

# Internationalization of Higher Education in Vietnam Opportunities and Challenges

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**Abstract:** In the contemporary global academic environment, internationalization of higher education has become a common trend in both developed and developing countries. In Vietnam, a developing country in Asia, initiatives such as branch campus, transnational collaborative arrangements, sandwich programs, English-medium programs and degrees have been put in place as part of higher education internationalization. This has created both opportunities and challenges for the development of the Vietnamese higher education system. On the one hand, it creates the opportunity for local universities to cooperate with foreign partners, to provide international and cross-cultural perspectives for their students, and to enhance their curricula. Thus it may help the local institutions improve the quality and cultural composition of their student cohort, gain prestige and earn more income. However, these initiatives and programs are largely coming from and controlled by the industrialized North, with the key motives of earning money and expanding power. Therefore, it requires that the local government and institutions have strong capability to monitor international initiatives, to be selective in their cooperation and in the lessons they should learn in order to improve the teaching and learning quality for the Vietnamese higher education system.

*Keywords:* Higher education, internationalization, Vietnam, challenges, opportunities.

## 1. Introduction

In the contemporary global academic environment, internationalization of higher education (HE) has become a common trend in both developed and developing countries. Initiatives such as branch campus, transnational collaborative arrangements, sandwich

programs, English-medium programs and degrees have been put in place as part of HE internationalization in Vietnam. This has created both opportunities and challenges for the development of the Vietnamese higher education system (HES). This article aims to explore both opportunities and challenges brought about by the internationalization in HE in Vietnam in the unequal context of a globalized world. This, hopefully, will help the involved stakeholders, policy makers and

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institutions included, to see the whole picture of internationalization of HE in Vietnam and to adapt their policies and practices in ways to seize the opportunities and overcome the challenges.

## 2. Globalization and the unequal context of internationalization in higher education

Over the last few decades, globalization has become the context of both economic and academic trends worldwide. Under the impact of globalization, there is evidence of an irreversible process of ‘increasing the flow of people, culture, ideas, values, knowledge, technology, and economy across borders resulting in a more interconnected and interdependent world’ [1]. The economic, political and societal forces of globalization have ‘pushed 21<sup>st</sup> century HE toward greater international involvement’ [2]. Globalization has resulted in growing use of information technology, cross-border communication, and the spread of English as a common language in scientific communication. This creates opportunities as well as challenges for the HESs all over the world. Each country, depending on their specific circumstance, may come up with different policies to seize the opportunities brought by globalization and to cope with its challenges.

Internationalization is one of such policies adopted by many HESs in different countries all over the world. Internationalization is often used to refer to specific policies and initiatives adopted by higher education institutions (HEIs), HESs or even a whole country to deal with as well as to take advantage of both the challenges and opportunities presented by globalization [3]. According to Altbach [3], while

globalization is considered ‘unalterable’, internationalization involves choices. However, although internationalization of HE is considered optional, many initiatives such as transnational HE, cross-border collaborative arrangements, branch campuses, international student programs and many others have become widespread both in the developed and the developing worlds. Internationalization of HE is even considered as ‘an important resource in the development of HE towards, first of all, a system in line with international standards; secondly, one open and responsive to its global environment’ [4]. With Qiang’s definition [4], it seems, internationalization is all good for any institution and any system adopting it.

However, the matter does not seem to be that simple, especially when the deep inequality in academic world interferes into the process, and when most initiatives and programs, as suggested by Altbach and Knight [2], come largely from the North and become ‘the focus on the South’<sup>1</sup>. In most developed countries in the North, when ‘profit’ is the key motive, internationalization of HE is ‘more driven by commercial and entrepreneurial spirit’ [6]. Whereas in the South, when agreeing to let foreign universities set up their campuses or to offer their programs to local students, even when seeking to attract foreign students to their countries, it seems that the very first aim of developing countries is to improve the teaching and learning quality for the local institutions, then, to improve the quality and cultural composition of the student cohort and to gain

<sup>1</sup> North/Northern, South/Southern are relational terms; North/Northern refer to the metropolis of Western Europe and Northern America; South/Southern refer to the global periphery – the less developed world in Asia and Africa ([2, 5]).

prestige [2]. Earning income seems to be less important than these motives.

In this unbalanced relationship between the North and the South in the internationalization of HE, the voice discussing internationalization is also 'largely Western' and it seems to be accepted by the rest of the academic world [2]. The current internationalization of HE is considered as a process from aid to trade [7]. The North has become the one who provides, who sells or who exports educational services. The South, has eventually become the one who receives, buys or imports those services. Western norms, ideas and standards have become privileges in many developing countries in the South who are struggling to improve the quality of their HESs. One of the common ways is to seek and accept academic norms, standards, conventions and initiatives suggested largely by the North [1, 2, 8].

