

Contested Imagined Communities: Higher Education for Ethnic Minority Students in Vietnam

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Abstract: As a country with 54 ethnic groups, including 53 officially designated “ethnic minority groups,” Vietnam has recognized the importance of enhancing education for ethnic minorities. However, despite the government’s efforts to increase educational opportunities for ethnic minority students, the latter often do not have access to the same education as their counterparts of the major ethnic group, the Kinh. In this study, the concept of “imagined communities” (Anderson 1991) is applied to analyze national governmental policies on ethnic minorities, curricular structure in the Department of Ethnic Minority Culture Studies at the Hanoi University of Culture, Vietnam, and the perspectives of professors and students in the department. Three months of field research were conducted in Vietnam, and included: (a) an analysis of national and institutional policy documents, (b) participant observation at the university, and (c) interviews with professors and ethnic minority students enrolled in the program.

Findings for the study were as follows. In government policy, ethnic minority students were ascribed a broad range of identities, including those of disadvantaged Vietnamese citizens, key human resources, loyal nationalists, cultural ambassadors and cultural enhancers. The institutional view found in the Ethnic Minority Cultures Program imagined them as loyal multi-functional staff, introductory curriculum emphasized national ideology, and professional curriculum focused on theoretical knowledge. Professors in the program envisioned ethnic minority students as deficient in knowledge and skills, and as replaceable staff, but also as cultural activity organizers, policy consultants, Masters of Ceremonies, and “seeds” planted in the community. Students themselves, within a learning community surrounded by majority Kinh students, contested these official images, and offered an alternative vision of their identities as students in the program and as future staff in the field of cultural management. In doing so, they provided advice for reform of the program. The study builds on this advice and research findings, to offer recommendations for positive change in ethnic minority education in Vietnam to policy makers, the department, professors, and students.

Keywords: Higher education for ethnic minority students in Vietnam; governmental and institutional policies; imagined communities; teaching and learning practice; Department of Ethnic Minority Culture Studies; Hanoi University of Culture

In the last two decades, systems of higher education have grown more dramatically in Asia than in any other region in the world (Altbach & Umakoshi, 2004). Like China, Malaysia and Korea, Vietnam has focused much attention on developing its national education system. Education is considered a national priority for the country’s long-term development. In fact, the *Education Law* in the *1992 Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam* states that “education and training is the nation’s foremost priority” (cited in Pham & Fry, 2004, p. 313). The focus on educational policy development includes a strong emphasis on higher education.

As a multi-ethnic country with 54 ethnic groups, including 53 officially designated “ethnic minority groups,” Vietnam has also recognized the importance of enhancing education for ethnic

minority people. *Resolution 22/1999* of Vietnam's Political Ministry codes prioritizes "training ethnic minority staff" as one of its policy objectives (Tran, 2005). However, despite the government's efforts to increase educational opportunities for ethnic minority students, the latter often do not have access to the same educational opportunities as their counterparts from the major ethnic group, the Kinh.

In academic literature to date, researchers have explored various issues concerning Vietnamese ethnic minorities such as culture, politics, language, living standards, and lifestyles (Dang, Chu & Luu, 2000; Evans, 1995; Hickey, 1993; McElwee, 2004; Michaud, 2000; Salemin, 2003; Trinh, 1985; Wandel, 1997). However, literature on higher education for ethnic minority students is scarce. Some research focuses on primary and secondary education (Kampe, 1997; Pholsena, 2003), but not on higher education. There is in fact a great need for research on ethnic minority education at all levels, including higher education. As Das (2001) has suggested: "the survival of indigenous culture and language is closely related with the educational policies of the State" (p.80). Moreover, Kanno (2003) has noted that educational institutions are "powerful social agents that can create images of communities for their [students'] future and give these visions flesh and blood" (p.295). The present study, therefore, is important and timely, and will fill a gap in the field of higher education for ethnic minority students in Vietnam. Research findings are expected to inform government policy-makers and, if addressed adequately, may respond to the identified needs of ethnic minority students and their communities. Finally, the study is of much value to concerned international researchers in the field, adding to discussions of viable models of higher education for ethnic minority students in Vietnam and beyond.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework which is used in this research study encompasses the notion of "imagined communities," defined by Anderson (1991). Anderson asserts that a nation is socially constructed and ultimately imagined by the people who perceive themselves as part of that group. Blackledge (2003) argues that imagined communities are constantly developing, shifting and changing, and being re-imagined by both dominant and subordinate groups. Identities are negotiated and renegotiated; they are contested along lines of power and interest. Pavlenko (2003) maintains imagination can be seen not primarily as a personal characteristic, but as a "terrain of struggle between different and often incompatible ideologies of language and identity in particular sociohistoric contexts" (p. 253).

