

THE IMPACT OF VIETNAMESE NATIONAL CULTURE ON THE EFFECTIVENES OF QUALITY MANAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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Vietnam has witnessed major changes in all aspects in the twenty-first century. The adaptation and absorption of new technologies and management concepts have been surprisingly fast. Organizations continuously look for new practices to gain competitive advantages including higher education institutions (HEIs). Many local universities have exploited Quality Management (QM) for the purpose of improving performance and outcome. Nevertheless, how to maximize the benefits from QM implementation is a challenging issue that needs to be solved by both researchers and practitioners. Relatively few researchers have explored the connections between national culture and QM especially between Vietnamese culture and QM in Vietnamese HEIs. The study critically examines the impact of national culture on the implementation of QM in Vietnamese tertiary institutions based on the in-depth review of QM in higher education and the analysis of Vietnamese culture through the lens of Hofstede's cultural framework. The paper argues that QM practices in HEIs be introduced in consonance with the national culture profile. It enhances the understanding of QM in higher education from the context bound approach and informs leaders of alternative ways to obtain substantial effectiveness of quality practices in a specific cultural setting. The study's findings will facilitate ongoing dialogue aimed at supporting current attempts to implement systematic reform in HEIs.

Key words: quality in higher education, quality management, national culture profile, institutional culture, Vietnamese universities.

1. Introduction

Vietnam has witnessed major changes in all aspects in the twenty-first century. The adaptation and absorption of new technologies and management concepts have been surprisingly fast. Organizations continuously look for new practices to gain competitive advantages including higher education institutions (HEIs). Many local universities have exploited Quality Management (QM) for the purpose of improving performance and outcome. However, how to maximize the benefits from QM implementation is a challenging issue that needs to be solved by both practitioners and researchers. Not many studies have explored the connections between national culture and QM especially between Vietnamese culture and QM in Vietnamese HEIs. Hence, the study will critically examine the potential impact of the national culture profile on the implementation of QM in Vietnamese tertiary institutions based on the in-depth review of QM in higher education and the Vietnamese culture through the lens of Hofstede's cultural framework.

2. The Characteristics of Quality Management in Higher Education Institutions

Political, economic and socio-cultural agents have brought about significant changes in the field of higher education, which have heightened the concern for more standardised and formalised approaches to quality. HEIs tend to adopt systematic and comprehensive QM approaches to boost efficiency and effectiveness (Sahney et al., 2010; Sultan & Wong, 2014). This implies that QM development in education is of intensified concern (Sahney et al., 2008) and also reflects the growing awareness that sustained improvement cannot be reached if the quality of management practices used on a daily basis are ignored (Manatos et al., 2015).

First, QM is comprehensive in its nature embracing approaches, concepts, policies, processes and systems that aim to maintain and enhance the education quality within an institution (Harvey, 2004). QM can be a mechanism helping the institution achieve transparency, accountability and effectiveness. It can be a systematic combination of practices aiming at enhancing quality at institutional or system level. It can also be a technique or an instrument that helps improve the quality of teaching, learning or doing research. It manifests the institutional quality improvement initiatives, although some might be externally driven. It is evident that QM is targeted at not only the quality output, but also the processes to maintain and enhance it. As a consequence, QM steers HEIs towards continuous quality improvement and enhancement.

Second, QM can be multi-purposeful (Trow, 1994). It is instrumental to such goals as enhancing the quality of HEI services, improving institutional transparency and accountability and delivering desired performance. Though QM can cover such a wide range of dimensions as continuous improvement, leadership, information management, resource management, education and research management, stakeholder focus and satisfaction, partnership and benchmarking; the literature has proved that the dimensions associated with the three missions of higher education i.e. education, research and public services are always of priority (Stensaker, 2003).

