

Chapter 14

Internationalisation of Vietnamese Higher Education: Possibilities, Challenges and Implications



Ly Thi Tran and Simon Marginson

The Strategy for Education Development for Vietnam 2011–2020 positions internationalisation as one of the eight initiatives fundamental for the development of education in the country (Thủ Tướng Chính Phủ [Prime Minister] 2012). In national policy internationalisation is understood mainly in terms of the expansion and enhancement of international cooperation in program development and delivery, in research and in student and staff mobility. Internationalisation is seen as a key strategy for lifting education quality, keeping pace with international standards and fast moving developments in the Asia-Pacific region, and augmenting the supply of skilled human capital for the nation. Internationalisation is considered as a crucial approach to enhancing institutional performance and international ranking. In implementing these perspectives, the Vietnamese government has begun realising the potential of internationalisation. The internationalisation of Vietnamese higher education system has partly moved from a passive to a pro-active approach.

Nevertheless, taken overall, the internationalisation of Vietnam higher education is still rather ineffective and in some cases, unrealistic. The main weaknesses include lack of coherent approaches and lack of leadership focus on the promotion of internationalisation (see Chap. 2 for more detailed discussion), lack of resources for implementing internationalisation, lack of capacity, and lack of effective competition (see Hoang et al., Chap. 2; Tran et al., Chap. 4; Diep Tran, Chap. 6). Both Chap. 4 and Chap. 2 noted that internationalisation activities in Vietnamese universities are largely concentrated in demand-absorbing professional fields and cater for a small population of students in selected programmes and selected universities.

L. T. Tran (✉)

School of Education, Deakin University, Burwood, VIC, Australia
e-mail: ly.tran@deakin.edu

S. Marginson

UCL Institute of Education, University College London, London, UK
e-mail: s.marginson@ucl.ac.uk

The government-led initiative to utilise internationalisation as a vehicle to have world-class universities by 2020 is still far from being achieved.

Despite the emergence of a market in Vietnamese higher education itself, in many respects, Vietnam still operates mainly as a receiver and importer of higher and vocational education. Internationalisation is referred to as a ‘goal’ rather than as a ‘process’. Internationalisation activities occur at various Vietnamese universities that either do not meet the government’s expectations or are not foreseen by the government (Hoang et al., Chap. 2). The inefficiency of some internationalisation programmes and activities in Vietnamese higher education (for example, the advanced program) appears to be a significant weakness of policy making. Quality assurance is an important dimension of the internationalisation process in Vietnam, especially given the exponential growth of joint and twinning programs in partnerships with foreign providers over the past decade. There is still much concern about benchmarking those partnership models and transnational activities against international benchmarks (Do, Chap. 3).

Authors such as Nguyen (2010), Tran et al. (2014) and Welch (2010) generally agree that the internationalisation of higher education in Vietnam is predominantly motivated by the cooperation-for-capacity-building driver, or the borrowing-and-importing-for-development driver, rather than the revenue-earning driver. International cooperation in program development is limited mainly to curriculum borrowing (Tran et al. 2017, Chap. 4). Fragmented and inconsistent internationally-financed initiatives do not add value and valuable resources are being frittered away. Large numbers of students study abroad, some government financed and others privately supported. Many of these students progress very well in educational terms when they are abroad, benefitting from the strong educational foundations they acquired in Vietnam, in the family and schooling. However, the skills and knowledge they acquire when abroad are not drawn on effectively in national development when they return.

For emerging higher education systems in growing nations, internationalisation, effectively handled, offers a vital mechanism for accelerated development. However, only some nations are successful in their internationalisation strategies. Many have lost their way. For some outside observers, Vietnam’s failure to use internationalisation strategies effectively in higher education —in contrast with regional neighbours China, South Korea and Singapore — is a mystery. Internationalisation in Vietnam seems to be stuck, inhibited by the poor level of development and capacity, by the inadequate policy status of tertiary education within the country, and by the mechanisms of government. Vietnam still uses a top-down, centralised approach in which educational institutions are subject to close bureaucratic controls. Further, government policy and regulation are not always insightful or internally consistent.

