, which was of little beneficialness to those institutions’ quality improvement. This author also indicated two defects embraced in the ILOs generation by those institutions: (1) the inconsistency in the perception of the term LOs, and (2) the separation of the ILOs generation from the other tasks involved in curriculum design. As a result, their publicized ILOs were not closely related to the real teaching and learning topics and contents. Furthermore, there has been no empirical evidence that those announced learning outcomes have been achieved (Vu, 2001). A similar situation was disclosed in an interview by the Voice of Vietnam on December 28th 2013 with Mr. Bui Anh Tuan, Director of the Tertiary Education Department, the MOET. Mr. Bui confirmed “we have checked 60 percent of the total Vietnamese tertiary institutions and discovered that the publicized programme LOs by 60 institutions have been inappropriately generated.”

“The concept ‘learning outcome’ is new to Vietnamese education although the term ‘teaching objective’ has been previously mentioned.

As a result, many institutions are still confused, generating inappropriate learning outcomes,” added Mr. Bui. Additionally, in an interview with the Infonet Newspaper in March 2014, Mr. Bui once again stated that “many universities are still confused about generating learning outcomes.”

Generating appropriate ILOs is the very first step in the implementation of Outcome-Based Education. It can be inferred from Mr. Bui’s revelation that many institutional administrators and instructors at Vietnamese tertiary institutions have not familiarized themselves with the concept OBE, which partly reflects the nature of their current practices of the outcome-based approach to the quality improvement of education in general and of instructional planning and implementation in particular.

II. SIGNIFICANCE OF OBE IMPLEMENTATION

Outcomes-based education is a learner-centred, results-oriented approach to education premised on the expectation that all learners can learn and succeed. It implies that learning institutions have the responsibility to optimise the conditions for success (Dreyer, 2001). Kudlas (1994) mentioned that OBE is a process with a focus on what is to be learned: the outcome that is a demonstration of learning. Spady (1994) defined outcomes as high quality culminating in demonstrations of significant learning in context.

(Jager & Nieuwenhuis, 2005, p. 5)

OBE places emphasis on the alignment of LOs, teaching and learning activities, and student assessment. Accordingly, the educational process revolves around intended learning outcomes (ILOs). Caspersen et al. (2001, p. 3) define LOs as “a result or product” and “a function of a prior learning process”. In the definition by DePaul University, LOs are “concise statements, made in specific and measurable terms, of what students will know and/or be able to do as the result of having successfully completed a program of study”. In the explanation by Lahiff (2006) and O’Farrell (2009), a learning outcome is “a student-centred statement of what you want your students to know, understand or be able to do as a result of a completed process of learning” (p. 5). This is the definition of ILOs by Biggs and Tang (2007, p. 5): “The ILOs are statements, written from the students’ perspective, indicating the level of understanding and performance they are expected to achieve as a result of engaging in the learning and teaching experience”. These two authors also indicate three levels of LOs (op. cit., p. 64):

- the institutional level referring to what the graduates of the university are supposed to be able to do,
- the degree program level addressing what the graduates from particular degree program should be able to do, and
- the course level stating what students should be able to do at the completion of a given course.

OBE has been applied to improving the quality of learning and teaching as well as education quality management in general (Biggs and Tang, 2007). Spady (1994, p. 9) states two purposes of OBE:

- Ensuring that all students are equipped with the knowledge, competence, and qualities needed to be successful after they exit the educational system.
- Structuring and operating schools so that those outcomes can be achieved and maximized for all students.

These purposes are based on three premises resulting from the induction of “voluminous research and over 30 years of educators’ practice” (op. cit., 1994, p. 9):

- All students can learn and succeed, but not on the same day in the same way.
- Successful learning promotes even more successful learning.
- Schools control the conditions that directly affect successful school learning.

According to DePaul University, ILOs:

- can assist departments and program to think about their curriculums since when outcomes are defined, departments can map the outcomes onto the courses that they teach to identify areas within the program where outcomes may overlap (or otherwise be redundant) or where gaps may exist;
- allow departments and programs to indicate what knowledge, skills and abilities students are expected to have mastered at the end of their course of study and allow them to communicate expectations to students;
- provide students with a way to articulate the knowledge and abilities that they have gained and to express what they know to others;
- assist faculty in determining appropriate assessment strategies; and
- inform potential employers of the abilities of a department’s graduates.

McMahon and Thakore (2006) synthesize the effectiveness of the implementation of OBE at the University College Dublin as follows:

- greater standardisation leading to fairer and more reliable assessment. When assessment criteria follow from stated outcomes, decisions on how many marks are awarded are much easier to compare and defend.
- greater transparency leading to (a) easier and more accurate inter-university and international

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1 Cited from http://condor.depaul.edu/la/Learning/creating_outcomes.html
3 Cited from http://condor.depaul.edu/la/Learning/creating_outcomes.html
4 Cited from http://condor.depaul.edu/la/Learning/why.html
The application of OBE comprises three main phases: generating, implementing, and measuring LOs. The alignment of these three aspects is conveyed in the concept of “constructive alignment” (CA) coined by John Biggs (1996), which is explained below:

- “constructive” referring to the idea that students need to play an active role in constructing meaning via relevant learning activities; and
- “alignment” addressing the teacher’s responsibility in assuring that TLAs and student assessment are aligned to the ILOs.

