

IMPROVING LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT COMPETENCES FOR FACULTY DEANS AND DEPARTMENT HEADS IN THE VIETNAMESE HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

*Author:
Nguyen Duy Mong Ha*

ABSTRACT

In order to deal with the competition and challenges in higher education in the globalization era, professional middle management staff in the Vietnamese HEIs (higher education institutions), i.e. faculty deans and department heads, are required to improve a wide variety of important leadership and management competences in addition to their specialized knowledge and skills, foreign languages and ICT competence, as follows: (1) Competence in building and implementing strategic plans as well as managing projects accordingly, (2) Competence in designing and developing study programs and curricula (main and extra-curricular activities), (3) Human and financial resource management competence, (4) Quality management competence and (5) External relations competence. The paper first analyzes the global and national contexts with the impact on the demand for improving these competences of the academic middle management staff, then describes clearly each type of the competences above and finally gives some implications for the comprehensive development of these competences in the Vietnamese HEIs.

Key words: *higher education, middle management staff, competences, globalization era*

INTRODUCTION

Since the open-door policy was issued in the renovation (Doi Moi) era in Vietnam, a wide variety of educational reforms has been made in higher education such as credit-based system, interdisciplinary courses, quality assessment, outcome-based education... However, there is still a lack of competent academic and management staff as well as the training courses for these staff in accordance with the requirements of the 21st century. Faculty deans and department heads in the Vietnamese higher education institutions are usually appointed or nominated based on their professional knowledge and experience or academic title rather than other competences. Very few effective training courses have been offered for them to improve leadership and management competences; and no clear criteria for assessing their competences have been officially set up so far. Their roles and functions, assignments are sometimes not clearly defined in the regulations for the faculty deans and department heads in many

universities in Vietnam. Therefore, these things need to be taken in serious consideration to create appropriate measures for improvement.

1. THE IMPACT OF GLOBAL AND NATIONAL CONTEXTS ON IMPROVING LEADERSHIP COMPETENCE FOR ACADEMIC MANAGEMENT STAFF IN THE VIETNAMESE HIGHER EDUCATION

The global contexts bring both challenges of competition and opportunities for cooperation. Therefore, academic management staff members of Vietnamese HEIs need to be qualified not only in professional knowledge, but also in leadership competence to deal with the competitive contexts and make use of chances for cooperation to improve the reputation/brand-name and prestige of the university.

The tendencies of massification, diversification and internationalization in higher education have become more important in the globalization era together with the mobility of both students and staff, which require the appropriate innovative strategies. As a result, on the one hand, program coordinators or department heads need to have good competence in developing flexible educational programs for diversified students in accordance with the demands of the globalized labor market. In addition, educational quality has become an issue of great concern for the sake of the students as accountability is required through accreditation by different stakeholders. The increasingly high requirements of the labor market force the faculty to pay adequate attention to the close connection between the HEIs and enterprises/industries for formulating the appropriate learning outcomes of the graduates. Above all, faculty deans must be able to have long-term visions in order to make predictions of the graduates' attributes and competences in the future so as to adjust the curricula accordingly and make good preparation for the future qualified global citizens. They are supposed to take necessary measures for the improvement of their academic and non-academic/support staff to realize the strategic plans of their faculties or departments.

Nowadays, Vietnamese HEIs get more autonomy but internal quality assurance (IQA) system and accountability are required by MOET (Ministry of Education and Training) at the same time. According to the Resolution of the Government No. 14/2005/NQ-CP on comprehensive fundamental innovation in the Vietnamese higher education in 2006-2020, there is a great need to "Develop quality assurance mechanism and to train sufficient numbers of qualified higher education institution staff and managers with management skills". The HEIs in Vietnam are striving to become high-quality, prestigious universities in the region with series of strategic plans and projects for development such as improving staff competence, internationalization, quality assurance, research and scientific publications, curriculum and facility development, academic advising and student support...

2. THE NEED FOR IMPROVING LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT COMPETENCES AMONG THE FACULTY DEANS/DEPARTMENT HEADS IN THE VIETNAMESE HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

2.1. Competence in building, implementing strategic plans and project management

The most important job of the academic manager in any faculty, department or administrative unit is to build the strategic plans for a short-term or long-term period so as to begin the development of his/her unit as required by any universities in Vietnam today. Therefore, faculty deans or department heads must be able to set up the strategic plans with the clear Logframe and assessment criteria for the successful implementation of those strategic plans from the beginning for the educational programs and activities, research activities, student support activities as well as staff development and external (domestic and international) relations. In order to implement the strategic plans, the leader is supposed to transform the plans into concrete projects with clear outcomes, milestones, work breakdown structure in a specific period of time. In higher education context, the projects can be related to course development, curriculum development and revision, building tools and materials/manuals for teaching and learning assessment, academic advising, facility investment, exchange and internship programs, research projects, etc,... *"The most important task in project management is to achieve the objective by means of suitable procedures, methods and behaviour patterns within the framework of prescribed time, cost and quality requirements"* (Fischer 2012: 28)

A survey conducted at VNU-HCM in the first half of 2016 showed that 93% (28/30) faculty deans and department heads of some member universities of VNU-HCM agreed that these kinds of competence is of the utmost importance in the integration era. They are now responsible for formulating strategic plans and projects for the development of their faculties/department for the period 2016-2020 with the vision of the year 2030. They need to make effective use the tools such as SWOT-analysis, PDCA cycle, Logical Framework approach, stakeholders and risk analysis...and be aware of many changes in the complex environment for adaptation and breakthroughs.