Transnational mobility, research and curriculum partnerships are no doubt crucial for Vietnamese higher education, as means to reform the HE system, lift the quality of teaching and learning to internationally recognised levels and enhance local capacity building in research and innovation. However, Vietnam needs to combine openness and engagement with partners abroad, with a strong sense of evolving

Vietnamese identity and more coherent, structured and targeted strategy to facilitate effective appropriation and filtering of foreign policies and practices. This is referred to as “self-determining global engagement” (Tran et al. 2014) which allows the country to reap the potential benefits resulting from new ideas and approaches developed abroad while at the same time tailoring and appropriating them to suit the local practice, culture and traditions (Nguyen and Tran 2017). In addition to foreign institutions, international organisations, especially the World Bank and UNESCO and ADB, have been successful in incorporating their agendas into the government’s higher education policies. However, their various impacts have been less valuable than they could have been, due to the lack of ownership on the part of Vietnam, the top-down approach to implementation, and the system’s inadequate capacities to manage large-scale projects and to flexibly and efficiently filter foreign influences (Tran, Chap. 6). Empirical research reveals that the structural conditions of the higher education system, its values and traditions, its leadership and the agency of teachers, are the key factors driving how foreign practices are adopted and modified in Vietnamese universities (Tran, Tran & Ngo, Under review). It is important to remember, also, that a nation that largely depends on other nations for education models and programs and for capacity in science and technology will become increasingly dependent over time (Tran et al. 2014).

International student returnees are an important but often neglected group in the literature and policy discourse in international education. Graduates returning from overseas study as highly skilled human capital can make a significant contribution to the nation’s revenue, and reach out to the regional and international community, assisting the country to develop its cross-border relations as a ‘friendly’ communist country in the international market and politics (Nguyen, Chap. 8). Over the past few years, the Vietnamese government has developed strategies to attract back overseas Vietnamese graduates and professionals and tackle the nation’s skill shortages. However, to maximise the potential contributions of returnees, and retain them in the country, it is crucial to ensure returnees’ re-entry experiences are positive (Ho et al., Chap. 12). The government needs to develop effective repatriation programs, consultancies and policies aimed at facilitating returnees’ re-adjustment processes, assisting them to deal with reverse culture shock, and creating a positive working environment, thereby reducing their likelihood of re-expatriation (see Chap. 12 for further details). As have other authors (for example, Ho et al., Chap. 12 & Nguyen Chap. 8), Gribble and Tran (2016) argue that without transparent, specific and targeted support structures to address some of the diaspora’s key concerns—including employment opportunities, local bureaucracy and corruption—many overseas Vietnamese will continue to seek opportunities elsewhere. Further, in addition to policy initiatives and incentives designed to facilitate the return of overseas Vietnamese and retain them, a larger effort, in terms of investment and policy, should be directed to engaging with those Vietnamese international graduates who choose to remain overseas (Gribble and Tran 2016).

In sum, internationalisation is a key strategy whereby the Vietnamese government can enhance the capacity of the higher education system, enable the sector to contribute more effectively to national development and augment human capacity

building for the country. However, the expected outcomes cannot be achieved without appropriate policies and structures to support institutions and individuals in the process of internationalisation. To overhaul the outdated curriculum, keep pace with regional and international developments in education and enhance graduates' capacity to work not only in the local labour market but also in the region and the world, it is important to facilitate staff and student mobility, expand international cooperation and support trans-national curriculum, research and technology exchange (Tran, Phan & Marginson, Chap. 4; Tran et al. 2014). Hoang, Tran and Pham (Chap. 4) also call for the repositioning of internationalisation that "includes recognising the roles played by individual institutions and focusing more on creating a supportive environment and incentives for individuals and institutions to engage in and take advantage of internationalisation, in a way that meaningfully contributes to improving the country's higher education system and better meeting the socio-economic demands placed on it." For internationalisation activities to operate effectively, it is necessary to develop a long-term strategic plan along with transparent, coherent and systemic approaches and targeted support structure. A national policy for internationalisation characterised by explicit vision and mission aligning with the current context of Vietnam and specific action plans and frameworks to facilitate the implementation of internationalisation is needed. It is essential not only to encourage and facilitate greater activity but to make the best use of the resources and insights available. Finally, good practices in designing, administering and implementing internationalisation activities and programs at the institutional level, across the different regions of the nation, should be disseminated and promoted through a holistic channel set up by MOET. In this manner institutions can share, support and learn from each other in the course of internationalising and improving the operations of higher education.

