

Priorities of Vietnamese higher education leaders towards MOET's educational development strategies

Dr Thu D. Pham¹, Office of Cooperation and Research Development, Can Tho Medical College

Prof Hitendra Pillay, Faculty of Education, Queensland University of Technology

The impetus for the study reported in this paper is the Higher Education (HE) reform agenda outlined by the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training (MOET). The paper reports on phase two of a multi-method research; a qualitative approach using ranking scales and descriptive statistics to study how the Vietnamese HE leaders prioritised the quality improvement principles outlined by MOET. The ranking/order scale was administered to 190 senior managers in the nine State colleges and universities in the Mekong Delta region. The qualitative ranking scale results showed that Vietnamese HE leaders prioritised MOET's principles at high, moderate, and low levels. Non-significant differences were found in the ranking priorities of Vietnamese HE leaders based on demographic data. Further studies to investigate Vietnamese HE leaders in the private sector, and comparative priorities between the State and private institutions are recommended to determine what lessons can be applied to improve quality in both types of institutions.

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¹ Corresponding author:
Dr Thu D Pham
Can Tho Medical Collge
Office of Cooperation and Research Development
Can Tho, Vietnam
Email: pdxthu@gmail.com
Mobile: 01998984444

1. Introduction

In the three decades since the Renovation Policy (*Doi Moi*) was implemented in Vietnam in 1986, Vietnamese higher education (HE) has witnessed a massive growth in State and private universities and colleges (Dao & Hayden, 2010; MOET, 2005a; Oliver, 2006; Pham, 2011). Given this rapid growth and the risks associated with it, there is a need not only for quality assurance, but also for continuous quality improvement. To manage quality issues, institutional leaders' perceptions regarding quality and their visions to support quality improvement within their respective institutions is critical for strengthening the Vietnamese HE sector.

While commercialisation of HE has reached the global marketplace (Altbach, 2015), comprehensive reforms in HE systems have been implemented in many Asian countries in order to enhance their global competitiveness (Mok, 2015). The HE reform agenda outlined by the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) was a response to this trend. In this reform agenda, HE quality improvement is a particular objective (MOET, 2005b). Therefore, this research study on HE leadership was devised to support quality improvement in Vietnamese HE with a focus on State HE institutional leaders and their leadership strategies for quality improvement in their institution.

2. Context of Vietnamese Higher Education

Vietnamese HE is going through an exciting phase with many reforms in recent years. It is believed that one of the fundamental issues to support quality improvement is that it should be designed in ways that helps to change education leaders' beliefs and conceptions (Tran et al., 2011). Therefore, Vietnamese HE needs a transformation of the whole system, rather than fragmented, activity-oriented reform. The HE Reform Agenda (MOET, 2005) illuminated a wide range of constraints within Vietnamese HE, including quality accreditation, governance and management, privatisation, teaching and learning, research culture, the renewal, restructuring and internationalisation of the HE curriculum, and the development of a more internationally integrated HE system (Harman et al., 2010).

The introduction of the MOET legal framework and the MOET stipulated criteria noted above initiated a response that Vietnam lacks even a single university that has recognised international quality (Vallely & Wilkinson, 2008). Vallely and Wilkinson's report,

“Vietnamese higher education: Crisis and response,” demonstrates that Vietnamese universities are not producing the educated workforce that Vietnam’s economy and society demand. Students are ill-prepared for professional work, personal life, or to undertake studies abroad. Tran and Nguyen (2011) concur with this argument: that graduates from Vietnamese universities lack practical, engineering, and/or organisational capabilities. It is clear that Vietnamese HE is lacking an appreciation of quality improvement and mechanisms to ensure that universities’ quality is well-suited and capable of meeting the high demands for a diverse workforce that is able to meet local and international standards.

Tran and Nguyen (2011) note that frequently the statements on university missions/goals are very broad and ambitious; however, practical human resources do not have sufficient capabilities to carry out the roles; some institutions do not have enough people to do perform the required tasks. Sometimes, conflict between commercial value and scientific value is recognised in these institutions, which present tensions for the leadership (Tran & Nguyen, 2011). As noted above, the rapid growth of HE institutions in Vietnam has attracted many providers. Unfortunately, while this growth has increased access to HE, quality remains a challenge (Vallely & Wilkinson, 2008).

