

Chapter 3

Vietnam's Progress with Policies on University Governance, Management and Quality Assurance



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Abstract This chapter addresses progress made by Vietnam's higher education sector over the past 30 years in the areas of governance, management and quality assurance. Over the past decade, relatively significant progress is evident in the implementation of quality assurance mechanisms. Regarding governance and management, however, the achievement of progress has been remarkably slow-moving. Though reform aspirations are frequently expressed, a culture of centralised control remains remarkably resilient.

Introduction

Governance, management and quality assurance are important topics in the context of Vietnam's higher education sector. Significant policy progress has been made in these areas during the past 25 years. Pressures associated with globalisation and internationalisation have undoubtedly played an important role in this regard, but there have also been other pressures at work. Ultimately, the Soviet-style centralised system of higher education governance and management which existed in Vietnam up to the mid-1990s had become unviable and needed dismantling. The dismantling process has, however, been slow, and a culture associated with a centrally controlled higher education sector refuses to disappear. This chapter reviews the policy progress which has been made regarding governance, management and quality assurance in the higher education sector and draws attention to several of the ongoing challenges.

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Policy Reform Since the Early 1990s

In *Decree 90/ND-TTG*, issued in 1993, the government signalled clearly that it would not persist in adopting a Soviet model of higher education. Up to that time, higher education institutions (HEIs) were expected to be mono-disciplinary and teaching-focused. *Decree 90* departed significantly from this model. It approved the establishment of a network of national and regional universities that were to be multidisciplinary and to engage in research as well as teaching. The *Decree* signalled that public HEIs would charge tuition fees, that community groups could establish 'non-public' HEIs on a fee-paying basis and that graduates from public universities and colleges would no longer be guaranteed employment by the state. These changes represented a victory for pragmatism. Under Soviet influence, and in light of crippling resource shortages, Vietnam's higher education sector had fallen apart and had become incapable of meeting emerging social needs.

The next significant policy reform occurred in 2005 when the government released a Higher Education Reform Agenda (*Resolution 14/2005/NQ-CP*). The Agenda was ambitious in terms of the raft of reforms proposed. It represented an even more significant departure from the Soviet higher education model. The Agenda indicated that by 2020, there should be the complete removal of line-management control of public HEIs by ministries and other state instrumentalities; there should be the development of key HEIs as major scientific centres; and the private higher education sector should be expanded to a point where it would account for 40% of all higher education enrolments. The Agenda also signalled the need for a boost to the proportion of academic staff members with PhDs, as well as the need for a stronger commitment to the internationalisation of the curriculum.

Given the Communist Party's traditional antipathy to private education, it came as a surprise when the Higher Education Reform Agenda projected a huge increase in the size of the sector by 2020. This expansion has not eventuated, and the sector currently accounts for only about 14% of all higher education enrolments. In 2006, the government decided that all existing and future private HEIs should be corporately governed entities, involving a shareholders' association and a governing board. These institutions were then to be left to manage their own affairs, though subject to national quality assurance and accreditation requirements. In 2013, *Decree 141/2013/ND-CP* subsequently established a mechanism for distinguishing between 'for-profit' and 'not-for-profit' private higher HEIs. Institutions considered to be 'not-for-profit' were defined as those whose shareholders received either no dividend from their shareholdings or, at most, a dividend that fell below the interest rate paid on national bonds. The government indicated that these institutions would have governing boards that were broadly representative of community interests and that it would provide these institutions with access to incentives for development. The nature of these incentives continues to be unclear.

In 2007, the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) issued requirements for all HEIs to participate in a national quality assurance process requiring the completion of, first, an institutional self-assessment report and, second, an external review leading to accreditation (*Decision 65/2007/QĐ-BGDĐT*). Ten quality stan-

dards and 57 quality criteria formed the basis for the review process. MOET was given responsibility for organising the external review and accreditation process. Later, in 2013, *Decision 37/2013/TTg* reaffirmed the government's commitment to improving the quality of higher education in Vietnam, and MOET issued *Decision 6/VBHN-BGDDT*, promulgating amended regulations regarding the quality criteria for assessing the educational quality of HEIs. Also in 2013, responsibility for the external review and accreditation process was delegated to two accreditation centres, one from each of the two national universities. In 2015, two more of these centres were established, one at Da Nang University and the other attached to the Association of Vietnamese Non-public Universities and Colleges.

