

Vietnamese university governance in the age of digital transformation

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Abstract

Education is fundamental to the development and growth of any nation. It is widely acknowledged that the current age of global digital transformation requires tertiary education in Vietnam to change accordingly for the purpose of equipping the Vietnamese with essential knowledge and skills to become global and digital citizens. However, it is not a simple task of applying digital technology but demands a more strategic approach to the issue of university governance. This paper presents some major essential factors which shape a Vietnamese university in this new era including its new roles, new mission as well as a demand for movements toward digital transformation in organizational culture, workforce and technology.

Key words: digital transformation, university governance, tertiary education

1. Introduction

Vietnam national digital transformation program to 2025, orientation to 2030 has defined education among eight fields for conversion priority. Since then, various projects to pilot digital transformation models especially at higher education have also been conducted. While focuses may be different, a general trend is a concentration on the development of technology for education, towards individualized training. Although it is widely accepted that digital transformation in education is toward a development of a platform to support distance learning and teaching, thoroughly applying digital technologies to management, teaching and learning; digitizing documents and curriculum; building a platform for sharing teaching and learning resources both directly and online ³, in fact, it is not a simple task of applying digital technology but demands a more strategic approach to the issue of university governance in which

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³ Long Giang. 2021. National digital transformation program to 2025, orientation to 2030. Retrieved at <http://asemconnectvietnam.gov.vn/default.aspx?ZID1=14&ID8=99391&ID1=2>

university's roles, missions and core activities should be redefined, based on a realization of existing obstacles hindering higher education institutions (HEIs) from transforming digitally.

2. Current obstacles to digital transformation in Vietnamese higher education institutions

Under the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, higher education institutions all over the world are forced to make quick digital transformation adjustments to sustain operations and consequently resulting in a number of new issues mostly relating to university governance rather than the level of integrating digital technologies into their business ⁴. In many Vietnamese universities, hierarchical administrative management model is still very common resulting from the history and an existence of numerous governmental regulations. However, global trends of digitalization, modernization and internationalization have put Vietnam HEIs into a continuously changing environment which requires a lot of reduction in time-consuming management activities and an active application of more flexible, effective decision making process. More specifically, digital transformation in the context of university governance autonomy greatly influencing the whole operational procedure of a higher education institution also raises some major challenges.

First, it is quite common to see many universities, including Vietnamese, who plan to implements digital initiatives in reaction to the massive shift towards using new technology without a redefinition of its strategic vision, capability and commitment. Consequently, there is a tendency that IT systems are heavily invested but just lead to relative disappointments in delivering the anticipated benefits and outcomes. A lack of overall vision can result in disjointed programmes and an infrastructure that is complex, inflexible and unable to react quickly in a changing marketplace ⁵. In fact, before staff and academics can buy into new strategic programmes to improve digital capabilities, it is significant that they understand why the programme exists and what their role is in achieving the strategic outcomes. Therefore, a lack of

⁴ Marks, A., Alali, M., Reitesema, K.: Learning management systems: a shift toward learning and academic analytics. *Int. J. Emerg. Technol. Learn.* (2016)

⁵ The 2018 digital university: Staying relevant in the digital age. Retrieved at <https://www.pwc.co.uk/publicsector>

a strategic vision for the whole institution, led by senior management with support from many departments, not just IT, will play as one of the main obstacles.

Second, an organizational culture which is resistant to change may become a severe problem preventing any intention of transforming. In general, people prefer to their routine tasks and it can be a challenge to convince them to adopt entirely new methodologies to complete tasks that they felt they have always done well before ⁶. It is quite easy to understand why faculty members may feel reluctant to take critical steps toward a complete digital transformation. Therefore, a potential for conflicts between faculty members and IT designers, central administrations and faculties may become the second most important challenges ⁷.