The concept of imagined communities can be used not only with entire nations, but also with virtually all communities. In particular, Kanno (2003), Blackledge (2003), Norton (2001) and others demonstrate that the notion of imagined communities can be applied to educational institutions. Wenger (1998) likewise focuses on the human ability to relate, through imagination, to groups of people beyond our immediate social networks; imagination involves a sense of belonging to a particular community of practice. Norton (2001) further argues that an individual's learning is shaped not only by the individual's current social involvements, but also by their future, imagined affiliations. As Norton sees it, learners envision imagined communities for themselves and invest in their learning in a manner which will enable them access their imagined communities of their future. Kanno (2003) demonstrates that the imagined communities envisioned by educational institutions for their students have a strong influence on

the pedagogical policies and practices they adopt, and will also shape, expand and restrict the potential, future imagined communities of their students. In this current research, based on these notions of identity, belonging and participation in imagined communities (Pavlenko, 2003, Anderson, 1991, Wenger, 1998, Norton, 2001 and Kanno, 2003), I try to understand the multiple and contested imagined communities of ethnic minority students in higher education in Vietnam.

The Study

This study was conducted in the Department of Ethnic Minority Cultures at the Hanoi University of Culture, Vietnam. The Hanoi University of Culture is the only university in Vietnam which offers the BA program in Ethnic Minority Cultures aiming at educating staff who will work in cultural fields in ethnic minority areas. Students who graduate from the program are expected to be able to: (1) study, collect and preserve the cultural values of ethnic minority areas; (2) organize and hold cultural activities in ethnic minority areas; and (3) evaluate cultural activities in ethnic minority areas. Most of the students of this program are ethnic minorities themselves who attend the program under the policy of “selecting and appointing” students, yet students from the major ethnic group, the Kinh, are also eligible to study in the Department. The government policy of “selecting and appointing” students applies to ethnic minority students who belong to ethnic groups located in disadvantaged areas. Most of ethnic minority students live in these areas, however, Kinh students who have their family registered in ethnic minority areas for five years or more could be also eligible under this policy. In Vietnam, a person wants to enrol in a university program, s/he has to pass the national university entrance examination. The appointed students do not have sit in the national university entrance examination. However, after graduation, they must return to their communities and are supposed to take the positions to which the local sponsoring governments appoint them.

The purpose of this study is to explore the imagined communities of ethnic minority students enrolled in the BA program in Ethnic Minority Cultures in the Hanoi University of Culture, as these are envisioned by government policies (at the national and institutional levels), by faculty members of the Department of Ethnic Minority Cultures, and by ethnic minority students themselves. The study ultimately aims to explore the possible ways through which Vietnam can provide more relevant and effective education in general and higher education in particular, for ethnic minority students. To do so, I investigated the different ways in which the government, the instructors and ethnic minority students envision the goals of higher education for minority students, and whether or not the current program and policies in fact lead to meeting those goals. The study addresses the following questions:

1. What imagined communities does the Vietnamese Government envision for ethnic minority students in national policy and through the BA program in Ethnic Minority Culture at the Hanoi University of Culture?
2. What imagined communities do the faculty members in the Department of Ethnic Minority Cultures envision for ethnic minority students currently enrolled in the BA program in Ethnic Minority Cultures?
3. What imagined communities do ethnic minority students currently involved in the BA program in Ethnic Minority Cultures at the Hanoi University of Culture envision for themselves?
4. How are the imagined communities for ethnic minority students envisioned above similar or different; how are they contested?