Tran and Nguyen (2011) make a wide range of suggestions with regard to transforming Vietnamese HE institutions. Specifically, they suggest that more autonomy should be given to HE leaders to encourage them to take more responsibility for quality. In addition, MOET’s longer-term vision and more strategic approach should replace the current short-term objectives of simply collecting fees in order to pay for the academic system by retaining the status quo. Tran and Nguyen (2011) support the linking of research activities to teaching in HE institutions to encourage innovative research, because they believe that research activities form the fundamental background for stimulating quality improvement, and that research and teaching have a mutual relationship. Specifically, research and teaching activities should be improved in an interrelated relationship to support each other. Teaching programs should encourage students to do research, and encourage them to take initiatives to apply in practice; and vice versa, the research in teaching should help improve teaching initiatives, including teaching methods, content, and teaching context.

Currently, university research capacity is severely limited, although small numbers of universities in recent years have made impressive progress (Harman & Le, 2010). Hence, HE

leaders should learn from these small numbers of universities that are leading the transformation. Vietnamese HE leaders should take into account that research activities and research development practice are significant contributors to transformation and quality improvements. Tran and Nguyen (2011) also emphasize that in the process of this transformation, leadership of institutions is crucial in adopting a pro-active approach to operate their institutions. Internationalisation, including international staff, salary levels, modes of management, evaluation criteria and teaching quality, are strongly recommended. Tran and Nguyen (2011) suggest that more thorough investigation needs to be undertaken to shed light on the academic system and the balance between teaching, research, and serving society.

In summary, there are challenges as well as opportunities for HE leaders to show leadership to support quality improvement in their institutions in the context of Vietnamese higher educational transformation, as suggested in the higher education reforms agenda (HERA) in 2005. In order to successfully transform the HE system to gain international recognition, many issues should be taken into account: leadership strategies and planning are one of the key factors. Therefore, this investigation on leadership perceptions in reforming Vietnamese HE, and HE leaders' priorities, is extremely necessary and timely.

3. Methodology

The paper reports on phase two of a multi-method research; a qualitative approach using ranking scales and descriptive statistics to study how the Vietnamese HE leaders prioritised the quality improvement principles outlined by MOET. The study is exploratory and descriptive in nature. The main instrument to collect data in this phase of the study was a ranking/order scale with open-ended questions.

3.1 Population and Sampling

There are nine colleges and universities in total selected from the Mekong Delta area. Most of these offer three- and four-year college training, except for one university, which offers six-year programs. The institutions are located mostly in Can Tho City and in the surrounding provinces in Mekong Delta. The sample of this study consists of 207 senior managers and leaders in State colleges and universities drawn from the population of State HE institutions. The non-completed or inappropriate response rate at 8% was excluded, which left 190

responses in the final sample. To ensure that the sample is representative of HE institutions included in the study, sampling analysis was undertaken using the method proposed by Krejcie and Morgan (1970). The sample size of this current study was 207 participants, which was calculated based on statistical formula within the margin of error was 5% of chance, level of confidence was 95% and the population of approximately 250 people.

The senior leaders who participated in this study held the positions of Dean or Vice Dean of the department, Director or Vice Director of the centre, Head or Vice Head of the office/unit, and President or Vice President of the institution. Targeting this group was essential as they are the key decision makers; and their leadership style and perception about MOET's principles of quality are key to making the reform successful.

These leaders were chosen for the following two reasons: (1) the leaders in these chosen positions are believed to be powerful enough to make the reforms happen and support the quality improvement in their institution; and (2) this study only focuses on the State sector, since most of HE institutions in Vietnam are State colleges and universities (MOET, 2005b). Leaders in the State sector are strictly controlled by MOET. Hence, the study investigated how these people may be influenced by MOET and vice versa.