In 2010, the government approved a university charter (*Decision 58/2010/QĐ-TTg*) which prescribed that public universities must work towards establishing university councils that would exercise responsibility on behalf of the state for approving institutional objectives and strategies, guidelines for organisational structures, staff recruitment and training policies and policies regarding institutional finances, property, facilities and equipment. University councils were also given authority to conduct annual performance reviews for rectors and vice-rectors and to approve matters related to tuition fees and institutional scientific and training councils. This legislation was consistent with a growing commitment by the government to the belief that public HEIs should be more self-managing. It was not, however, the first time that the idea of university councils had been proposed. In 2003, a similar policy commitment had been expressed, but few public universities at the time did much to implement the proposal, principally because rectors considered the proposed framework to be unclear. Rectors were also reluctant to be burdened by an additional level of accountability, given that they were already required to report to whichever ministry or state instrumentality had line-management control of their university. In 2014, the *University Charter* was amended (*Decision 70/2014/QĐ-TTg*), principally with a view to strengthening the role of university councils and to reinforcing their importance within the higher education sector. The amendments did not, however, alleviate the concerns of rectors, and neither did they give any authority to university councils for the appointment of rectors.

In 2012, in what was a significant development for the higher education sector, the National Assembly approved a new *Higher Education Law*. The *Law* acknowledged formally the distinctiveness of the higher education sector within the national education system. It also consolidated a vast amount of regulatory detail concerning higher education that had been approved incrementally since 1993. The new legislation recognised the need for diversity within the sector, stating that some public universities would be elevated to a higher tier within the sector on the basis of their superior research capability and better overall quality. It also clarified that university councils should be given authority to decide institutional development plans, to determine organisational structures for the institution and to supervise the implementation of their own decisions. It gave more seats on university councils to community groups, including the Labour Union and the Youth Association, both extended arms of the Party. No mention was made about university councils having any authority for the appointment of rectors.

In 2013, the Central Committee of the Party declared that, to assist Vietnam to make faster progress with the industrialisation and modernisation of the economy, the education system needed comprehensive renovation (*Resolution 29-NQ/TW*). Of main concern was that the education system was not keeping pace with the needs of the economy. The *Resolution* referred specifically to the higher education sector in this regard, indicating also that public HEIs needed more autonomy as well as better governance and leadership. The *Resolution* expressed concern about the slow progress of reform in the higher education sector.

In 2014, the government issued *Resolution 77/NQ-CP*, which announced the establishment of a pilot scheme under which public universities agreeing to receive no further direct subsidy by the state would be given a greatly increased level of institutional autonomy. These universities would, for example, be able to establish their own training programs and specialisations, determine their own enrolment quotas and determine their own tuition fee levels for different programs – subject to ceiling levels set by the government. The pilot scheme, initially intended to conclude by 2017, was subsequently extended. To date, as many as 23 public universities have accepted self-funding status in exchange for more institutional autonomy. Many questions were, however, left unanswered by the *Resolution*, including questions about the extent of expenditure freedom for the ‘autonomous’ public universities and the extent of their freedom in making senior staff appointments. The recruitment of senior academic staff members, for example, remained subject to legislation over which the pilot-scheme universities had no control. The ceiling tuition fee levels set by the government have also proven to be restrictive, especially as the universities concerned are highly aspirational, needing much bigger budgets to enable them to become regionally or even globally significant as research-intensive institutions. Another problem recently reported is that the ‘autonomous’ universities have remained unexpectedly constrained by restrictions imposed on them by Vietnam’s highly prescriptive legislative and regulatory culture. Of significance, though, is that in 2016, the Deputy Prime Minister commented that the effect of a requirement of financial self-sufficiency did not mean that the state was completely abandoning these universities and that public funds, provided in targeted ways, would continue to be provided. It is not clearly evident, though, if this form of funding for these universities has eventuated.

In 2016, the Cabinet issued *Resolution 89/NQ-CP*, re-emphasising the government’s commitment to the establishment of university councils with genuine institutional autonomy and indicating yet again its intention to remove line-management control of public HEIs by ministries and other state instrumentalities. The *Resolution* indicated that university councils should play a role comparable to that of a board of directors in the private sector and that there should be a clear accountability relationship between a university council and the university’s board of rectors (comprised of the rector and vice-rectors). No explanation was provided about how this accountability relationship should function. The *Resolution* also made it clear that all public HEIs must remain under the absolute leadership of the Party.