According to Biggs and Tang (2007), CA can be applied to the classroom level by individual teachers and the institution level by a department, faculty, school or the whole institution. At the classroom level, Biggs (2013, p. 8) suggested the following process:

1) Describe the intended learning outcomes for the unit, using one verb (or at most two) for each outcome. The ILO denotes how the content or topics are to be dealt with and in what context.
2) Create a learning environment using teaching/learning activities (TLAs) that require students to engage each verb. In this way the activity nominated in the ILO is activated.
3) Use assessment tasks (ATs) that also contain that verb, thus enabling one with help of predetermined using rubrics to judge how well students’ performances meet the criteria.
4) Transform these judgments into final grades. “Alignment is best achieved by designing TLAs and the assessment tasks that activate the same verbs as are stated in the ILOs.” (Biggs & Tang, 2009, p. 1).

The ‘alignment’ in constructive alignment reflects the fact that the learning activity in the intended outcomes, expressed as a verb, needs to be activated in the teaching if the outcome is to be achieved and in the assessment task to verify that the outcome has in fact been achieved...The alignment is achieved by ensuring that the intended verb in the outcome statement is present in the teaching/learning activity and in the assessment task. (Biggs & Tang, 2007, p. 52)

Even more comprehensively, Fry and Marshall (2003) suggest a 6-stage process for the implementation of CA:

1) Generating ILOs
2) Assessing student background (entering knowledge, personal characteristics, goals, learning styles, reasons for enrolling, and motivation)
3) Designing teaching and learning activities
4) Implementing learning and teaching activities, based on the identified ILOs
5) Assessing student LOs
6) Revising the process, beginning from stage (3)

The process proposed by Biggs (2013) is similar to the model devised by Dwyer (1991), shown in the following figure, which emphasizes the importance of the alignment of ILOs, teaching and learning activities, and student assessment in the quality...
management of teaching and learning, especially at tertiary level.

Alignment of teaching objectives, instruction and assessment (Cited in Penn State Learning Design Community Hub, 2007).

As described, when teaching objectives are set at the problem-solving level, the correspondent instruction and student assessment should also be at this level. Accordingly, any mismatch among these three aspects will adversely affect education quality. Even more comprehensively, Figure 2 by Fry and Marshall (2003) illustrates an outcome-based approach to instructional design and implementation, in which ILOs are found at the beginning and at the end of the teaching and learning process.

In spite of slight differences in terminology, the theories by the above-mentioned authors (Spady, 1994; Biggs, 1996 & 2013; Biggs and Tang, 2007 & 2009; and Fry and Marshall, 2003) share one key point in teaching and learning quality management: ILOs are the key factors of education quality which shape all related activities from the beginning to the end of the educational process.

IV. CHALLENGES IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF OBE IN VIETNAM’S CONTEXT

Content-Based Education (CBE) has deeply rooted in Vietnam’s education, as illustrated below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Content-Based Education</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Passive learners</td>
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<td>2. Examination driven</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Content-based syllabus</td>
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<td>4. Textbook and lecturer centered</td>
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<td>5. Syllabus is rigid.</td>
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<td>6. Lecturers responsible for learning</td>
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<td>7. Emphasis on what lecturer hopes to achieve</td>
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<td>8. Content placed into rigid time frames</td>
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Comparison between a traditional content-based education system and an outcomes-based education system (Adapted from Jager and Nieuwenhuis, 2005)

The tables state the gaps between CBE and OBE, which reveals the challenges facing Vietnamese educational policymakers, administrators, instructors as well as students at tertiary level while implementing OBE. In order to make CA possible, the following conditions are essential:

- A felt need for change by all major participants.
- A clear conception of what an aligned teaching system is.
- The operational decisions made concerning ILOs, TLAs, and ATs and how to grade students’ performances.
- A ‘willing’ climate, in which all participants, and those whose cooperation is necessary for the project to go ahead, will be on side and institutional policies and procedures that support constructive alignment.
- Sufficient resources: resources such as financial, time for development of constructive alignment, space, educational technology and the like.
- Formative evaluation of progress, including evidence that the new system is working properly; and, if not, the means of finding out what to do to correct matters.

Comparison between a traditional content-based education system and an outcomes-based education system (Adapted from Jager and Nieuwenhuis, 2005)

Michael Fullan (1993) concludes “theories of education and theories of change need each other” (cited in Biggs and Tang, 2007, p. 247), which means the application of OBE entails a big change. The greatest challenge in the application of OBE is subsequently the change in mentality (Biggs, 2013).

CONCLUSION

Sharing the same viewpoint with Ball (2009), Caspersen, Lange, Prøitz, Solbrekke, and Stensaker
(2011, p. 1) conclude “[quality can be said to have been a key concept in tertiary education policies since the latter part of the 1980s, and it is often associated with a shift from an input-oriented focus in tertiary education, to more output and results-orientations among policy-makers”. The application of OBE, particularly CA to teaching and learning at tertiary level is indubitably necessary in enhancing student employability. In the case of Vietnam, Directive 7823/CT-BGDDT and Guideline 2196/BGDDT-GDDH serve as an orientation rather than a framework for the application of OBE. Therefore, the premises, principles and process for OBE implementation suggested by the authors mentioned in this paper should be thoroughly circulated among the policymakers, institutional administrators and instructors to foster their awareness of its significance since “[l]earning takes place through the active behaviour of the student: it is what he (sic) does that he learns, not what the teacher does” (Tyler (1949; cited in Biggs, 2013, p. 6).

REFERENCES