In this study, I undertook extended fieldwork in my research setting in the Hanoi University of Culture. The primary methods of data collection were (1) collection of government policy documents on higher education and on requirements for cultural staff who work in ethnic minority areas; (2) collection of documents on the current curriculum for the BA program in Ethnic Minority Cultures; (3) participant observation in classrooms, around the department and in social settings; and (4) interviews with faculty members and students.

For the government documents, I selected relevant government's policies documents concerned with higher education for ethnic minority students, ethnic minority cultures, and cultural staff who work in ethnic minority areas. I chose to focus on the following sources to analyze the government's policies at the national level: (1) an anthology of educational laws and policies regarding teachers and students (Labour – Society Publishing House, 2002); (2) an anthology of regulations for ethnic minority groups (Labour Publishing House, 2001); (3) an anthology of national laws encompassing the fields of culture, society, education, sports, tourism, technology and environment (National Politics Publishing House, 2001); (4) an anthology of laws regarding social and cultural issues in Vietnam (National Politics Publishing House, 2002); (5) an anthology of the Communist Party and government's official documents on culture and information activities in ethnic minority and mountainous areas (Ministry of Culture and Information, 2003); (6) an anthology of work regarding culture and information in ethnic minority and mountainous areas (Ministry of Culture and Information, 2003); (7) the website of the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training; (8) the website of the Higher Education Department of the Ministry of Education and Training in Vietnam; (9) the website of the Ministry of Culture and Information in Vietnam; and (10) *Ethnology Magazine* in Vietnam.

For the institutional data, the sources that were chosen to analyze included: (1) information extracted from the website of the Hanoi University of Culture, particularly the website of the Department of Ethnic Minority Culture; (2) the textbooks currently used in the programs; and (3) the detailed description of the program's curricular structure.

There were two groups of participants in the interviews of this research. They were expected to be informants who would "have the knowledge and experience the researcher requires... the ability to reflect, [be] articulate [and have] the time to be interviewed" (Morse, as cited in Palys, 2003, p. 143). The first group of study participants was comprised of faculty members, including four full-time faculty members, and one sessional faculty member. Among five faculty members, two of them are minority. These participants were able to provide rich information concerning the design of current curriculum and the teaching and learning activities in the Department. The second group of participants was comprised of ten students in the Department who were appointed by local governments to study at the University and are from variety of ethnic groups. Although the BA program lasts for four years, my study included only students who were in their third and fourth academic year. This is because after two years studying in the Department, the third and the fourth year students will have obtained certain ideas and experiences of the curriculum and program as well the teaching and learning activities in the Department. They were therefore likely to be "information rich" for the purpose of my study.

For interviews with students and faculty, I conducted one structured interview and followed it up with an unstructured interview. To begin with, a structured interview was conducted with each of the faculty members. The questions were designed to explore: (1) the faculty members' expectations for the students who were currently enrolled in the program; (2) their evaluation on current curriculum for the program; (3) their experiences with ethnic minority students and the typical teaching methodology that they use to teach ethnic minority students; and (4) their ideas about current teaching and learning conditions as well as the ideal learning conditions for students of this program. After analyzing each interview, I had a second round of interviews with each faculty member. This session was an unstructured, open-ended interview. The purpose of the second interview session was to clarify and extract more information from their discussions with me in the structured interview.