Most recently, the National Assembly has released an amended draft of the *Higher Education Law*. About one-half of all Articles in the existing *Law* have been

proposed for amendment. The proposed amendments are mostly directed at making requirements for institutional autonomy and institutional accountability more explicit. Article 16, for example, is now indicating that a university council, as the governing body of a public university, has responsibility to represent the state as the owner of the university. The university council becomes, therefore, entirely responsible for developing the institution's strategic plan, determining its budget and articulating its approach to teaching, research, international cooperation and quality assurance. Importantly, except at universities concerned with public security and defence, university councils are being permitted to appoint the rector and vice-rectors, subject to final approval given by the relevant line-management authority. University council members are to include the rector, a vice-rector, the Party secretary, the chair of the labour union, the secretary of the youth union, representatives of the staff at the university, a representative of the relevant line-management authority and representatives of external stakeholders (accounting for at least 30% of the membership).

These proposed amendments represent significant policy progress in that they will provide greater clarity about how university governance should occur in public-sector universities. There are, however, important matters yet to be resolved. One of these concerns is the extent of the authority of a university council with respect to both the Party and the relevant line-management authority. Another is that, while direct state control will have been substantially reduced, indirect state control will increase because of an increase in the government's capacity to determine the priorities of the national quality accreditation agencies (see *Circular 04/2016/TT-BGDDT* and *Circular 12/0117/TT-BGDDT*).

Since the early 1990s, therefore, policy reform progress concerning the governance, management and quality assurance of higher education has clearly been evident, but the pace of the reform process has been slow. The reasons for this slow pace of the reform process must now be addressed.

Achieving Autonomy and Accountability

Institutional autonomy is a widely invoked concept in the international literature on higher education governance and management. Tight's (1992) elucidation of the concept is possibly the most relevant to Vietnam's circumstances. He identified institutional autonomy in terms of the freedom: a HEI has to be self-governing; manage its own financial affairs; select and appoint its own academic personnel; select and admit its own students; determine its own curriculum; and assess and accredit the academic performance of its own students.

Considered from this perspective, public HEIs in Vietnam do not yet generally experience a high level of institutional autonomy. For the large majority of these institutions, MOET routinely makes the important decisions regarding curriculum frameworks, quality standards and the introduction of new training programs; the Ministry of Science and Technology (MOST) largely determines their research pri-

orities; and the Ministry of Finance (MOF) is mainly responsible for determining what they can spend. At least 16 ministries and more than 50 other state instrumentalities exercise line-management control over public HEIs, determining their expenditure priorities and appointing their rectors and other senior academic managers. The freedom most available to all of them is that of being able to assess students and accredit student performance.

The two national universities, one based in Hanoi and the other based in Ho Chi Minh City, are exempt in this regard because of their status in being able to report directly to the Cabinet. As reported earlier, there are also now 23 public universities that have accepted self-funding status in exchange for becoming more autonomous. For most public HEIs, however, a traditional form of direct state control remains the norm.

Institutional accountability is another widely invoked concept in the international literature on higher education governance and management. It is often seen as if complementary to institutional autonomy. Santiago et al. (2008, p.89) have identified various forms of institutional accountability that are compatible with institutional autonomy. These include quality assurance, where HEIs are made responsible for the quality of their systems and outcomes; performance-related funding, where the state provides financial incentives for the purposes of achieving desired social outcomes; market mechanisms, where HEIs are required to achieve efficiency by being exposed to market-based forces; participation by external stakeholders on governing bodies, where external stakeholders are given the opportunity to contribute directly to institutional governance; and public disclosure of institutional performance, where public HEIs are required to be transparent in reporting on their use of public funds.

In Vietnam, only two of these forms of institutional accountability have been developed. The first is a national quality assurance framework for the higher education sector. Institutional accreditation is now mandatory for all HEIs, whether public or private, and most HEIs now have their own internal quality assurance units, responsible for fostering a culture of commitment to quality, developing institutional strategies for the appraisal of quality, undertaking periodic appraisals of training programs and so on. An ambitious target has been set for the external accreditation of 95% of all HEIs and training programs by 2020, but this program is known to be running behind schedule because of limited resources. By March 2016, for example, of more than 3000 training programs in Vietnam's higher education sector, only 61 had been fully accredited.¹ The second is the 'three disclosures policy', introduced in 2009 (*Circular 09/2009/TT-BGDĐT*), which requires all HEIs to disclose publicly their commitment to quality, to effectiveness in their teaching and to sound financial management. In general, this policy has had a positive impact on institutional accountability across the sector, though HEIs have generally struggled to report meaningfully about their teaching effectiveness. Some fudging of the data being reported has also been identified, with MOET responding to these occurrences by reducing the enrolment quotas of institutions found to have produced deficient reports.

