

VIETNAMESE UNIVERSITY CULTURE WITH EXTERNAL RELATIONS IN THE ERA OF INTEGRATION¹

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Abstract: *In the era of integration and tendency of autonomy, the Vietnamese higher education institutions (HEIs) have been paying more attention to the diverse external relations in the process of developing the university culture. The accountability about the quality of education, research as well as other missions of the HEIs requires the close connection with both internal and external stakeholders. The papers first aims to analyse the integration context and the requirements for innovation in the Vietnamese higher education. Next, the role of each external stakeholder of the HEIs will be presented and analysed. Finally, the paper will give some implications for the policies of developing and enlarging the external relations, making contributions to the university culture on the basis of core values appropriate for the new era of integration, especially the value “living together” and “accountability”.*

Key words: *university culture, accountability, stakeholders.*

Introduction

There are several definitions of university culture but all share the common focus on the system of core values, beliefs and thoughts of the HEI formed during the stages of university development, dominating and directing the university activities in the process of interaction within and with the external stakeholders outside the university. Before Doi Moi (*Renovation*) and market mechanism were applied in Vietnam, the HEIs (especially the public ones) had not paid enough attention to the relationships between the HEIs and the diverse agencies and organizations outside the HEIs (except for the political-social organizations and the controlling agencies). In the context of autonomy and integration as well as under the pressure of competition and the tendency of standardization, innovation in higher education, the HEIs nowadays in the whole country are promoting the relationships and interaction with various stakeholders in accordance with new appropriate values, which have affected the development of university culture holistically.

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1. The integration context and innovation in the Vietnamese higher education

The 21st century is the century of globalization, ICT booming, Industry 4.0, knowledge economy and learning society. Vietnam has more opportunities for collaboration in various fields with many countries in the world. The Vietnamese HEIs are also influenced by the changes and required to make innovations, which helps speed up the process of industrialization and modernization of the country, making contributions to the sustainable development of the peaceful and harmonious world. The tendency of diversification, internationalization, standardization and digitalization in higher education bring both chances and challenges. The training products must satisfy the requirements of the new diverse labour market. The connection with the external stakeholders (within and outside the country) is not only necessary but also beneficial to the HEIs.

1.1. The diversification in higher education and some appropriate values

In the globalization context, the diversification is clearly seen in higher education: various types of HEIs have been established with different objectives, satisfying different aspirations, interests and competencies of various learners, serving diverse needs of the society. In Vietnam, the tendency of diversification is demonstrated in the diversified types of HEIs and modes of study, forms of study. Together with the articulated study programs and joint programs, there are also various majors, disciplines, orientations and abundant optional and elective courses, creating more chances of learning in accordance with the learners' specific needs, abilities, interests, plans and intentions. However, this tendency also requires the careful study of the career context, increasingly diverse and complex requirements of the labour market outside the HEIs. Diversification also requires more autonomy and higher accountability.

Therefore, in this tendency, the Vietnamese HEIs have developed some core values such as "Diversity", "Learner-centeredness", "Whole-person education" in order to individualise learners' various needs, satisfying the various needs of the labour market. The Vietnamese that have selected these core values or educational philosophy include the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, VNU-HCM with "Whole person education", the National University of HCM City (VNU-HCM) set the core value of Learner-centeredness or Learner-center approach,...

1.2. Internationalisation and some appropriate values

The era of exchanges, integration and mobility in the world of learning and working has facilitated the internationalisation of higher education in many disciplines throughout the world. In Vietnam, in addition to many joint study programs, the establishment of many international universities, foreign universities such as RMIT, Vietnam-German University, Vietnamese-Japanese University, Vietnam-France University,... help students follow the international programs in the home country instead of studying abroad which would cost more money. The joint programs require effective coordination, continuous monitoring and revision of study programs, educational and research activities to attract international partners and promote competitive advantage.