References

- Do, Q. N. T. (2018). Current perspectives on internationalisation of quality assurance at the institutional level. In L. T. Tran & S. Marginson (Eds.), *Internationalisation in Vietnamese higher education*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Gribble, C., & Tran, L. T. (2016). Connecting and reconnecting with Vietnam: Migration, Vietnamese overseas communities and social media. In C. Gomes (Ed.), *Multicultural Southeast Asia and social media: Identity, ethnicity, community and migration* (pp. 63–86). London: Anthem Press.
- Ho, N. T. T., Seet, P., & Jones, J. (2018). From brain drain and brain gain to brain circulation: Conceptualizing re-expatriation intentions of Vietnamese returnees. In L. T. Tran & S. Marginson (Eds.), *Internationalisation in Vietnamese higher education*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Hoang, L., Tran, L. T., & Pham, H. H. (2018). Vietnam's government policies and practices in internationalisation of higher education. In L. T. Tran & S. Marginson (Eds.), *Internationalisation in Vietnamese higher education*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Mai, L. T. Q. (2018). Vietnamese students' transition to international non-government organisations. In L. T. Tran & S. Marginson (Eds.), *Internationalisation in Vietnamese higher education*. Dordrecht: Springer.

- Nguyen, A. T. (2010). The internationalisation of higher education from the perspectives of institutional stakeholders: The case of Vietnam National University, Hanoi. *Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Waseda University, Tokyo.*
- Nguyen, C. H. (2018a). Historical trends of Vietnamese international student mobility. In L. T. Tran & S. Marginson (Eds.), *Internationalisation in Vietnamese higher education*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Nguyen, H. T. (2018b). English-medium-instruction management: The missing piece in the internationalisation puzzle of Vietnamese higher education. In L. T. Tran & S. Marginson (Eds.), *Internationalisation in Vietnamese higher education*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Nguyen, N. (2018c). Transnational education in the Vietnamese market: Paradoxes and possibilities. In L. T. Tran & S. Marginson (Eds.), *Internationalisation in Vietnamese higher education*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Nguyen, N., & Tran, L. T. (2017). Looking inward or outward? Vietnam higher education at the superhighway of globalisation: Culture, values and changes. *Journal of Asian Public Policy*, 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17516234.2017.1332457>.
- Pham, A. (2018a). Employers' perspectives on Vietnamese returnee students. In L. T. Tran & S. Marginson (Eds.), *Internationalisation in Vietnamese higher education*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Pham, H. (2018b). International students' choice of destinations for overseas study: A specific push-pull model for Vietnam. In L. T. Tran & S. Marginson (Eds.), *Internationalisation in Vietnamese higher education*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Pham, L. (2018c). International students' aspiration to contribute to socioeconomic development in Vietnam. In L. T. Tran & S. Marginson (Eds.), *Internationalisation in Vietnamese higher education*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Thủ Tướng Chính Phủ (Prime Minister). (2012). Quyết định số 711/QĐ-TTg, 13/6/2012, Chiến lược phát triển giáo dục 2011–2020 (Decision number 711/QĐ-TTg, 13/6/2012, Strategies for education development 2011–2020). Hanoi, Vietnam.
- Tran, D. N. (2017). Impacts of international organizations on Vietnam's higher education policy: The good, the bad and the ugly. In L. T. Tran & S. Marginson (Eds.), *Internationalisation in Vietnamese higher education*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Tran, L. T., & Marginson, S. (2018). Internationalisation of Vietnamese higher education: An overview. In L. T. Tran & S. Marginson (Eds.), *Internationalisation in Vietnamese higher education*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Tran, L., Marginson, S., Do, H., Do, Q., Le, T., Nguyen, N., Vu, T., Pham, T., & Nguyen, H. (2014). *Higher education in Vietnam: Flexibility, mobility and practicality in the global knowledge economy*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Tran, L. T., Ngo, M., Nguyen, N., & Dang, X. T. (2017). Hybridity in Vietnamese universities: An analysis of the interactions between Vietnamese traditions and foreign influences. *Studies in Higher Education*, 42(10), 1899–1916.
- Tran, L. T., Phan, H. L. T., & Marginson, S. (2018). The 'Advanced Programmes' in Vietnam: Internationalising the curriculum or importing the 'Best Curriculum' of the West? In L. T. Tran & S. Marginson (Eds.), *Internationalisation in Vietnamese higher education*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Welch, A. R. (2010). Internationalisation of Vietnamese higher education: Retrospect and prospect. In G. S. Harman, M. Hayden, & T. N. Phạm (Eds.), *Reforming higher education in Vietnam challenges and priorities* (pp. 197–212). Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer. Retrieved from <http://public.ebib.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=510803>.