3.2 Data Analysis

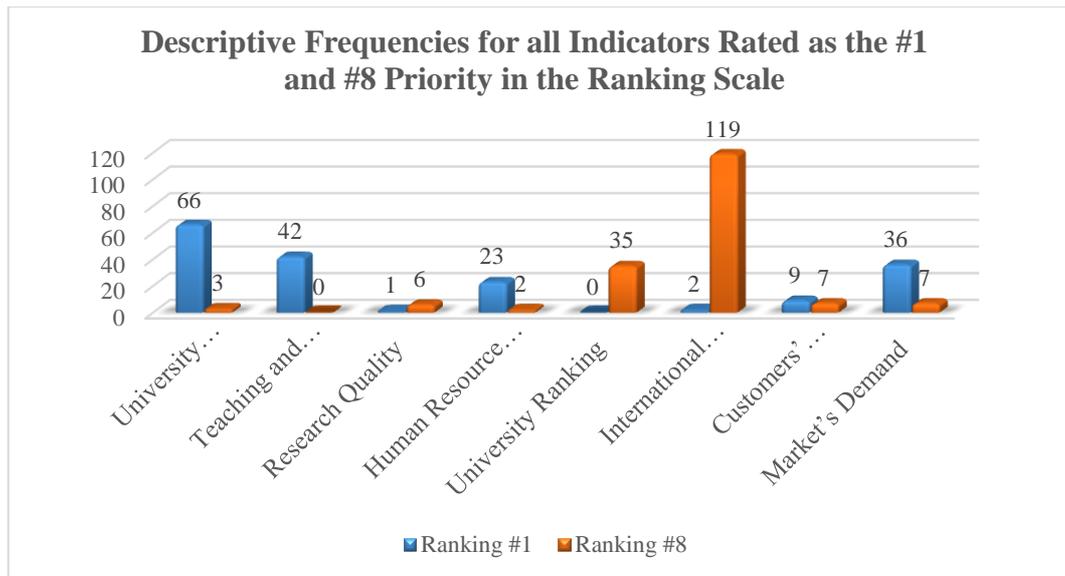
The analysis involved the ranking scale data and the open-ended responses. A descriptive statistics analysis using the mean and median was employed to understand the priority preference of Vietnamese HE leaders regarding quality improvement principles (i.e. university missions/goals, teaching and learning quality, research quality, human resources quality, university ranking, international recognition, customer's expectation, and market demands). The participants were asked to rank the eight quality improvement principles from one to eight for the most important to the least important principle. The descriptive statistics were juxtaposed with demographic data to investigate how different sub-groups of the sample responded to the ranking. The qualitative content analysis was used to analyse the open-ended responses to provide a comprehensive understanding about Vietnamese HE leaders' priorities.

4. Results/Findings and Discussion

4.1 The Ranking Scale Results

The analysis in this section focuses on the most extreme situations by analysing the indicators with the highest number one ranking and the highest number eight ranking. Analysing the distribution of the frequency of priority number one indicates that the university missions/goals indicator was ascribed the highest priority (number one) by the participants. There were 66 participants out of 179 (36.9%) who ranked this indicator as number one. The second highest frequency of priority number one was attributed to the teaching and learning quality indicator (42 out of 179; 23.5%). The third-ranked number one indicator was the market's demand indicator (36 out of 179; 20.1%); while 23 out of 179 participants (12.8%) thought that the human resources indicator was important and ranked it number one in their priority. Other indicators such as customers' expectations and international recognition were not highly ranked in the first priority (9 and 2 out of 179, 5% and 1.1% respectively); and the university ranking indicator stood out in this ranking, as no participant thought that this was the most important issue and should be the first priority, from their leadership perspectives.

As mentioned above, this analysis also identifies participants' lowest priority indicator with the highest ranking number eight. In contrast to the frequency of participants noting the university missions/goals indicator as number one (the first priority), the international recognition indicator received the highest frequency of priority number eight or the least important issue to participants. As can be seen in Table 4.14, international recognition was considered a low-priority indicator, with 119 out of 179 (66.5%) of HE leaders considering it not important. Only 35 respondents (19.6%) rated the university ranking indicator as their last priority (number eight); and very few participants believed that other indicators were less important and rated them as their last priority. In particular, no one rated teaching and learning quality number eight in their ranking. This suggests that within current HE conditions in Vietnam, leaders do not prioritise international recognition or the university ranking indicator in their leadership. The following bar chart illustrates these frequencies graphically.



Descriptive frequencies for indicators rated as the first and the last priority

As mentioned above, data in the ranking scale were presented with the purpose of examining the indicators which were most frequently rated most important (number one) and least important (number eight). As shown in Figure above, the university missions/goals indicator was rated as the number one priority as it was important to 66 of the participants (36.9%), while international recognition was considered the number eight priority, as it was the least important indicator to participants (119/179 participants, 66.5%). The comparison illustrated in the figure above shows a reverse in ranking the teaching and learning quality and the university ranking indicators. While 42 participants (23.5%) rated teaching and learning as their first priority (ranked number one) and no one (0%) ranked this indicator as number eight, 35 participants (19.6%) rated university ranking as their last priority and no one (0%) mentioned it as their first priority indicator.