Multicultural education promote value of the inter-dependence and respect to various culture to find solutions to the global issues together: ecology, pandemic, terrorism, exhaustion of natural resources.... The appropriate core values in this tendency include “Respect”, “Integration”, “Connectivity”, “Community engagement”,.... The values of *Integration* or *International integration* have been announced on the websites of several HEIs such as University of Technology, International University, VNU-HCM, Nguyen Tat Thanh University,... One of the 6 core values of VNU-HCM is “*Interconnection, international cooperation are the cores of the development*”. The values of *Solidarity, Collaboration, Mutual respect, or Respect for diversity/differences* have been used by the University of Science, VNU-HCM, University of Economics, VNUHN, Vinh University,....

1.3. Standardization, digitalization and some appropriate values

Standardization of the study programs and all activities according to the HEIs’ missions will help prove the accountability, meeting the HEIs’ objectives and complying with the quality criteria. Therefore, the interaction with the accreditation or assessment agencies/ auditing authorities in addition to the controlling agencies has become the common tendency in the country and in the world according to the European and North American models. It is required by most quality accreditation/assessment criteria at program level to have constant exchange with the employers, alumni, industries and professional bodies/associations to collect the information, feedback and comments on the study programs, internships and careers.

In addition, the technology-oriented, active and individualized learning in higher education helps overcome the negative consequences of the diversification. The overloaded knowledge and skills in the era of booming diverse information requires the lifelong learning, leading to the innovation of teaching and learning, the changes in the teachers and learners’ roles. In this trend, the HEIs need to develop the relationships, interaction with the external stakeholders for technological transfers and enhancing scientific research, commercialisation of scientific products to bring benefits to the community and promote the prestige or brand name of the HEIs. During the pandemic, on the technological foundation, the HEIs can also enlarge the exchanges, cooperation via the online tools.

The appropriate core values in this trend include “*Transparency*”, “*Commitment*” (Accountability), “*Excellence*”,.... The University of Economic-Law, VNU-HCM has selected the core value of “*Excellence*”, Thu Dau Mot University, Vinh University and the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, VNU-HCM have the core value “*Responsibility*” and “*Creativity*”, VNU-HCM set the values: *Education quality is the top priority for every activity* and *Independence, creativity in research and science creativity*.

2. The role of HEIs’ connection with external stakeholders.

Tierney (1988) mentions the multidimensional interaction of cultural influences in the development of HEIs, including with internal and external aspects. Shen và Tian (2012) mention the academic ethics in the relationships, academic environment, creativity, evaluation of the internal and external stakeholders. The external stakeholders are of great importance in the development of HEIs as analysed below.

2.1. Connection with the industries, employers and professional associations

The link between the HEIs and the industries, employers and professional associations usually aims to: (1) exchange on the updated information about the requirements of the employers, labour market for the study programs, translated into the program development in the trend of diversity and standardization; (2) cooperate in students' internship/practicum, recruitment of the graduates; (3) cooperate in research projects, technological transfer, updating and sharing new knowledge in accordance with the values of connectivity and leadership; (4) get scholarships, sponsorships and grants for students with financial difficulties.

The feedback from the employers, alumni, information from the labour market are the basis for the development of the graduate attributes translating into the study programs outcomes including subject-specific and generic knowledge, skills and attitudes. The quality criteria according to MOET and AUN-QA require the close connection between the HEIs and the industries, employers in study, research and community service/engagement. It is necessary to have connections with the industrial partners or communities for the application of the research results or products in the HEIs' mission of community service. The key principles for this connection include: (1) looking for partners and fulfilling the research projects as contracted, (2) technological transfers and offering of applied research products, (3) investment in strong research groups, commercialization of research products, spin-offs... (4) attracting sponsors for the research projects from big enterprises, industries and other organisations.

2.2. Connection with the alumni

The Vietnamese alumni are always the very important stakeholders who have strong attachment to the HEIs and faculties where they used to spend memorable years during their time of study. As a result, they often show close connections with the HEIs and often come back to the HEIs for a visit on the occasions of some important events as special invited guests and make significant material and spiritual contributions to the HEIs, especially on the Vietnamese Teachers' Day. Some successful alumni are also employers.