Third, “to describe the total process of judgement, decision and action” is another important feature of QM (Brennan & Shah, 2000, p. 5). Because of transparency and accountability requirements, HEIs need to establish an effective QM system to maximize effectiveness. Effectiveness requires HEIs to stimulate their decision-making processes to engage all stakeholders effectively in teaching and learning and administration. (Tribus, 1992) describes QM as a strategy that helps a HEI increase its workforce’s efficiency and effectiveness. To achieve a sustainable competitive advantage, the HEI has to encourage its workforce to get involved in both the process and the improvement of the process. Indeed,

QM manifests the efficiency and effectiveness of process management and human resource management (Trow 1994, Zhang et al., 2012). Hence, QM is supposed to cover organised activities which help manage quality in HEIs systematically and structurally rather than leave it to unsupervised individual driven initiative (Massy, 2003).

In short, QM can be regarded as a holistic management philosophy and an aggregate of practices for institutional management that focuses on the maintenance and enhancement of all the institutional functions to satisfy or exceed stakeholders' current and future expectation (Flynn et al., 1994). Therefore, "the approaches are quite comprehensive, they are intended to be used for a number of different purposes and are tightly linked with institutional decision-making." (Pratasavitskaya & Stensaker, 2010, p. 46).

Vietnam reforms have witnessed HEIs engaging with other universities in the world. The implementation of an effective QM system at institutional level is therefore imperative. Yet, how to get the highest benefits from QM implementation is challenging especially when QM practices are derived from Western point of view. According to Hofstede et al. (2010), culture has a great impact on our social organizations including HEIs which are embedded in that culture. Hence, the operation and development of HEIs should not be separated from their cultural environment since not only contextual factors vary, but also the degree of their influence changes depending on different circumstances. In the same vein, through her suggested ten principles for working with Vietnamese counterparts, Borton (2000) also emphasises the crucial role of Vietnamese customs and practices in management. Based on the concept of QM and Hofstede's national cultural dimensions, the paper will examine implications for HEI practice to help attain an effective implementation of QM in Vietnamese higher education.

3. Definitions of Culture

World literature has recorded a large number of cultural definitions with their own rationale for the apprehension of the terms of culture. In Olie (1995)'s widely quoted work, over 164 definitions of culture appearing before 1951 are closely examined. With the vogue word reflecting modern age of IT-programming, Hofstede (2011) states that "Culture is a collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others" (p. 3). It is perfectly true that culture does not come and go easily. It takes a long time to fully integrate into a society. The process takes place through learning the values; joining the collective activities; role modelling; and understanding symbols. These cultural characteristics are ingrained from the influence of family, school, religion, workplace, friends and media among others. Hence, culture provides a sense of belonging to

the people, a special feature playing an important part in management. Management literature seems to reach a consensus that culture is "a set of ideas shared by members of a group" (Jaeger, 1986, p.179). This collective programming, the so-called national culture, is established from the ways of life shared by one people of one nation (Flynn & Saladin, 2006).

4. Vietnamese National Culture

The characteristics of a nation's culture are formed when that nation has to confront geographical, climatic, social, historical, economic and political challenges. In term of nature, Vietnam is a tropical monsoon country in Southeast Asia, with the paddy-rice agricultural economy and lifestyle and the community originally organised in closed villages (Tran, 2006), enjoying the harmonious living environment of the warm climate and rich alluvial soils. From the social, historical, economic and political perspectives, Vietnam went through three major cultural periods, including (1) the period of local culture formation from the Stone Age to 208 BC when Zhao Tuo invaded North Vietnam; (2) the period of cultural exchange with neighbouring countries especially China and under the influence of three cultural layers from Southeast Asia, East Asia and South Asia, (from BC 208 till present); and (3) the period of interaction with Western culture (from the 16th century till present). Thanks to its natural, social, economic, and historical backgrounds, Vietnam enjoyed an early process of its cultural connections, exchanges, integration and acculturation. Therefore, these conditions play an important part on forming the nation's five distinctive cultural characteristics, including the collectivism, the interaction with harmony, the yin-oriented essence, the synthetic culture (good at seeing the big picture) and the flexible culture (Tran, 2006).