4.2 Analysis on the open-ended questions

Explanation on ranking university missions/goals indicator as high priority

Broadly, analysis of the written content identified three main themes in participants' responses. Respondents believed that (i) University missions/goals is the leading indicator which has an impact on other targets and activities in a HE institution. In other words, these respondents believed that if they can accomplish their university missions/goals, the seven other indicators will follow. (ii) University missions/goals are the backbone, the foundation

for a university's development. Since these Vietnamese HE leaders value each indicator as equally important, they determined that the university missions/goals' accomplishment would be a strong foundation to drive other indicators to develop. (iii) University missions/goals cover all other indicators, as once these Vietnamese HE leaders can solve the issues in the university missions/goals indicator, all other indicators would synchronise, and work properly to develop their institution.

Generally, the respondents had their own argument to support their ranking priority; they all had a common sense that the university missions/goals indicator was the most important and their first priority in leadership.

Explanation on ranking the international recognition indicator as the lowest priority

To understand participants' priorities in ranking the international recognition indicator as the least important priority, the study analysed the textual responses for open-ended question number two. The word repetitions, similarities, and word in context techniques were used to identify themes in this qualitative data. Two main themes were identified that explain Vietnamese HE leaders' ranking priority. Respondents believed that: (i) they need to implement indicators to serve from local to global demands, as the international recognition indicator was considered as a further target which could only be reached on the back of other indicators. In the current Vietnamese HE context, international recognition is not seen as a priority issue. Universities need to serve the social domestic demands in Vietnam before going beyond for international recognition. (ii) The international recognition indicator was considered by respondents as an unrealistic goal, as their institutions' capabilities are limited in capturing international recognition. At this point, Vietnamese HE leaders highly value international recognition of Vietnamese HE; however, their institutions' current capabilities are very limited and restrict them from approaching this target. Therefore, these respondents determined that the international recognition indicator was unrealistic for the current context of Vietnamese HE.

In summary, the international recognition indicator was the least important indicator to Vietnamese HE leaders. They firmly believed that they did not have enough capacity to successfully achieve this indicator. Moreover, they considered this indicator as unrealistic

and unable to be pursued in their current situation. As a result, these respondents gave the lowest priority in their ranking to the international recognition indicator.

Some explanations for ranking the international recognition indicator as the least important are worthy of analysis even though they did not constitute a common theme. These explanations indicated that the international recognition indicator should be a long-term institutional target. Although respondents stated that they needed many years to obtain this indicator, they did not specify a particular timeframe. One respondent did not even think that the international recognition indicator was an essential indicator for his/her institution's development, as he/she claimed the institution was a small, newly established college that targeted local demands only. Those respondents who gave open-ended explanations allowed the researcher to more deeply understand their ranking. Their responses also partly reflected the current Vietnamese HE context, which is discussed in depth in the next chapter.

5. Conclusion

The findings of this study have a number of important implications for the Vietnam HERA. It seems that MOET's intention to reform the HE system to reach international standards was appropriate and timely; however, it is worth noting that historical central control may constrain this process and the development of Vietnamese HE. While progress is in the right direction, reforming such entrenched practices takes time. For instance, internal indicators such as university missions/goals and teaching and learning quality were highly ranked by HE leaders. This may just reflect central management cultures in Vietnam, where confirming to the centrally derived mission is considered a high priority. Although no data in this study showed the central control of the system, the review of MOET's HERA indicates that central control prevails in the system, and it strongly influences HE leaders' perceptions on quality improvement indicators. This could have slowed the adoption of transformational leadership, which required high levels of autonomy.

The findings of this research show that MOET's principles for quality improvement are still not understood and appreciated by all. Hence, the support for some principles by HE leaders at the institutional level was restricted for some indicators. Indeed, although HERA aimed to reach international standards by participating in the world's league tables and achieving

international recognition of qualifications, institutional leaders were not well prepared for this process. Therefore, a key policy priority should be to plan for the long-term aim of developing comprehensive understanding of HERA's objectives and MOET's quality improvement principles. Moreover, instead of targeting world standards, it may be more practical for Vietnamese HE to target the Southeast Asian region, and compete with its neighbours like Singapore and Malaysia as a starting point. Additionally, an implication of this is the possibility that MOET may release their central control, and widely exercise autonomy transfer to encourage transformation in Vietnamese institutions. From the institutional perspective, it is suggested that leaders should be bold and negotiate greater autonomy transfer from MOET and practice institutional autonomy.

Taken together, these findings suggest a role for MOET in promoting HERA objectives by further relaxing central control. The process for reforming Vietnamese HE is long-term, and may take decades to show fruitful achievements. Therefore, the HE reform agenda may extend its vision to 2030 and beyond.

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