¹ <http://www.tienphong.vn/xa-hoi/thanh-lap-trung-tam-kiem-dinh-giao-duc-dau-tien-tai-mien-trung-977359.tpo>

Establishing University Councils

As reported earlier, progress in establishing university councils has been slow. The reasons are worthy of exploration because they provide insights regarding the difficulty of achieving reform of the governance and management of higher education in Vietnam.

Much of the delay experienced relates to difficulties associated with accommodating the legitimacy of the Party as the leading force in society with a form of corporate governance in which a university council has authority to govern and, through the rector, manage a public HEI. While the Party does not generally seek to interfere in university affairs, except in relation to the appointment of academic managers, it does have responsibility for approving a public university's strategic plan. If the strategic plan preferred by the Party turns out to be a failure, then it is the rector, on behalf of the university council, who will be held accountable because, under Article 36 of the *University Charter*, it is the rector who is 'the bank account owner of the university' and who is 'entirely responsible to the law'. The Party is above the law and so cannot be held accountable.

This situation presents a predicament for university councils. While they may be expected to exercise corporate governance, focusing on whatever is in the best interests of the institution, they must also be sensitive to Party policies and preferences. Rectors perceive that they can be caught in the middle of this two-way set of accountabilities. They are also accountable to whichever ministry or other state instrumentality was responsible for their appointment. For rectors, therefore, the preferred option has been to delay the introduction of university councils. Recent legislation has become increasingly insistent, however, about the need for each public HEIs to have its own university council.

Complexities related to accommodating the role of the Party in a culture of corporate governance have not been the only source of delays. There exists in Vietnam a gap between policy articulation and policy implementation, as observed by numerous scholars (see, for example, Hayden and Lam 2007; Dao and Hayden 2010, 2015; London 2011; St. George 2011; Dao 2014; Tran 2014; Do 2014). This gap contributes significantly to delay in matters such as the establishment of university councils. The government routinely attempts to implement higher education reform by promulgating decrees, resolutions, decisions and circulars, but the substance of these documents is often ignored for extended periods for any one of the following reasons: there is insufficient budget to implement the proposed reform; there is a lack of clarity in the legislative and regulatory provisions; the reform proposed is excessively ambitious when considered in relation to the context; and the proposed reform will potentially disrupt well-entrenched vested interests.

Other reasons relate to particular cultural characteristics of public life in Vietnam. Many officials and academic managers may have little or no experience of public management practices beyond Vietnam and so may be unable to comprehend the thrust of reform based on principles of autonomy and accountability. There also exists in Vietnam a culture of 'asking and approving' (*xin-cho*), meaning that offi-

cial and academic managers may be reluctant to implement reform processes if they do not perceive some personal benefit as an outcome. There tends to be a 'waiting for guidance and budget' culture, whereby nothing gets done until the framework for the reform process has been fully documented and properly funded. Even rectors will delay making decisions if 'guidance and budget' are not clear. The personal cost for them from making the wrong decision can be high.

A Case Study

A case study of governance, management and quality assurance at a large and nationally significant university in Vietnam serves to illustrate how a changing policy context is being understood and acted upon at a local level. Though undertaken in 2007/2008 (Dao 2014), insights from the case study remain relevant to the contemporary state of governance, management and quality assurance in the higher education sector.

The case study involved semi-structured, in-depth interviews with ten senior and middle-level managers at the site institution, which was selected because it was representative of the leading group of public HEIs in Vietnam. The interviews were supplemented by prolonged observation of the institution's governance, management and quality assurance, as well as by an examination of relevant documentation. Of interest was the institution's experience of institutional autonomy, institutional accountability and quality assurance.

In reporting on the institution, reference will be made simply to 'the University'. In 2007/2008, when data were being collected, the University had over 1000 members of academic staff and as many as 50,000 full-time and part-time students. Most of these students were enrolled in undergraduate degree programs, but the post-graduate programs were expanding rapidly in terms of student enrolments.