2.2. Competence in designing and developing study programs and curricula (main and extra-curricular activities)

Study programs nowadays must be designed in accordance with the requirements of the globalized labor market and continuously reviewed on the basis of the various stakeholders' feedback to increase competitive advantage. In addition, the well-rounded education and learner-centered approach require both deep and broad knowledge of the learners in the globalization era. As the faculty deans and department heads are usually in

charge of developing the academic programs in the Vietnamese HEIs and they are usually the heads or chairs of the academic council/scientific or program committee, they must have the good knowledge of the curriculum design and revision. They are also responsible for designing the co-curricular/extra-curricular activities for their students, which are of great importance in improving students' well-rounded competences and soft skills, especially with new modes of delivery and the application of ICT today. *"Those who take leadership in curriculum development are encouraged to become familiar with various models, to try them out, and to select or develop the model that is most understandable and feasible to them and to the persons with whom they are working"* (Oliva, 2001, p.153)

In reality, many of them are not familiar with any curriculum development models but just follow the general guidelines or curriculum framework of their HEIs or MOET. VNU-HCM has recently pioneered in adopting the CDIO model for curriculum development (initiated by MIT in 2000) with some significant achievements. The survey conducted at USSH, VNU-HCM showed that 95% of the deans/heads have a strong desire for improving their competence in curriculum design/development professionally.

2.3. Quality management competence

Quality has become a significant value in the integration era of competition. As mentioned above, setting up an internal quality assurance system (IQA) is required by MOET for all the HEIs in Vietnam. However, not only a single unit in charge of QA at a university must carry out all the QA activities alone but all the faculties and departments must be involved in these activities for the need of developing quality culture within the institution. In addition, the quality of the individual faculties and programs will make contribution to the quality of the institution as a whole. In the tendency of autonomy and decentralization, all the faculty deans and department heads must be responsible for the quality of their study programs/curricula and academic unit as autonomy must go together with accountability. Especially, accreditation at both program and institutional levels has become a must since MOET requires the accreditation results for all the study programs and HEIs in Vietnam in the period of 2016-2020. The post-accreditation period is of equal importance as the faculty deans or department heads must be able to carry out the improvement plans after the accreditation results or peer- review results have been given. The information system and application of ICT can help facilitate the accreditation and improvement process.

Some sets of quality assessment or accreditation criteria have been applied in Vietnam so far, including those set up by MOET and the international/regional accreditation criteria at program and institutional level such as AUN-QA, ABET, AACSB,...Therefore, the academic managers, especially the faculty deans and department heads must be equipped with

quality management competence. *"Quality management can be taken as an extensive concept of leadership- and organizational development, including a balanced analysis, planning, management, and controlling of all quality-related aspects within an organization"* (Ganseuer & Randhahn, 2016, p. 21).

More than 95% of the deans surveyed totally agreed or agreed with the need for further improvement of their quality management competence and they are eager to participate in the QA training courses and activities now. Leadership and management competence in QA in general would help strengthen the structural development of HEIs and support them in their endeavor to build up systematic QA structures.

2.4. Human and financial resource management competence

To implement the strategic plans and improve the quality of the academic programs and activities, the human factor is the key. As most academic staff prefer academic freedom and have few opportunities for teamwork and cooperation, the faculty deans/department heads must be able to get their academic staff involved in the activities of the whole faculty, encourage/motivate them, especially the young ones to improve their professional and other competences, including academic advising, research competence, teamwork and communication/cooperation competence...It is sometimes not easy to have common values shared by everyone and lead the staff to follow the vision and objectives already created. This requires good interpersonal skills, change management skills and decision-making competence. A new young dean at USSH, VNU-HCM in a short interview admitted that human resource management was more difficult for him than he had expected. The *"knowledge experts" such as the lecturers, need to learn about management; officials need to not simply administer, but need also to develop strategic decisions;... There is a new call for "social relevance" as regards knowledge production. Work in universities is mostly individual and subject or discipline-related rather than co-operative and issue-related. ...* " (Pellert, Widmann & Cunningham, 2008, p. 6)

As human resource management (HRM) is also important to improve the quality of the whole institution, staff development must be taken into account *"If HRM is to make a contribution to improving quality and encouraging institutional self-reflection in educational organisations, all stakeholders need to agree that that optimal improvement is both possible and desirable. There has to be an organisational culture which takes responsibility for maintaining and improving quality...Organisational and staff development are extremely closely connected. Transformation in organisations must include change on three different levels – the individual, the group, and the organisation... Steps towards organisational development must be consistent with systems for selection, promotion,*

remuneration and assessment." (Pellert, Widmann & Cunningham, 2008, p.9).