Besides interviewing faculty members, I conducted a structured interview with ten students. This structured interview was aimed to find out: (1) their learning objectives; (2) their evaluation on the current curriculum, teaching methodology for the program; (3) their viewpoints about teaching and learning environment in the Department as well as in the university; and (4) their experiences as ethnic minority students. The findings of this interview were then used to structure more in-depth interviews with these same ten students. These interviews followed up on themes identified in the first structured interview and, in general, sought to understand: (1) how the students perceived the value of their education; (2) how they perceived the role of their ethnic systems of values in influencing their attitudes towards education; (3) how they envisioned themselves in their future careers, in their place in the Vietnamese nation, and in their respective indigenous communities.

Study Findings and Discussion

The findings of this study show that imagined communities envisioned for ethnic minority students by the government, professors and students themselves are diverse and contested. The imagined communities were not only different among the three groups, but also contested within each group.

Summary of the findings

Government policy envisioned ethnic minority students both belong to the Vietnamese nation and to their local communities. They were first envisioned as a group of disadvantaged members who need special help and second as Vietnamese speaking students in educational institutions. Within their local communities, they were considered elite minorities and key human resources. They were expected to be loyal to national ideology in order to propagandize the government's policies to ethnic minority people. At the same time, they were also expected to adhere to the communities where they work to contribute to the preservation and enhancement of ethnic minority cultures.

Professors envisioned ethnic minority students as a group of disadvantaged students who had limited ability in knowledge acquisition mostly because of poor educational or social conditions. For example, professor Pham affirmed that early educational disadvantages affect ethnic minority students' university study, noting that they are "selected and appointed by local governments, who come from particularly disadvantaged communes." Professor Pham reported that some of these communes do not even have high schools, and that students who live in such

communes have to travel to high schools in other places. Good teachers do not often go to teach in mountainous areas either. According to her, a lack of opportunities for quality education disadvantages these students.

For future careers, professors most commonly saw students as cultural staff, rather than researchers, working in the field of organizing and conducting cultural activities. Some of them thought that it is based on the reality in ethnic minority areas which need a lot of staff who know how to organize and conduct cultural activities. For example, professor Tran found that in ethnic minority areas, the most essential thing is to know how to organize and hold different cultural activities for people in communities. Therefore, according to her, skills in organizing and conducting cultural activities in ethnic minority areas were most important for students to master after they graduate.

Some others believed that ethnic minority students are more suitable to the role of cultural activity organizers and conductors than researchers. For example, professor Pham thought that ethnic minority students are the people who understand their communities the best. Also, she found that ethnic minority students are very spontaneous. They are not often faultfinding themselves. Therefore, they often make progresses very fast. I wanted her to clarify this idea, she explained:

“This means that they do not hesitate to participate in any learning activities just because of the fact that they are still not good. When they like some activities, they will attend. They do whatever they like. Therefore, their competence of accepting and changing is good. For example, they study very fast and very well in practical arts courses (dancing and singing).

In addition, professors in the program also envisioned ethnic minority students as policy consultants, Masters of Ceremonies.

Within the group of professors interviewed, there was disagreement about students' positions in their ethnic communities. Some considered ethnic minority students as “seeds” planted in the community, which means they should have their own permanent socio-political roles within the community. Professor Trinh affirmed:

...an ethnic minority student who graduates from the program and goes back to their local areas in mountainous areas may not reach high professional effectiveness, but in terms of social meaning, ethnic minority students have their own independent and special value to their ethnic communities which Kinh students cannot replace.

He emphasized that “we cannot consider them [ethnic minority students] as other ordinary students, we need to count to cultural, political and social meaning that they have. They are seeds.”

However, some thought that general problems need to be solved in ethnic minority communities, but these are not specifically issues for ethnic minority people alone, therefore, ethnic minority staff who work in ethnic minority groups can be replaced with a more professionally qualified non-ethnic minority staff.

All the above images affected the teaching methodology that professors used with ethnic minority students. They believed it was necessary to include more practical knowledge for students, to slow down and otherwise modify their teaching methods when they taught ethnic minority students, and, for some, to develop a new curriculum specifically for ethnic minority students.