The management structure of the University was typical of management structures at public universities across Vietnam. At the top was the Rector's Board, which included the rector and a number of vice-rectors. Next came the Faculty Boards, each chaired by a Dean, with members elected or appointed from within the faculty. At the bottom were the Department Boards, each chaired by a Head of Department and comprised of members appointed and elected from within the department.

Consistent with national political values, the Party played a monitoring role across all levels of management, seeking to ensure that decisions taken were consistent with the expressed policies of the Party. The Party also played a significant role in determining suitability for appointment as an academic manager at the University.

Authority within the institution was highly centralised. The Rector's Board decided all matters of importance to the functioning of the University, nearly always in consultation with the Party Committee. Faculty Boards were informed about the decisions taken and had limited decision-making independence. Department Boards had little or no capacity to make decisions independently, and so their role was pri-

marily administrative and mainly concerned with allocation of teaching responsibilities and the authorisation of compliance reports for consideration at higher levels of authority within the University.

Curiously, more and more faculties and departments were being established each year, resulting in an ever-expanding organisational structure at the University. Subdividing faculties and departments into smaller units seemed to be the preferred strategy of the Rector's Board for the purposes of maintaining control over the University. It was evident that senior managers were aware that this practice was giving rise to problems, and yet it continued. One of the vice-rectors commented, for example:

[The] organisational structure at the University appears inappropriate. There are too many faculties and [too much] overlapping [of] specialised fields of study available within our institution. Several faculties remain rather weak and academically fragmented. Several deans just allocate around 30% of their time for faculty management. Their power is quite limited.

On this point, a former rector commented:

This University's management is too heavy and bureaucratic. I cannot understand why there are so many faculties, institutes and centres within it. Surprisingly, even the Department of Registry/Academic Affairs has centres within its Department. Faculties also have their own centres and institutes. The more divisions the University has, the more it has to pay to maintain its operation. Synergy cannot be fully made use of, resulting in waste of time, money and energy.

The University shared with other public universities in Vietnam a commitment to transitioning from a mono-disciplinary profile to one that was multidisciplinary. In 2007, *Decision No 121/2007/QĐ-TTg* by the Prime Minister had explicitly encouraged HEIs to offer more fields of study, thereby becoming more truly comprehensive. Many mono-disciplinary universities were also keen to become multidisciplinary as a way of distancing themselves from the influence of the Soviet higher education model. The main reason for making the shift, however, was survival. Mono-disciplinary universities had become less able to guarantee the availability of sufficient enrolments to generate the income required to remain fully operational. At the site institution, however, the aspirations to diversify seemed unrealistic: though the institution's core disciplines were business and economics, it had plans to develop training programs in technology, engineering and even biotechnology. A merger with another university might as well have been a more sensible option, but this option was simply ignored, most likely because it would possibly result in a need to consolidate two Boards of Rectors, with possible adverse loss of status and privileges for some existing members of the Board of Rectors.

The University's strategic plan envisaged the development of a comprehensive university with an organisational structure similar to that of the two national (in Hanoi and in Ho Chi Minh City) and three regional (in Hue, Da Nang and Thai Nguyen) universities. However, few of those interviewed appeared to have more than a superficial understanding about how the organisational structure at these universities functioned.

The extent of institutional autonomy at the University was limited. It was evident from comments made, as well as from observations, that the University was very much under control by MOET. A former rector, when describing this situation, drew attention to the implications: inputs to the University in the form of students were tightly regulated, but nobody took responsibility for what was going to happen to these students when they graduated. He commented:

The paradox here is that institutional autonomy remains modest, but [institutional] accountability is required to be highly maintained. This is one of the biggest dilemmas in Vietnam's higher education system. I cannot understand why MOET, on one hand, has a very tight control over student admission (input) but, on the other hand, releases the graduates (output). No one knows exactly after graduation what types of jobs they will do and if they will be satisfied with the jobs they find.

He observed also that, though academic staff members had lost their right to be permanently employed by the state in 2003, the conditions of their employment had not changed as a consequence, meaning that the incentive for them to take responsibility in matters of governance, management and quality assurance was weak and inadequate. He reported:

For human resources, the policy of permanent recruitment has been abolished since 2003, but the salary rate is still managed in the old way, that is, payment according to positions and working years rather than by job performance. If so, how could institutional autonomy and [institutional] accountability be well maintained?