Another obstacles is the potential cost for transforming. In general, converting into the model of smart school or digital university will increase the cost up to 60% in comparing to a traditional learning model. New technologies are often expensive while major expenses include but not limited to hardware, software infrastructure ⁸, technology, smart classroom, innovate pedagogical methodologies ⁹, learner management, lecturers and flexible and digital curriculum ^{10, 11} etc. Transforming in education is not only changing from face-to-face to online learning and teaching but also a change of the whole system from admission, teaching and learning

⁶ Digital transformation challenges in educational institutions. Retrieved at <https://hospitalityinsights.ehl.edu/digital-transformation-challenges>

⁷ Kertu Lääts, Kaia Kask, Viire Täks et al. 2019. White paper on digital transformation of universities' internationalization process. Retrieved at <https://www.chedteb.eu/>

⁸ Faria, J.A.; Nóvoa, H. 2020. Digital Transformation at the University of Porto. In Proceedings of the International Conference on Exploring Services Science, Porto, Portugal, 5–7 February 2020. institutions. In Proceedings of the SGEM2017 International Multidisciplinary Scientific GeoConference: SGEM, Albena, Bulgaria, 20–25 June 2011.

⁹ Bond, M.; Marín, V.I.; Dolch, C.; Bedenlier, S.; Zawacki-Richter, O. 2018. Digital transformation in German higher education: Student and teacher perceptions and usage of digital media. *Int. J. Educ. Technol. High. Educ.* pp15, 48.

¹⁰ Azarenko, N.Y.; Mikheenko, O.V.; Chepikova, E.M.; Kazakov, O.D. Formation of innovative mechanism of staff training in the conditions of digital transformation of economy. In Proceedings of the 2018 IEEE International Conference “Quality Management, Transport and Information Security, Information Technologies” (IT&QM&IS), Saint Petersburg, Russia, 24–28 September 2018; pp. 764–768

¹¹ Fleaca, E. Embedding digital teaching and learning practices in the modernization of higher education institutions. In Proceedings of the SGEM2017 International Multidisciplinary Scientific GeoConference: SGEM, Albena, Bulgaria, 20–25 June 2011

administration process ¹², assessment, learner supporting and consultancy activities, which may remarkably lower institutions' determination in transforming.

Last but not least, facing an increasingly demanding expectations of the students in the current 4.0 and the near future 5.0 age is really troublesome to any Vietnamese HEIs whose majority of faculty members and supporting staff are still alien to the concept of IoTs, big data, blockchain, cloud services and the like. Students of the current age, who are more savvy, better connected and more vocal than ever before, bring their own digital world expectations to university. As a result, the necessity of digitalizing administrative processes, providing 24/7 access to information and services as well as satisfying the expectations of students to enrich and diversify learners' experience, securing their employability naturally puts severe constraints on Vietnamese universities, especially the ones with limited resources.

Being total aware of existing challenges, with the purpose of a successful digital transformation, it is necessary that Vietnamese HEIs acknowledge some major factors shaping a digital university. Such components include, but not limited to, a redefinition of educational services through an action of redefining their mission, roles and secondly a redevelopment of operational processes by moving toward digital transformation from university governance perspectives.

3. Major factors shaping a digitally transformative university

3.1. Redefinition of university roles

According to a recent article, the roles of HEIs must change to narrow the digital skills gap and give “future workforce the resilience to capitalize on new opportunities and challenges”. New roles should include ¹³:

- Promoting inclusion: In a classical classroom, it is an assumption that all learners have the same pace of learning and same demands of education, which is unnecessarily true and in fact has created certain difficulties in teaching and learning process. The digitalization of

¹² Tay, H.L.; Low, S.W.K. 2017. Digitalization of learning resources in a HEI—A lean management perspective. *Int. J. Prod. Perform. Manag.* Pp 680–694

¹³ Digital Marketing Institution. 2018. What is the role of higher education in digital society? Retrieved at <https://digitalmarketinginstitute.com/blog/whats-the-role-of-higher-education-in-a-digital-society>

classroom and learning model will bring about a similar effectiveness in comparing to the one with the presence of lecturers. In addition, more learners are able to enjoy academic supports and more assistance is offered. Likewise, interaction between students and lecturers takes place more frequently thanks to technology. Personalized learning development, digital curriculums and new learning application can allow students to approach knowledge according to their needs. In brief, education needs to promote inclusion and provide more learning opportunities for people with the help of digital technology.