5. Hofstede's Six Cultural Dimensions

The impact of national culture on the QM in HEIs can be addressed through the 6-D Model© developed from Hofstede et al. (2010)'s landmark theory of six cultural dimensions. Evidently, many other models on cultural dimensions have been proposed in the field (e.g. Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 1997); but Hofstede's model with its available scores on Vietnamese national characteristics deems to be most comprehensive and most useful for this research. Although subject to some criticism, Hofstede's seminal study on national culture has been widely applied in the literature as a theoretical framework on differences in work-related values and cross-cultural comparisons thanks to its highly articulate theory, comprehensive design, efficient collection, and the high precision of its proposed dimensions (Flynn & Saladin, 2006; Zhang & Wu, 2014; Adler & Gundersen, 2008)

In 1980, Hofstede, the fourth most cited social scientist of all time, presented the most celebrated research of its kind and summarized most culture elements into four dimensions: individualism, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, and power distance, which have been regarded as fundamental to categorise the cultural characteristics in different countries (Dorfman & Howell, 1988). In 1991, ‘Confucian Dynamism’ or ‘Long/Short Term Orientation’, a fifth dimension, was introduced after discovering that Asian culture possesses a close and specific connection to Confucianism (Hofstede, 1991). In 2010, a sixth element entered the framework, Indulgence versus Restraint (Hofstede et al, 2010). Obviously, it has not been used extensively within the management field perhaps due to its relatively new appearance, smaller size of data and the ambiguities of happiness research. While acknowledging Indulgence versus Restraint as the sixth dimension, the author argues that it shares some similarities with the fifth dimension-Long Term Orientation. Therefore, this dimension is not discussed in the paper. The dimensions are labelled as follows.

Dimensions	Related to
Power Distance	the different solutions to the basic problem of human inequality
Individualism versus Collectivism	the integration of individuals into primary groups
Uncertainty Avoidance	the level of stress in a society in the face of an unknown future
Masculinity versus Femininity	the division of emotional roles between women and men
Long Term versus Short Term Orientation	the choice of focus for people's efforts: the future or the present and past
Indulgence versus Restraint	the gratification versus control of basic human desires related to enjoying life

(From Hofstede, 2011)

6. Vietnamese National Culture from the lens of Hofstede’s Cultural Dimensions

From Hofstede et al. (2010) and Hofstede’s model (<https://geert-hofstede.com/vietnam.html>) for Vietnam, a review of Vietnamese national characteristics can be presented as follows.

Power distance expresses the degree of hierarchy in a society or organisation. On this dimension, Vietnam scores high (70), which means centralisation is popular leading to the expectation and acceptance of the prevailing of leaders’ authority, the Confucian style values, the high value of age and seniority and the soft manner when presenting feedback in the workplace. Inequalities, status differences are expected and desired. The picture is vivid in HEIs with the reporting line, formal communication and strict control manifested through close supervision, subordinates’ limited autonomy and top leaders’ full power. This natural

order of inequalities results in the necessity for guidance and leadership. It is quite common that staff expect to be told what to do. Nevertheless, this can be treated as a strongly complementary potential for smoothly executing mechanisms, rules and regulations.