Nonetheless, internationalization of HE has become an increasingly important trend in many developing countries. The driving forces for this trend are affected by not only their national policies but also by 'calls and pressures from international, regional, or global organizations' [6]. In an unequal relationship, there are still successful stories and practices from the developing world in the South. Emerging countries who are neighbours of Vietnam, such as Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore, do not limit their internationalization of HE to receiving, buying or importing foreign HE initiatives from the North, but also export their HE activities to other Asian countries. Other countries, such as China and Malaysia, although importing foreign HE programs has remained predominant, have established educational hubs for international students and begun to export their education services to other countries. The

current way of internationalization has presented both challenges and opportunities for developing countries in the South. To be a winner or loser in 'the game of internationalization of HE' [9], all depends on each player to seize the opportunities, to overcome the challenges and actualize their goals.

### **3. Internationalization of HE in Vietnam: Opportunities and challenges**

In Vietnam, since the implementation of the open door policy in 1986, with the adoption of a market-based economy, both the economy and the HES in the country have developed impressively. In terms of the HES, the number of students enrolled in the system increased from more than 100,000 students in 1987 to more than 2,2 millions students in 2012 [10]. The number of HEIs has also increased sharply with more diverse types of universities. Instead of only 101 public colleges and universities in 1987, there are 419 HEIs in 2012, many of which are semi-private or private universities [10]. Despite the booming of the system, the HES does not seem to satisfy the demand of the students, their families and the economy. Education quality has remained low and has become a major social concern [11]. The outcome of the system also does not seem to satisfy the demand of the developing economy. Many university graduates are unemployed or underemployed when employers still complain about the difficulties in finding graduates with required skills and knowledge [12]. English is considered one of the important factors helping the system on the way to attain international standards, yet the English proficiency of the majority of university students is weak [13]. Many families are willing to send their children

overseas to study, despite the fact that they may have to pay the tuition fees which are hundred times more expensive than those of local public universities. They keep the hope that their children will receive better knowledge and skills for a bright future in a better educational system.

Recognising these weaknesses, the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) and HEIs are struggling to find solutions to improve the quality of the system. Internationalization of HE, which is considered one of the most important approaches, have been proposed and also carried out to achieve that goal. Internationalization of HE in Vietnam is considered as a way to enhance regional and international cooperation and integration in the field of education. The aim of internationalization of HE in Vietnam is not only to improve the quality of the system but also to help the system better integrate in the region and in an international context [11].

Under the influence of globalization and internationalization of HE in Vietnam, there has been massive staff and student mobility across the border of the country. The number of students and HE staff studying abroad has increased sharply, from 1,139 in 1990 to 25,505 in 2005 [14]. In 2012, according to Vietnam International Education Development - MOET, there are currently more than 100,000 Vietnamese students studying in 49 different countries all over the world [15]. This number has increased more than 10 times compared to the year 2001. These students fall into three categories: self-financed students, foreign scholarship recipients and Vietnamese government scholarship recipients. The number of students in all three categories has increased as a result of (1) the increasing number of middle and high income families in Vietnam,

together with the increasing disappointment at the quality of the Vietnamese higher education; (2) the expanding relationship and cooperation between MOET and a wide range of countries, as well as between local institutions and different international organizations and institutions; and (3) the efforts of the Vietnamese government to spend its budget on such projects as 322, 911 or 165 which aim to send government staff overseas for training.

The number of international students coming to study in Vietnam has also increased, although at a much more moderate level, from about 600 students during the years of 1998-2000 to 2,053 inbound students in 2005 [16]. Internationalization has opened the door widely to greater number of international students into the system. However, the low quality of teaching in the system and the limited number of educational programs offered in English are the main barriers to many international students coming to Vietnam. The majority of international students pursuing their study in Vietnam only study Vietnamese or Vietnamese studies [11]. Cases of international students coming to Vietnam to study other specializations are rare.

The internationalization of HE in Vietnam has also been marked by the presence of numerous foreign education programs. These programs are run entirely by foreign partners or through some forms of cooperation between foreign partners and Vietnamese HEIs. In 2002, the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology established two campuses in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. It was the first one and has remained the only 100 percent foreign owned university in Vietnam. In addition, the Vietnamese-German University founded in 2008, despite considering itself as a Vietnamese state university [17], follows the model of

German HE. Thus, it is often counted as a foreign institution to distinguish from other institutions in the system. Apart from programs offered by these two universities, many other programs offered by different universities from different countries have also entered Vietnam in the forms of joint ventures with Vietnamese institutions. These programs are advertised across the systems from two National Universities to smaller universities such as Hanoi University, Foreign Trade University and the National Economics University.