- Fostering collective intelligence: Technology allows a closer connection among users and allow them access huger amount of information, and more learning materials than ever before. It also enables learners to share their viewpoints, bestow knowledge onto their friends and cooperate regardless of geographical distance. The application of collaborative technology at HEIs will enhance their students' classroom learning experience and ensure their own learning path.
- Promoting innovation and creativity: Digital age offers good chances for both learners and lecturers to discover new things, collaborate in numerous activities and projects, listen to various perspectives and hence stimulates innovation.
- Developing skills and embracing new technology: the rapid social change with digital application requests students, faculty members and researchers to have high flexibility and frequently update new trends, new technologies. When digital applications are utilized to support learners and to manage training process, students not only develop new skills but also are motivated for lifelong learning, resulting in higher competitive competence. Digital transformation at HEIs will shorten the digital gaps between labor force and social needs.
- Nurturing an ecology of learning and an entrepreneurial spirit: By providing learning opportunities for everybody, by giving individuals to express their own opinions, by offering collaborative learning tools for learners to interact, develop skills an share information instantly without boundaries, universities will create an ecology of learning, a way of thinking that motivate people share knowledge and acquire knowledge , an environment stimulating learning where everybody can achieve what they want. Such learning ecology

will inspire people to innovate and provide them entrepreneurial spirit and self-create more chances for future success.

3.2. Redefinition of university mission

The three academic missions including teaching, research and “third mission” are greatly affected by the process of digital transformation at HEIs ¹⁴.

Teaching: The role of lecturers change from conveyers of knowledge into mentors for learning who facilitate learning in intercultural or transcultural groups using digital technologies.

Research: the virtual exchange between academics and virtual research groups thanks to global networking ,together with employment of big data dramatically alter the approaches to research.

Third mission: Exchanges between HEIs with external actors for the purpose of effective public dissemination of research results will be effectively facilitated. Universities can offer open educational resources and open access research databases so that a wider range of public can access to academic education and academic knowledge. Therefore, higher education institutions help shape the change of society.

3.3. Redevelopment of operational activities by shifting towards digital transformation¹⁵

From the university governance perspective, the digital transformation at higher education institutions requires a combination of different movements in terms of organizational culture, workforce and technology.

First, a higher education digital culture requires a collaborative working environment, a risk taking attitude, a quick decision making process, a balance between risk and rewards, a rapid introduction of innovation and improvement to overcome any resistance to change in the

¹⁴ Jörg DRÄGER, Julius-David FRIEDRICH, Lisa MORDHORST, Ulrich MÜLLER, Ronny RÖWERT. 2017. Higher education institutions need strategies for the digital age. Prospects and Future Tasks of Universities: Digitalization – Internationalization – Differentiation. © LIT VERLAG GmbH & Co. KG Wien.

¹⁵ D. Christopher Brooks and Mark McCormack. Driving Digital Transformation in Higher Education. ECAR research report. Louisville, CO: ECAR, June 2020.

organization¹⁶. Such culture also focuses on enhancing experience of all stakeholders through highest levels of leadership support and involvement, enabling “ alignment across campus between institutional mission/goals and departmental efforts”¹⁷. At the same time, coordination, collaboration, and shared goals is of great essence. Leaders, faculty members and all staff will need to develop a culture of trust that is corroborated by accountability and data . In terms of strategy, it is necessary that institutions differentiate themselves by drawing new, creative strategic directions to meet 21st-century challenges and opportunities, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic by new technologies and greater use of data¹⁸. All decisions need to rely on data and analytics while decision-makers become professionals at change management and risk management.