Students who are selected and appointed by local governments to attend the BA program in Ethnic Minority Cultures, both minority and majority, wanted, in general, to be viewed and taught in the same manner as majority students. For example, Hang mentioned the preconception of ethnic minority students' lack of competence that influences professors teaching methodology. In Hang's opinion, teaching methods should be flexible and it is not a good idea to make the assumption that ethnic minority students study badly, so that professors believe they have to read for them to write down whatever professors say. Hang suggested that professors should apply the same teaching methodology (professors give lectures and students take note based on their understanding) to both regular and appointed students. In taking this perspective, ethnic minority students contested both official and professors' images of themselves. They provided an alternative image of their identities as students and as staff in cultural management and research. As for their destination after their graduation, most were loyal to their home communities, and wanted to return home and serve their local communities. For example, Thu expressed that, "I was born and grew up in my home land. I love my home land a lot and I really want to contribute my knowledge to serve my community." Some hoped to work on preserving their own languages and culture. Others preferred or would accept jobs in major cities such as Hanoi, and believed this also served their communities. For example, Lan said that, "serving here in Hanoi, but in the field of ethnic minority cultures is equal to serving my community members." Or Khoi shared with me his desire to stay and work in Hanoi:

Staying and working in Hanoi is also my aspiration because Hanoi is a big social and cultural centre. Working in Hanoi will bring me the chance to learn and exchange working and living experience with many people. I really want to stay and work in Hanoi, but I think that it is impossible for me to have a chance to stay and work here.

As their future careers, students saw themselves working both as organizers and as researchers in cultural management and preservation. Many of them imagined themselves working as researchers in the future to conduct research on and write about their ethnic minority cultures. Above all, it was clear that students' visions for their future plans had a close connection with their identity as members of ethnic minority groups and with their homes communities.

Contested Imagined Communities within Groups

Even within government's policy, there were contested imagined communities. On the one hand, the government expected that students who will work as cultural staff in ethnic minority areas must have enthusiasm for ethnic minority groups where they work in order to preserve and develop traditional ethnic minority cultures. On the other hand, these cultural staff are expected to propagandize the government's policies to ethnic minority people, especially the policies on solidarity of the nation. There are two somewhat contradictory policy goals co-existing. The

government may want cultural staff to preserve ethnic minority cultures, but at the same time, they also want them to serve their political ideology in order to have stable politics in Vietnam.

In general, within the group of professors interviewed, there was a common vision for the imagined communities of their ethnic minority students. Some disagreed about students' positions in their ethnic communities, but for the most part there appeared to be little contestation within this group.

Student opinions about their imagined communities were diverse. Some wanted to return to their local communities and work while others wanted to find jobs in the city. Some wanted to become researchers, others to be organizers of cultural activities. The identity imagined depended on the particular student. Thus, it is difficult to say that there was a collective imagined identity shared by all of the students. However, as I will show below, the students often shared similar ideas about points that were contested with imagined communities at other levels.

Contested Imagined Communities among Different Groups

Students versus Professors and the Educational Institution

Kanno (2003) points out that the vision educational institutions have for their students powerfully influences pedagogical policies and practices. This theorization of imagined communities is true here in the sense that professors' views of ethnic minority students affected their teaching methods. Professors' expectations for students' performance were fairly low, and they modified their teaching accordingly. In fact, the findings showed that the students were in fact aware of modified teaching methods and did not always agree with them. Research has long shown that instructors' expectations for students can affect students' actual performance in class (e.g., Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968), confirming professors' expectations. Therefore, it is possible that holding low expectations for students may have actually hurt the academic performance of students.