Apart from cooperating with foreign partners in offering more options to meet the variety of students' demand, MOET as well as individual universities have made great efforts to attract support and investment from international organizations and institutions such as the World Bank, UNESCO and the Asian Development Bank. Different projects have been implemented with the assistance, both financially and technically, of these organizations and institutions. Up to the end of 2008, there have been about 100 such projects run at both undergraduate and graduate levels [11].

### ***Opportunities***

Several advantages have been reported as results of internationalization of HE in Vietnam. By allowing more and more education services across borders and by undertaking joint programs and projects with prestigious foreign partners, Vietnamese HEIs can increase their understanding of international education practices. They can also benefit from having an overview of educational standards, ideas, curriculum management and delivery of different educational partners, from which they can learn and develop better quality practices applicable to the Vietnamese context. The increased number of staff and students who were trained in foreign countries also enriches

the student and staff cohort in each university. These students and staff often bring back with them knowledge and skills learnt in foreign countries to contribute to the development of their own universities. Thousands of Master and PhD graduates have returned to Vietnam and are holding important positions in different institutions [18]. They are expected to be the main contributors to the renovation process in the system, to help increase the research capability and quality of HEIs, and to boost the process of Vietnamese HES attaining regional and international educational standards.

By introducing and offering joint programs with foreign partners, Vietnamese HEIs can also provide more options for the growing demand which cannot be met by their own programs. The joint programs, to some extent, also help Vietnam to train more graduates with international perspectives more quickly and cheaply. In addition, as the school fees for this cohort of students are often much higher than the fees contributed by their main stream students, opening joint programs is also considered a good way of earning income for Vietnamese HEIs.

Similar advantages are found in attracting foreign students to the HES in Vietnam. By increasing the number of international students, universities can expect to 'improve the quality and cultural composition of the student body, gain prestige, and earn income' [2]. These students often bring with them more funding but also higher demands, expectations and needs. Thus they urge for the change in HEIs toward the development and adoption of better teaching practices as well as higher quality services to meet the demand of international students.

### ***Challenges***

Internationalization of HE has opened up several good opportunities for Vietnam to learn

from different policies and practices applied in HESs worldwide, however, it also imposes quite a number of challenges for a developing country like Vietnam. When adopting internationalization in an unbalanced world, Vietnam has also accepted the risks associated with a weaker party in international interaction. The relationship between developed countries and developing countries in the process of internationalization of education is often described as the process of exporting-importing, of selling-buying or selling-receiving, of globalizer-globalizing educational policies and services [1, 2, 19]. The risks created by this imbalanced relationship are worth being mentioned.

The first risk seems to be evident, not just for Vietnam, but it has been a common concern for most developing countries. A long standing concern is 'brain drain' and 'capital drain' [3] especially when the flow of students, academic staff and funding is largely from Vietnam to developed countries. When the number of Vietnamese students going overseas to study in 2005 is more than 25,000, the number of international students coming to study in Vietnam was only slightly more than 2000 in the same year [14, 16]. When the number of Vietnamese students studying overseas has reached 100,000 in 2012, Vietnam has still kept the hope attracting 3000 international to come [16]. Among these 100,000 Vietnamese students studying overseas, more than 90 percent are fee paying students [14] – they bring money from Vietnam overseas. Apart from seeking to study in a more advanced system, many keep the hope of finding an opportunity to settle in the host countries [3]. These numbers and figures illustrate very clearly the risk of brain drain and capital drain

for Vietnam to its internationalization partner countries.

Offering foreign programs and finding ways to make universities attractive to retain local students and to attract more international students are considered some of the right solutions to reduce the brain drain and capital drain in Vietnam. However, problems still exist. In terms of managing the foreign programs, Vietnam still seems to lack capacity and political will to 'have the regulatory systems to register or evaluate out-of-country providers' [2]. This firstly, makes it hard for the Vietnamese authority to monitor foreign partners' activities to make sure they comply with national regulations. Secondly, when the national quality assurance agency – the Department of Testing and Accreditation, MOET – does not have the responsibility to assess the quality of imported programs, how is the quality of these programs assured? Universities, when getting involved in these transnational education programs, are often driven by market forces. They often focus more on profit rather than controlling the quality of the programs offered. They either do not seem to have the capability to control it, or do not consider it their responsibility.