As a summary from our research results, the HEIs' connection with the alumni can bring the following benefits to the HEIs with the alumni's contribution in: (1) giving feedback to the HEIs and faculties on study programs and sharing updated information on the requirements of the labour market for the quality of the training programs which can be more specific than the information given by the employers as they themselves experienced the study programs previously; (2) sharing information and advising students on career prospects, receiving and guiding students for internship/practicum, recruiting them after graduation in case they also play the role of the employers; (3) collaborating in the role of visiting lecturers or "guest speakers" in some classes with practical experiences or participating in the professional councils/ committee, supervising students with graduation thesis especially if they have high qualifications; (4) giving scholarships, grants to students with financial difficulties or financial contributions to other activities, infrastructure or research projects.

2.3. Connection with the research institutes and other HEIs

The connection with the research institutes and other HEIs, academic partners within and outside the country is a must, especially in the research activities. The QS Asia set the ranking criteria on academic reputation² on the basis of the evaluation on the HEIs' prestige by the domestic and international academic partners, which accounts for 30% among the total ranking criteria. This connection must be developed and strengthened at both institutional and faculty levels. The connection with the research institutes and other HEIs has the following significant role: (1) collaboration in the research and technological projects (in-depth and interdisciplinary ones), contribution in scientific councils selecting and evaluating the research projects; (2) collaboration in teaching in some main or extra/co-curricular programs, supervising in graduation theses, dissertations; (3) collaboration in other academic activities such as creating new study programs, sharing practical updated information with the academic councils; (4) collaboration in the exchanges of students, lecturers, especially with the foreign HEIs, which helps enlarge their knowledge and vision, not mentioning the credit transfers. A typical sharing from our research project³ shows that an HEI in the Mekong Delta area could get this benefit as follows: *“Our HEI could get benefits from the project of Community College model transferred by our Canadian partners. When we implemented our first COOP program, the Faculty of Chemistry was involved, they could get contact with a famous chemical company in the province”*.

The Vietnamese HEIs can also get benefits from the international cooperation activities with the advanced countries, from getting scholarships for lecturers and students to study abroad in short-term or long-term programs to welcoming experts to come and share in seminars, workshops, international conferences ... However, due to the limitation in internationalization, lack of competencies in foreign languages (especially English) and other barriers in procedures, only few Vietnamese HEIs have been able to develop in-depth research collaboration projects and mutual publications from these research projects' results except for the Vietnamese scholars doing their post doc abroad.

2.4. Connection with ministries and local authorities

The constant exchanges with various ministries in addition to the Ministry of Education and Training can bring the HEIs various benefits such as: technological transfers, getting updated statistical data in different fields, practical and academic consultancy, community service projects, infrastructure projects, getting research funding or grants,... which helps solve social, economical, technological problems or give implications for the policies in the fields of study.

The local authorities also have some grants, projects for the HEIs in the city/provinces, connecting the HEIs with the local enterprises, organizations that have the needs for human resources, creating chances for students' extra-curricular activities,.... The local authority representatives can even become members of the University Council, making contribution in the decision-making process in the autonomous universities with some

² <https://support.qs.com/hc/en-gb/articles/4403784242322-Asia-Region-Ranking>

³ Research under grant number A2018-18b-01, VNU-HCM.

decentralization. However, without appropriate mechanism and policies, this connection would be ineffective and this requires good communication to overcome the difficulties together and continuous improvements for mutual benefits.

2.5. Connection with social organizations and NGOs

The HEIs can also enjoy benefits from the connection with other cultural-social organizations, including NGOs. Students can get advantages from these organizations for diverse extra-curricular activities, charity activities which help them become mature and develop soft skills, making social contributions such as via the exchanges with Study Promotion Association, Women Association, Local Teachers' Association, Old People' Association, other unions. The local cultural houses, centers for community education, other domestic and foreign charity agencies, NGOs that have community service projects or programs can allow students and faculty staff to join which raise their awareness in protecting safe and healthy environment, complying with the law, traffic regulations,.... Students in social sciences and humanities can choose these agencies for their field trips or internships or service learning.