Many interviewees referred often to 'limited' or 'half-way' autonomy when asked to report on the state of institutional autonomy at the University. They accepted that the University had no authority to decide on the level of student tuition fees or to select its own senior academic managers or to exercise much academic freedom, but most stated that the University now had more expenditure freedom than in the past. In general, they regarded the level of institutional autonomy being provided to the University by MOET to be completely unrealistic.

The University's strategic plan expressed an expectation that MOET would eventually give the University more institutional autonomy. This expectation was said to be consistent with the University's aspiration to become a 'world-class' university by 2020. At the same time as requesting more institutional autonomy, however, the University was also requesting more funds from the state to enable it to extend its building program. In this regard, its behaviour was consistent with an account given by Chapman and Austin (2002) of the way in which public universities are prone to wanting more independence from state control while at the same time allowing themselves to become more dependent upon state funding. Meanwhile, governments often want public universities to be more financially self-sufficient, but not to become completely free of control by the state. The search for a balance in this regard is, therefore, a challenge.

Institutional autonomy and institutional accountability generally develop hand-in-hand, so that, as freedoms are conferred by the state, checks and balances are implemented to ensure that the freedoms are not being abused. At the site University, it was evident that a governance framework for the exercise of both institutional

autonomy and institutional accountability was severely lacking. Though there was a University Council, it remained largely inactive. The role of the Chair of the Council was not at all well-defined, especially in terms of how it related to the rector's role. A former Chair of the University Council described the situation as follows:

As a University Council chair, I [had] no voice. I did not know what to do because there were no concrete regulations from MOET. Personally, I was under the supervision of MOET but I received no support or guidance from MOET. Therefore, whatever I did, big or small, was fine. One important thing I had in mind is that I should not touch on any complicated institutional issues that might raise conflicts with the Rector's Board or the Party. What I did was to focus on the strategic plan as designated by MOET and that was it. I never interfered in anybody's affairs because I was not stupid. In reality, I participated in all important activities and meetings of the University, but I offered no ideas. I just simply applauded at the end.

The rector had recruited the Chair of the University Council and was also responsible for his remuneration. The role of Chair appeared to be marginalised. As the former Chair admitted:

I think the establishment of the University Council at the moment is not appropriate at all. Given the condition of limited institutional autonomy and the supreme leadership of the Party, no university council in Vietnam can work properly as required.

Many other interviewees echoed this perspective. It was widely recognised that the University Council had no effective power. Decisions of any consequence could never seem to be taken without 'concrete guidance' from MOET, even though MOET itself often did not always appear to know what to do.

The University was among the first group of universities in Vietnam selected to be involved in the implementation of a national quality assurance program. At the time of the interviews, it had completed both its internal self-assessment and external assessment by a review panel. It was waiting for the outcome of the external review to be released by MOET. The University had already obtained an ISO Certificate issued by the Association for Academic Quality (France). In the opinion of one of the vice-rectors, though, the procedures for obtaining the Certificate had been lax. The University had established its own Department of Quality Assurance, but many university staff members were reported to be unfamiliar with the notion of quality assurance. One middle manager from the Department of Quality Assurance reported:

I have tried to do many things to enhance staff members' awareness of the importance of the quality assurance program. For example, I myself distributed to all staff members the University's notebooks containing the 53 quality criteria of quality assurance as a reminder that our University is currently implementing this program. Many lecturers, however, said to me that it is unnecessary to implement quality assurance because the current criteria set by MOET are already too high to reach. In their opinions, no university in Vietnam could reach such high standards.

Why did lecturers have this perception? In reality, the 53 criteria referred to were not so demanding and they had been deliberately designed in accordance with Vietnamese, and not international, standards. The question, then, is as follows: how

can Vietnam's universities possibly reach international standards of quality if the national standards set for them are already seen to be too difficult to achieve?

This interviewee also expressed concern regarding follow-up to the quality assurance program. He stated:

I am wondering what we should do after the quality assurance program has been completed. We know our weaknesses, but how can we improve ourselves while being stuck in such a bureaucratic and heavily centralised governance mechanism with limited institutional autonomy. I think we just simply carry out quality assurance assessment and leave everything as it is for the future because we do not have sufficient budget to upgrade our physical facilities and increase staff members' wages.