The effort of internationalization of curricula does not seem to lead to a positive outcome either. In 2008, MOET launched the project namely 'Implementation of advanced training programs at a number of Vietnamese universities in the 2008-2015 period'. Advanced training programs are explained by MOET as 'properly designed and established by universities on the basis of the curricula currently used at prestigious universities in the world, including content, teaching method, organization and training management processes and are taught in English' [20]. The Vietnamese government was ambitious about

the possibility this project could contribute to the enhancement of quality and renovation in the HES. It was also expected that this project could lead to the result of having ‘some Vietnamese universities being ranked in the top 200 of the world universities by 2020’ [20]. However, even with the financial support from the government, universities are still facing many difficulties in running these programs, especially in terms of attracting both local and international students to these programs. The passive import of curricula from the so-called-prestigious universities, the lack of English ability of both the Vietnamese academic staff and local students, the high entrance requirements with high tuition fees and the domestic degrees granted at the end of the programs all make these programs less attractive compared to numerous joint programs offered elsewhere in Vietnam [11].

The above project of internationalization of curricula is considered as part of the process of Vietnam catching up with more advanced countries in providing education services. It, however, does not seem to work as expected. When Vietnam aims to develop similar curricula, teaching methods, teaching content, and to adopt similar organizational and educational management as those used in Western developed countries [20], it fails to acknowledge Vietnamese dimensions of identity and character. This has weakened the competitiveness of the local internationalization programs when there are many Western original programs with Western privilege degrees are on offer in the local market. More profoundly, the tendency of continuing buying, importing, receiving, accepting and following Western policies and practice ties Vietnam HE to the values of Western norms which may not be appropriate for the local context and culture [21].

## 6. Conclusion

The internationalization of HE in Vietnam is considered one of the most important policies to ensure quality development and enhancement of the higher education sector, and to achieve greater regional cooperation and international standards. However, it seems that Vietnam has more challenges than opportunities brought about by the internationalization of HE, given the weaker role of Vietnamese HE in the international education interaction. Especially when at both national and institutional levels, internationalization of HE seems to be oriented towards adopting Western models of policies, regulations and standardization without critically consideration of national and institutional identity and characteristics.

It is necessary for the Vietnamese HES to invest more on academic research to build a stronger internal system capable of making the best choices for its development and of developing appropriate strategies for internationalization of HE. It also requires that local governments and institutions develop a stronger capability to monitor international initiatives, to be selective in their cooperation and in the lessons they should learn in order to practically enhance teaching and learning quality for the HES in Vietnam. Since internationalization of HE has been increasingly driven by globalization forces, motivated by economic purposes and with the help of the development of information and communication technologies, in order to achieve regional and international standards and integration, Vietnamese HE needs to be well prepared in terms of human and financial resources. At the same time, the quality of the assurance system should also be strengthened and enhanced to take control over the quality of

the system both internally and externally. Lessons from neighbouring countries succeeding in internationalizing HE such as Singapore, Taiwan or Hong Kong should also be learnt to create a more balanced process of importing-exporting educational services in the internationalization of HE in Vietnam. If Vietnam can develop the right policies and programs to address the challenges and to seize the opportunities, internationalization could bring expected outcomes: to enhance the quality of HEIs and to help the system faster attain international standards.

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## Quốc tế hóa giáo dục đại học – cơ hội và thách thức

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**Tóm tắt:** Trong bối cảnh của nền kinh tế tri thức đương đại, quốc tế hóa giáo dục đại học (QTHGDĐH) đã và đang trở thành một xu thế phổ biến ở nhiều nước trên thế giới. Bài viết này muốn bàn về những thuận lợi và khó khăn do quá trình QTHGDĐH mang lại cho một nước mà nền giáo dục còn đang phát triển ở một chừng mực khá khiêm tốn như Việt Nam. Một mặt, QTHGDĐH tạo điều kiện cho các trường đại học trong nước có điều kiện mở mang tầm nhìn và nâng cao chất lượng đào tạo khi có điều kiện cộng tác và học hỏi các đối tác bên ngoài. QTHGDĐH cũng có thể giúp các trường cộng tác với nước ngoài nâng cao uy tín và thu nhập trong điều kiện kinh phí bao cấp ngày càng trở nên hạn hẹp. Tuy nhiên, đa phần các chương trình hợp tác đều có xuất phát điểm từ nước ngoài và do đối tác nước ngoài chủ động đưa vào với mục đích chính của họ là kinh tế và quyền lực. Điều này đòi hỏi không chỉ các trường đại học mà cả các nhà quản lý giáo dục ở tầm vĩ mô cần phải có đủ năng lực để hiểu rõ các chương trình và đối tác quốc tế, để biết cách lựa chọn các đối tác thích hợp và rút ra được những bài học thực sự thiết thực để dần nâng cao chất lượng đào tạo giáo dục đại học trong nước.

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