Individualism vs. Collectivism measures the degree that people prefer to act as individuals or are more dependent on a strong group. With the lowest scores (20) among all the six dimensions, Vietnam is a collectivistic society manifesting the management of groups, strong relationships, high respect to “in-group” loyalty, harmony and saving face. External social pressures and shame are the strong tools to control the members. Group preference is prioritised over members’ beliefs and behaviour. As a result, they never demand rights which may be against in-group members. It is noted that employer/employee relationships, even hiring and promotion are based on moral terms like a family link. Even in HEIs, this family relationship can be clearly expressed through the way of addressing the higher ups as uncles or aunts. This strong group cohesion can be observed through high loyalty and respect for group members. Due to historical and political issues, the academic and staff cohort in HEIs are drawn from mixed educational backgrounds i.e. from Vietnam or foreign countries, from eastern European countries, western European countries, Australia or the USA. The institutional culture is greatly divided by differences and even conflicts in values, philosophies, expectations, principles and standards from these in-groups. In the hiring, transferring or firing process, in-group correlation is carefully considered. Thus, group management is also popular and connections are more important than tasks. In-group members find it hard to accept different opinions, new people, newly developed rules or changes to their routine. When expressing a personal idea, they prefer ‘we’ as personal pronouns and feel more comfortable shouldering responsibility as a team member. However, in reality they just remove the focus on the “I” and perform at their best as a group when in need, which is also related to the following traits, low masculine and weak uncertainty avoidance and may lead to the failure of teamwork. This characteristic may also lead to the dependence on others’ assistance, failure of acknowledging an individual’s efforts by highlighting the concept of “we”, subjective criticism of out-group members’ ideas, boasting due to striving for belonging to a specific group, greediness for official titles and achievement, obsession with trends and formality. Yet, this characteristic may create democratic perspectives, respect, trust and cooperation in the QM implementation.

Masculinity vs. Femininity focuses on the motivation of members in a culture: striving to be successful (Masculine) or cherishing well-being (Feminine). With a score of 40, Vietnam is hence regarded as a feminine society, which highly appreciates equality,

solidarity, stability, sentimentality, caring for others and quality of life. The fundamental issue here is “work to live” that requires supportive managers, like-mindedness, flexible working conditions and motivations, compromise and negotiation in solving conflicts leading to the practice of involvement in decision making. Money and profit are not highly valued as people and good relationships. Due to this characteristic, people may be meekly obedient, relaxed, lacking in innovation and obsessed with foreign imports. People are characterised as hospitable, modest and foster their relationships as a good relationship is more important than success. In this low masculine environment, women and men are supposed to be equal in working life and home duties though it is not easy for women to reach the high ceiling as elsewhere. Leaders prefer intuition to conscious reasoning and try to achieve consensus when handling their jobs. However, this is a good environment for developing interactions between leaders and staff and effective communication.

Uncertainty Avoidance defines the attitude and solutions to uncertain and ambiguous situations. With a score of 30, Vietnamese society clearly adopts a more relaxing attitude in which practice and experience are more important than rules, and divergence from the established standards is more easily accepted. In the workplace, people can work hard if essential but it is not a means to an end. They tend to be flexible in schedules and do not find innovation urgent. Therefore, they tend to keep rules to the minimum and learn hard to be punctual. They feel comfortable in an ambiguous environment but motivated by achievement and esteem and happy being an in-group member. Together with the preference for harmony and flexibility, people are highly adaptable and creative but tend to be careless, random, egalitarian, ambiguous, indecisive and law ignorant. This feature could be particularly advantageous for applying continuous improvement, introducing new rules with a conciliatory attitude.

Long-term orientation/ short-term orientation reflects the degree that people are determined to overcome difficulties but prefer personal steadiness and stability; cherish the values of thrift but reciprocate greetings, favours, and gifts; respect for tradition, ordering relationships by status and face saving. The score of 57 describes Vietnam as a pragmatic culture believing that truth varies in accordance to context, time and situations. Vietnamese people exhibit a strong inclination to adapt to new conditions when necessary. The most significant practice is to encourage thriftiness and endeavour in education to prepare for the future. However, they also encourage lifetime employment as it establishes the connection between the employer and employee and inspires loyalty, which can benefit the management.

This orientation facilitates cooperation, engagement, mutual understanding and trust leading to sharing available and relevant information and consensus in decision making.