It is also more difficult to work with academic staff since they have flexible hours and few office hours in Vietnam in addition to their teaching and research hours although it is sometimes required to coordinate the academic and non-academic staff in some assignments/activities. More than 90% of the deans surveyed at USSH, VNU-HCM totally agreed or agreed with the need for further improvement of their human resource management competence. The deans or heads of the small faculties/departments or seniors deans usually have fewer challenges compared with those in charge of big faculties or young deans. Some of them have to deal with budgeting sometimes when they are faced with some research projects, other external funding or service activities.

2.5. External relations competence

It is necessary not only to support students with the internship/practicing opportunities, career advising,... within the country but also to create favorable conditions for them to join the international exchanges and internship abroad in the globalization and integration era to meet the requirements of the global market. In addition, the international exchanges can sometimes bring benefits to both students and staff, such as chances to get scholarships for students, financial support for the (programs, facilities...) development projects, chances for staff to improve and update their (professional, management/leadership...) knowledge and skills... The faculty deans and department heads are usually the brokers/ mediators for developing and exploiting these opportunities, enlarging external relations, in cooperation with the Office for external or international relations. Therefore, the topic of external relation competence cannot be ignored in the development training programs for academic managers of the faculties. Domestic and international relations can bring advantage and reputation to the faculties.

The reality showed that, the deans who are able to make/maintain good relationships with industries, enterprises, external domestic partners, international partners, sponsors and actively involved in the external affairs have successfully developed their faculties in the academic training and research, creating lots of opportunities for their students and bringing prestige to their faculties/departments, increasing the employability of the graduates.....

3. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COMPREHENSIVE DEVELOPMENT OF THE ACADEMIC MANAGERS' COMPETENCES IN THE VIETNAMESE HEIS

From the analysis above, some implications and recommendations can be given for the sustainable development of the Vietnamese HEIs as follows:

- The awareness of improving various competences for the top management staff as well as of the middle management staff needs to be raised in the globalization era through seminars, talks, conferences,...with higher education leadership experts (experienced domestic/foreign ones especially from the high-ranking universities);
- Diversified training courses and materials need to be offered regularly to the faculty deans and department heads by an excellent leadership center. A Dean Training Center or Higher Education Governance Center can be established to facilitate the training process; deans must be required to complete these further (practice-based) training courses with certificates of leadership & management, with follow-up coaching and mentoring phases if possible;
- Best practices in improving leadership skills and other management competences can be shared on some occasions like meetings of deans, academic councils at both faculty and institutional, national university or regional level...;
- Selection/appointment and assessment/evaluation criteria, promotion plans, role and functions must be clearly defined in the procedures of nominating deans in any new terms;
- Awarding system should be set up and incentive measures can be given for encouraging the contributions and eagerness to learn of the faculty deans and department heads, as lifelong learning is indispensable not only for the students but also for the academic staff and especially the leaders at all levels of the HEIs in the globalization and integration era.

CONCLUSION

Although it is still a long way to go but an appropriate roadmap with clear objectives for the sustainable development of the faculties/departments, the basic units of the Vietnamese HEIs, should be constructed right away. Top priority should be given to the investment plans for developing these important leadership and management competences of the faculty deans/department heads. In addition, context-based approach in the training courses for them should be noticed and appropriate internationalization and staff development policies should be made.

REFERENCES

- AUN (2011). *Guide to AUN Actual Quality Assessment at Programme Level*. Bangkok: ASEAN University Network
- Davis, B. Gross (1993). *Tools for Teaching*. Jossey-Bass; San Francisco

- EUA (2006). *Quality Culture in European Universities: A Bottom-up Approach*. Report on the three rounds of Quality Culture Project, European University Association, Belgium.
- Fischer, F. (2012). *Unilead training course material: Project Management*. University of Oldenburg.
- Ganseuer, C. & Randhahn, S. (2016). *Quality management and its linkages to higher education Management*. Training on IQA, Module 5. ASEAN-QA, DIES
- Jacques Delors (1996). *Learning: the Treasure Within*. Report to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-First Century, Paris: UNESCO Publishing.
- Niedermeier, F. (2015). *Designing effective QA system in higher education institutions*. Training on IQA – Module 1. DAAD, HRK, Postdam.
- Oliva P. F. (2001). *Developing the curriculum*. Longman.
- Pellert, Widmann and Cunningham (2008). *Human resource management in educational institutions*. Unilead training program. University of Oldenburg.
- Seminar proceedings “Applying quality assurance system and international standards at International University HCMC (ABET & AACSB)”, June 15, 2012.
- Wiles Jon, Bondi Joseph. (2005). *Curriculum development*. Translator: Nguyễn Kim dung. Education Publishing House.