Norton (2001) theorizes that an individual's learning is affected not only by the individual's current social participation, but also by their future, imagined affiliations. According to her, learners envision imagined communities for themselves and although they have not participated in such communities yet, they still invest in their learning in ways which will enable them to access the communities that they imagine. I found this notion is only true with the condition that students are supported with reasonable learning conditions for their own learning investment to enable them to join the communities that they imagine. In the specific case of this study, due to the characteristics of training programs in Hanoi University of Culture, the students are not fully supported to develop their future imagined communities. They have to follow a fixed timetable and fixed program, and do not therefore have a choice of courses that they think could develop their own preferences for their future imagined community. Even with elective courses, students are not allowed to choose them; it is the Department which decides what courses to teach among the list of elective courses. Some students I interviewed, for example, do not have an aptitude for arts performance and imagined themselves working as researchers in the future, but art performance courses are compulsory for them. Students not only find it very difficult to study in these performance courses, but also it is a kind of waste time and energy for both students and professors. One may ask, how can students invest in their learning to be helpful and practical for their imagined communities if they do not have opportunities to decide what they think is

suitable and helpful for them? Here there appears to be a structural barrier standing in the way of students reaching their desired imagined community.

Professors' imagined identities for students also varied. Some of them saw students as "seeds" to be planted back in ethnic minority areas, therefore, they most concerned about students' political and social functions in the communities to which they returned to work. Other professors were concerned more about the students' professional capabilities when they worked in ethnic minority areas, but it was not important if they were ethnic minority people or not. In addition, professors mostly envisioned ethnic minority students as more suitable in the roles of organizers and conductors of cultural activities after their graduation; meanwhile, many students envisioned themselves as researchers who would conduct research and write more about their ethnic minority cultures.

Students versus the Government

The government's image of ethnic minority students showed how very high level policies can have an effect all the way down to the lowest level of individual students. Some of the findings of this study can be partly explained with the notion of imagined communities theorized by previous researchers. Kanno (2003) affirmed that Norton's conceptualization of imagined communities can be applied to educational institutions. One role of educational institutions discussed by Kanno is to reflect society's visions and transmit these onto their students. This argument is true to the case of the Department of Ethnic Minority Cultures. Training multi-functional cultural staff model of the Department originated from the demands of society. The current labour structure in ethnic minority areas is still small. Positions for cultural staff for ethnic minority areas are limited by funding but there is also a demand for competent staff. Ethnic minority areas need staff who know how to conduct different kinds of work (organize and conduct cultural activities and at the same time conduct research) rather than many staff that just specialize in either organizing cultural activities or conducting research. This demand for cultural staff is in fact controlled by the national government. Its policies have created the positions for cultural staff. In this way the government is acting as the "society" described by Kanno (2003).

Findings from this study also show that educational institutions reflect the government's visions for students. This is illustrated in the training objectives of the BA program in Ethnic Minority Cultures. The requirement of national ideology is the first requirement that students in this program must meet. Students in the BA program in Ethnic Minority Cultures need to have a steadfast standpoint and ideology, a judicious viewpoint, and master the policies of the Communist Party; being completely faithful to the revolutionary work of the Communist Party and the government. This training objective reflects precisely one of the roles that the government envisions for students who will work as cultural staff in ethnic minority areas – to be loyal nationalists.

The imagined communities of the government also have an effect on the imagined communities of the students. All of the students who attended the program under the government's policy of "selecting and appointing students" were supposed to return to their ethnic minority groups to work and serve their communities. However, students' imagination for their future working place as well as their positions within the Vietnamese nation are different. Some of them want to return and work, others want opportunities in cities and see these as good

destinations for the future. This is especially true in the case of the Kinh student who lives in an ethnic minority area and was appointed by the government to attend the university to study Ethnic Minority Cultures. She recognized that she wants to study and write about her majority Kinh culture after her graduation. In other words, although the government may envision Kinh students who live in ethnic minority areas as belonging to a particular ethnic minority community, and as intending to serve “their” ethnic minority community after study, in fact, these students may envision “geographically” belonging to the ethnic minority community where they physically live, but not being culturally attached to it.