An illustration from our research project on university culture in Vietnam⁴ can be demonstrated from this sharing *“As for external stakeholders, many activities can be organized for students and lecturers as community services or engagement is one of the quality criteria, creating trust for the society. From these activities with various unions, exchanges, charity activities implemented from various levels: class level, department or faculty level and university level, union level ... we can find that we have done a good job”*. As a result, the Vietnamese HEIs tend to promote these connection activities in developing their institutional or organizational culture.

2.6. Connection with diplomatic agencies, friendship/international organizations

The diplomatic agencies, friendship/international organizations operating in the country are quite diverse from embassies, general consulates, friendship organizations, educational exchanges agencies, other diplomatic agencies or representatives of international agencies also play an important role in supporting the HEIs in various activities. The cultural or education department/section of these embassies, general consulates often share information about culture and education of their countries to the Vietnamese HEIs. When the HEIs hold some annual or special events, ceremonies, festivals, they are honoured to welcome international diplomats from these agencies. For instance, the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, VNU-HCM has received support from various international diplomatic agencies in HCMC including the general consulates, other international agencies such as British Council (the UK), DAAD Information Center (Germany), JICA and Japan Foundation (Japan), KOICA (South Korea),... with various activities, exchanges, sponsorship, training workshops, introduction of human resources, contribution to the big ceremonies, etc....

⁴ Research project A2018-18b-01, VNU-HCM

3. Recommendations for enlarging external relation of the Vietnamese HEIs

3.1. Connection to serve educational activities and development of campus life

From the analysis above, it can be found that to fulfil the educational mission of the HEIs, the value of “connectedness” must be systematically translated into the specific interactions and links with the external stakeholders and partners. It is therefore essential to enhance the leadership and communication competences for the key managers within the HEIs at all levels in developing and monitoring educational programs and activities. As a result, they can take initiatives in evaluating, selecting, strengthening and enlarging the networks outside their HEIs appropriate for the needs and objectives of their study programs to support the learners to the best. In addition, to develop the campus life, the extra-curricular activities, material, social and psychological environment, it is crucial to get the external contributions to the whole person development of the learners by exploiting the diverse external relations from the outside.

3.2. Connection to serve research activities and development of academic environment

The relationships with the external academic individuals and organizations such as the research institutes, other HEIs, professional bodies, technological zones,... plays the critical role in developing the HEIs’ brand name and academic ability, meeting the quality assessment and ranking criteria. Therefore, the Vietnamese HEIs nowadays need to make the holistic strategic plans in selecting important domestic and international academic partners, developing the regulations, guidelines, training in communication culture and external relations with the partners, monitoring and evaluating the activities implemented from the MoUs, MoAs to find solutions or measures to improve their effectiveness for further development.

3.3. Connection to serve communities and interaction with social environment

Community service and engagement is becoming the popular mission of many Vietnamese HEIs, following the tendency of the HEIs in the world in addition to education and research missions, which requires closer connection of the HEIs with the social communities. The diverse external stakeholders can help the HEIs to fulfil this mission. Therefore, the leaders at all levels must be more active in connecting with the external stakeholders in transferring technology, knowledge, best practices, initiatives, giving consultancy in social policies to contribute to the solutions of the common issues. With their awareness of accountability and commitment, the leaders and faculty members will be motivated to enhance their competences, to do research and study the social needs, promoting creativity and innovations to make more effective and practical contributions to the community and promoting the HEIs’ prestige, brand name and core value or philosophy of “living together”.

Conclusion

The external stakeholders not only provide important feedback on the quality of the HEIs from the input to the process and the output but also make contributions to the HEIs in various development projects, supporting human resources within the HEIs in different ways. They accompany the HEIs during the process of collaboration in educational, research and community service activities. The core values of the HEIs can be formed from these relations and maintained across generations. The committed leaders can help promote these values further via the enlargement of the domestic and international networks and external relations, creating the cultural identity for the Vietnamese HEIs, making use of the chances for positive exchanges and relationships with the outside world, respecting the various cultures of the mankind without neglecting the good traditional values of the country.

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