The result of the review is apparently consistent with Tran (2006)'s five categories mentioned Section 4. However, culture and its characteristics are highly changeable in response to natural conditions and social development let alone conflicts between the traditional culture and the market economy values. Thus, Vietnamese culture is very complicated. Indeed, owing to continuous struggles for independence and its geographical position in the region, 'being flexible or compliant' is merely protective camouflage against being invaded or assimilated by bigger nations (Phan, 2001; Tran, 2008). Deep under the compliance and flexibility is the rebellion from the inside. Evidently, this has immediate and non-ignorable implications for Vietnamese QM capacity. Nguyen et al. (2009) has noticed the effect of the Vietnamese culture on the application of management models in Vietnamese higher education. QM implementation must take into account the national cultural features and anticipate the conflicts between stakeholder involvements, in-group characteristics and power distance; hard work and profit versus yin-orientation; or ethical relationships and local norms versus economic principles, etc. These features definitely have a great impact on the effectiveness of QM in HEIs.

7. Implications for Quality Management in Vietnamese higher education institutions

Applying a more formalized approach in HEIs in the Vietnamese context requires a large amount of change of the culture in the institutions, which has proven to be most complex and difficult to achieve. Understanding the national profile and applying the QM practices accordingly would be most beneficial to the institution. For effectiveness, an extensive change strategy should be developed and pursued by resourceful leaders who are willing to facilitate active full participation from all the teaching and support staff. Together, these leaders and staff prepare the students for all types of organisational cultures.

In the culture of high power distance, the role of the leaders is more emphasised. Therefore, QM implementation should start with the leaders at all levels. Leaders should be aware of the national culture to avoid the confrontation of values and take advantage of the national characteristics enablers to build up a new quality culture. They should achieve a fundamental cultural understanding by studying the perspectives from Hofstede's cultural dimensions. Based on the QM concepts, leaders can determine the positive aspects that can promote the effectiveness of QM implementation; identify the negative issues that may hinder the process; and establish a potential strategy for change with the purpose of building

an effective quality culture. The process may be complicated depending on the leaders' vision, knowledge and capability.

The strategy should focus on full involvement of all the staff through team work, consensus, participation and concern for people. Long term personnel development and trust should be valued. The leader should work as a mentor, facilitator, and even a nurturer to encourage motivation and cooperation. Different perspectives should be communicated and relevant information should be shared by those affected before any decision is made. The staff involvement and the supportive leadership attitude can help create a family oriented environment which eventually leads to higher staff commitment and loyalty. In the areas of staff empowerment and involvement there is a need for a family atmosphere along with well-defined leadership, management and strategy. This can be feasible when taking advantage of the culture profile.

One of the most important tasks of HEIs is to ensure the professional and personal development of students. In other words, they have to provide knowledge and skills which assist students to respond well to workplace challenges. The increase of the proportion of practical training and the participation in projects and teamwork could contribute to students' self-confidence when joining the workforce. This can help Vietnamese students become successful in more performance-oriented organizational cultures when entering the labor market.

The change strategy should be long term, comprehensive and communicated thoroughly to all related stakeholders. New tasks should be carefully detailed in manuals. The QM practices should be adopted with careful choice to ensure that changes go seamlessly. Hence, it is essential to note that in order to carry out a successful change process, committed leadership and professional support with a more people-centered management style and practice are required.

8. Conclusion

Through the analysis of Vietnamese cultural identities based on Hofstede's framework of national culture, the study has agreed with previous researches that QM practices are culturally bound and the national culture has a great impact on QM in higher education. Given that Vietnamese cultural characteristics are complicated, an understanding of Hofstede's framework can relieve the leaders from the pressure of work. The study also implies that a wise exploitation of the national culture profile can promote total commitment and involvement from both leaders and staff which will eventually lead to the effectiveness of QM implementation in Vietnamese HEIs. The study's findings will facilitate ongoing

dialogue aimed at supporting current attempts to implement systematic reform in HEIs though more empirical studies may help to prove these initial findings further.

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