In general, when the students wished to return to their local communities, they did not often mention anything that contested their possible *role* as cultural staff. Many thought it would be a good idea to return and help their local communities and maintain their culture. This fulfills the local role envisioned by the national government. But, it is not clear if the students also imagine that they have a role to fulfill at the national level. It is possible that students are aware that the government expects them to spread and explain the government’s policies in local areas. This is difficult to know since students did not mention this. It would be interesting if this is a government goal that the students are unaware of. This goal may be fulfilled through the political ideology courses embedded in the curriculum, and the government has control over this curriculum. In summary, this research shows that, in addition to Kanno’s (2003) ideas, the national government’s imagined communities can interact with the imagined communities of individual students.

Government versus Professors and the Educational Institution

As mentioned above, Kanno (2003) points out that the vision of educational institutions for their students powerfully influences pedagogical policies and practices. However, I found that in the context of Vietnam, the educational institution’s vision does not always have a strong effect on the students. Actually, it is the government’s policies that affect the institution, which then affects the students. In many universities including the Hanoi University of Culture, the teaching practices as well as the pedagogies do not always reflect the visions of the institutions for their students. Universities must follow the policies of the Ministry of Education and Training, in program structure and content, and cannot really do what they want for their students. For example, professors think that the BA program needs to include more practice, but in fact the time for practice in the program is limited by certain higher level regulations for each program. Thus, students have to focus on national ideology and theory to the detriment of practical knowledge.

The professors’ visions for what is necessary for students are actually different from those envisioned by the government. This is clear from the professors’ viewpoints about the current program. Professors did recognize that the current program focuses on theory, not practical knowledge, and that the program needs to include more time for professional knowledge and more time for practical work. However, the government’s vision is different from theirs, and the program is designed under the control of the government; thus, the program designers and professors do not really control the curriculum content (theory and practical sections). It is interesting to note that here the government and the professors both imagine that students are to become cultural staff in ethnic minority areas, but these two groups disagree about the best way

to train the students. There is not a conflict between these two imagined communities, but one between the most practical way of preparing students for a community imagined in common.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that there existed contested imagined communities on higher education for ethnic minority students in Vietnam. The contestation of imagined communities may originate either from different point of views or different purposes and must have its socio and historical reasons. In Vietnam, it is likely that the contestation of identities will continue and may become more and more complex, particularly as the integration process of the Vietnamese nation into the global world progresses. And it is ethnic minority students and ethnic minority communities who are directly influenced by these contested imagined communities.

Recommendations

It is evident that ethnic minority cultures play an important and great role in making Vietnamese culture diverse and distinctive, and that the development of ethnic minority groups can also contribute to the common development of nation as a whole. Therefore, it is important that an appropriate education in general, and higher education in particular, for ethnic minority students who are key intellectual resources of these areas should be taken into full consideration.

Recommendations for Policymakers

Although the education system in Vietnam has become more decentralized and universities in Vietnam have been offered more self-determination, it might be better if the Ministry of Education and Training gave more rights to universities to determine not only the content of the teaching curriculum, but also the structure, including the amount of time for different parts of the program. Some flexibility within universities may be required so that professors can effectively teach their students and prepare them for the future. Or, it might be best if experts within the field of ethnic minority cultures were to establish a standardized national curriculum or were at least seriously consulted in making changes to such a curriculum.

The demand for cultural staff is another issue that policymakers of the national government should consider. Students know that they will have trouble finding a job in the cultural field after graduation. This contradicts the apparent shortage of qualified staff in ethnic minority areas. In reality, it is the government that decides the quota, or upper limit of staff that will be hired for each ethnic minority area. Even though students under the selecting and appointing policy are promised positions after graduation, these positions are sometimes not immediately available. It might be better if the number of students selected and appointed to study ethnic minority cultures was more representative of the number of cultural staff positions available.

Another issue which should be considered is the policy of selecting and appointing students. It is undeniable that this policy has contributed to an increase in access to higher education for ethnic minority students. However, the findings here showed that most students' first wish is not studying Ethnic Minority Cultures. It seems that they attended the program because they want a degree and because they can have preferential consideration concerning financing, but are not necessarily interested in this field. A question here is if these students will adequately fulfill their tasks as staff in the ethnic minority culture field when they are not really interested in it. Therefore, it might be more productive and may avoid wasting training money and time, if the

government set up clear criteria in the selecting and appointing process to guarantee that not only good students, but also those who are interested in the field and are ready to serve their communities are selected.