The case study shows how the governance and management of higher education in Vietnam was in an underdeveloped state as recently as 2007/2008. The legacy of centralised control was manifested in the lack of much institutional autonomy, a reliance on supervision by MOET for the purposes of institutional accountability and a lack of belief in the importance of pursuing a quality assurance agenda. There has undoubtedly been progress made since that time, but, except possibly for those public universities which have elected to be self-funding for the sake of obtaining more institutional autonomy, the extent of the progress made does not appear to be obvious.

Conclusion

In the West, higher education reform is often seen in terms of change to an organisational or corporate culture. Glor (2001, p.5), for example, describes the ability to reform as referring to 'the capability for autonomous direction, and action, growing out of individual self-consciousness, self-identity, values, commitments, knowledge and power' shared by the organisation's members. According to Cummings and Huse (1989, p.421), these cultural elements are seen 'to guide members' perceptions, thoughts, and actions'.

In Vietnam, these elements exist only on the pages of official documents. For reasons that relate to a traditional lack of autonomy, limited capacity in terms of knowledge and skills and the restricted availability of resources, leaders within Vietnam's higher education sector are generally unable to demonstrate the persistent commitment, expertise and capacity to undertake and then achieve significant reforms. Even MOET, which has overall responsibility for the higher education sector, is unable to implement a reform agenda because it must share responsibility for budgeting, planning and the appointment and training of key personnel with multiple other ministries and state instrumentalities, each with line-management control of its own cluster of HEIs. There is also in Vietnam a high level of sensitivity to the preferences of the Party. Indeed, the Party is constitutionally positioned to veto any decision that it considers 'inappropriate' or where the rules of law made by the Party have not been respected. In these circumstances, therefore, Vietnam has been slow to modernise the governance, management and quality assurance frameworks for its higher education sector.

Other factors have also contributed to the general lack of momentum of change. Dao and Hayden (2015) pointed, for example, to 'a high level of institutional paternalism', generally seen in the way in which government ministries and instrumentalities exercise line-management responsibilities for public universities and colleges. They observed that, although governing boards in the public higher education sector are being provided with additional responsibilities for institutional governance and management, they are not given permission to make the critical decisions: 'One of the most important decisions they could make concerns the appointment of the rector, but there is no mention anywhere of this responsibility ever being given to them' (Dao and Hayden 2015, p.331).

Another factor is that senior academic managers of HEIs in the public sector in Vietnam are accustomed to management by an in-line ministry or other state instrumentality, as well as to having subsidised budgets allocated to their institution. In this context, there is a reluctance to take business risks, and it is more politically safe simply to adhere to governmental regulations. There is, in other words, an entrenched mindset within which there exists a 'secure periphery' determined by the laws and regulations issued by the Party and the state. One of the ironies of the current process of approving additional 'autonomous', that is, 'self-funding', universities is to hear concern being expressed by some of the rectors concerned about the loss of protection by a 'parent' ministry. The habits of mind established over the long period of centralised state management of the sector seem unlikely to disappear in a hurry.

When viewed over a 30-year period, however, higher education in Vietnam has made remarkable policy progress. It has now reached a point where 23 public universities can claim to have more institutional autonomy than at any time in the past. While pressures associated with globalisation and internationalisation have contributed to this progress, other pressures have also played an important role. One of these is that the governance and management apparatus of a Soviet model of higher education simply had to be dismantled for the sake of the affordability and efficiency of the higher education sector. This dismantling process, which continues, has, however, been slow and has at times been pursued reluctantly. The government routinely espouses the importance of modernising the structure and processes for the attainment of institutional autonomy, institutional accountability and quality assurance in the higher education sector, but, at least in the public sector, autonomous governing boards are not yet widely evident. The form of institutional accountability relied upon most heavily continues to be direct control by the state. Quality assurance processes continue lack transparency, and there is not yet much evidence of their impact. Though a commitment was made in 2005 in the Higher Education Reform Agenda (*Resolution 14/2005/NQ-CP*) to remove line-management control by ministries and other state instrumentalities of public HEIs, this commitment has not yet been honoured. The culture of the Soviet model seems to be difficult to throw off, especially in Vietnam's higher education sector.

A long-term challenge for the sector is that of finding a way of modernising the sector's governance, management and quality assurance in a context within which the legitimacy of the Party as the leading force in society cannot be not threatened.

As always in matters of good governance and management, the cultivation and maintenance of trust will be essential, as will the need for a shared commitment to the importance of assuring quality.

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