Second, concerning human resources, it is undeniable that the majority of changes associated with digital transformation in the society and inside the institution demands new skills and competencies (such as technology and data skills, data-related competence, etc) not just within the IT field but across the entire higher education workforce. Consequently, a reinvention of human resource management is in need. For example, new roles in different areas such as innovation and transformation, data and analytics and the like appear. Similarly, faculty roles will change toward an emphasis on advising and student success. Lecturers’ tasks also involve the recreation and continuous adaptation of teaching and mentoring practices to reach changing demographics, using new techniques and tools, and making data- and evidence-based pedagogical decisions. Researchers will also need to equip themselves with new research techniques and adopt a research approach placing students at the position of collaborators and

¹⁶ NV. 2017. Digital Transformation in Higher Education. [Online] Navitas Ventures. Available: https://www.navitasventures.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/HE-Digital-Transformation-Navitas_Ventures_EN.pdf.

¹⁷ Susan Grajek and Betsy Reinitz. 2019. Getting Ready for Digital Transformation: Change Your Culture, Workforce, and Technology. Retrieved at <https://er.educause.edu/articles/2019/7/getting-ready-for-digital-transformation-change-your-culture-workforce-and-technology>

¹⁸ Marks, A., Maytha, A. A., Attasi, R., Elkishk, A. A., & Rezgui, Y. 2021. Digital transformation in higher education: maturity and challenges post COVID-19. In *International Conference on Information Technology & Systems* (pp. 53-70). Springer, Cham.

contributors. Additionally, because data becomes the determining factor in decision making process and there is the need for data literacy, management, and analysis skills across all areas of the institution, institutional leaders need to reskill and restructure their workforce systematically and strategically.

With reference to a shift in technology for digital transformation, it is not a simple task of equipping latest costly technology but more importantly, university should create digital environments that provide unprecedented agility and flexibility and manage such technology ecosystem so that it enables the institution and its units to rapidly and efficiently gain its strategic aims. A strategic application of technologies in support of the institutional missions will best assist HEIs to transform successfully. In order to perform such task, it is advisable that institutional leaders work closely with IT units to clearly define the goals of transformation efforts and develop effective plans and roadmaps. In addition, their IT governance should be improved to harness the full power of data, analytics, AI, as well as to consider and adopt other emerging technologies while IT leaders should focus their efforts on enabling the kind of digital agility and flexibility.

4. Conclusion

In our current age, all universities are under high pressure to provide innovative digital experiences for their students, academics and staff. Therefore, it is significant that they transform holistically by applying digital thinking across their core missions and services. For such purpose, a prior task is the recognition of main obstacles hindering digital transformation initiatives such as the lack of strategic vision toward transformation, the resistance to change in organizational culture, digital incompetence of human resource and the financial shortage. Subsequently, the redefinition of major roles and responsibilities as well as of internal processes operation should be conducted. Accordingly, HEIs' major roles in this digitally ever changing world should promote inclusion and provide more learning opportunities for people with the help of digital technology, enhance their students' classroom learning experience and ensure their own learning path, shorten the digital gaps between workforce and social needs etc. Meanwhile, three core missions of universities including teaching, research and community

service also need to change and adapt according to the digital conversion at campus and in society. Similarly, it is fundamental that university governance holistically consider a digital shift in organizational culture, workforce and technology.

A recent article ¹⁹ released evidence showing that Vietnam has a relatively low Digital Evolution Index (DEI) score (46.79) comparing to that of other Southeast Asian countries such as Malaysia (69.03), Thailand (53.04), Singapore (98.82), and Indonesia (47.72) ²⁰. It is apparent that this DEI insight urges the need to foster digital transformation in the education sector, especially in tertiary sector of the country. This paper suggests that during the process of digital transformation, the issue of university governance in Vietnam higher education institutions needs to be prioritized with major concerns relating to redefinition of vision, mission and redevelopment in the operation of core activities including the shift in culture, human resource and technology, rather than a simply focus on an upgrading of current IT infrastructure.

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¹⁹ Raj Mruthyunjayappa. 2021. Impact of Digitalization for Higher Education in Vietnam. Retrieved at <https://er.educause.edu/articles/2021/6/the-impact-of-digitalization-for-higher-education-in-vietnam>.

²⁰ "Digital Evolution Index (DEI)," Knoema (website), accessed July 8, 2021