Recommendations for the Department of Ethnic Minority Cultures

As far as curriculum and teaching in the Department of Ethnic Minority Culture is concerned, representatives of the minority ethnic groups could be consulted when the curriculum is designed, and specially selected minority representatives could assist the instructors. If possible, more ethnic minorities could be offered more opportunities to have control and input into their own education.

Culturally relevant teaching methodology should also be a criterion for the Department of Ethnic Minority Cultures in recruiting and training personnel. The findings showed that ethnic minority students experienced bad treatment in some courses in the classroom. And this negatively affected students' psychology and spirit for study. It is advisable the Department should employ instructors who are not only qualified in the subject matter but are also "culturally sensitive" and have an understanding of ethnic minority cultures.

It is also necessary that the Department should have some policies of offering professors opportunities to do their fieldwork besides just teaching. In the interviews and informal talks with students, many of them complained about the gap between knowledge that they learn in the university and practical knowledge and experience from the field. They found the knowledge in the university focuses more on traditional cultural issues; meanwhile, when they go to work they not only have to deal with such traditional cultural issues but also recent changes to them. Moreover, some information related to ethnic minority cultures provided to students by professors was at times dated or not precise. Therefore, it is necessary for professors to update their knowledge through fieldwork.

Recommendations for Professors

To begin with, adopting culturally relevant teaching methodology, is advisable for professors in the Department of Ethnic Minority Cultures. Professors should be flexible in their teaching methodology. On the one hand, they should treat both ethnic minority students and Kinh students equally, try to avoid stereotyping ethnic minority students, and teach them with at a reasonable speed for them to take notes. It may be useful for the institution to combine the classes of those who are selected and appointed and those who take the national entrance exam. That way, the professors will have to teach equally to all students and it might be a little harder for them to know who are the ethnic minority students. As a result, the professors may also learn that the ethnic minority students might be as competent about knowledge acquisition as their counterparts. On the other hand, they also need to be culturally sensitive and respect the cultures of different ethnicities. Some professors complained that ethnic minority students are reserved and lack self confidence, therefore, the learning atmosphere is often too quiet. However, it is important to keep in mind that when students do not talk a lot, it does not necessarily mean that they do not understand the lectures. It might be due to their culture. Moreover, people have different personalities and inclinations, therefore, some people can be very productive when using a more interactive and discussion-oriented learning style, while others may not.

Recommendations for Ethnic Minority Students

Ethnic minority students might participate more actively in the education and preservation of their own people. None of the participants in the research mentioned anything about their role in controlling their own education. Therefore, it is difficult to tell if they are taking a proactive role or not. To prevent the loss of culture, it would be better if taking control of their own education was one of their primary concerns.

Recommendations for Further Research

Further research is needed not only on finding a more appropriate teaching methodology for ethnic minority students, but also on the effect of professors' attitudes, especially Kinh professors, towards ethnic minority students. How can they bring a friendlier and healthier learning atmosphere to classrooms?

Research on imagined communities of the Government for ethnic minority students in other fields, such as English language study, computer science, technology, and medicine, is also needed. Such research will contribute to a better understanding of what the Government envisions for ethnic minority students both in their local communities and within the Vietnamese nation. It is possible that the vision for ethnic minority students in the context of this research is specific only to the students that are studying in the Ethnic Minority Cultures program. Further research would help clarify this point.

Finally, further attention could be paid to the imagined communities of ethnic minorities that are envisioned by the general Vietnamese public. In this study, there was a small contrast between the government and the faculty of the Department of Ethnic Minority Cultures. It would be interesting to see if most ordinary Kinh people share one of these visions or if there are other barriers preventing ethnic minorities from achieving high levels of education.

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