

An Overview of Vietnamese Higher Education in the Era of Globalization: Opportunities and Challenges

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Abstracts

Globalization is a multifaceted process with economic, social, political and cultural implications for higher education. In Viet Nam, the phenomenon of globalization has both brought out opportunities and posed the country numerous challenges for the past few years. This article reviews major concepts of globalization with the focus on opportunities and challenges posed by this process for the current Vietnamese higher education system.

Introduction

Viet Nam has entered the new millennium with the emergence of a new era: the era of globalization, which has dramatically transformed world trade, communications and economic relations since the late twentieth century, and is increasingly having profound influence on education at the start of the twenty-first century. This new phenomenon of globalization has both provided great opportunities and posed new challenges for school leaders and their staff in different aspects of education. To survive and succeed in the new era, educational administrators in general and higher education leaders in particular are required to recognize their institutional strengths and weaknesses, to identify vital changes in the new environment, and most importantly, to manage these changes strategically and effectively.

Globalization: A glimpse of the process

The phenomenon of globalization can be interpreted differently in different situations. From an economic viewpoint, globalization means ‘a process of increasing involvement in international business operations’ (Sae 2005). From a sociological perspective, globalization is conceived as ‘a more pervasive force throughout the world’ (Sae 2005). Sae (2005) also commented, ‘globalization occurs when the constraints of geography on social and cultural arrangements recede as people around the world become increasingly aware that they are receding.’ Marquardt and Berger (2003) generalized globalization as ‘a single market place with growing free trade among nations; the increasing flow and sharing of information, connections, or links of people around the world; the opportunity for organizations and people to shop around the world and not be constrained by national boundaries.’ Further, these writers indicated the four Ts – technology, travel, trade, and television – as main forces leading the world to a ‘Global Village’.

For higher education, globalization can be defined as ‘forces that are transforming the university from an institution with a monopoly on knowledge to one among many different types of organizations serving as information providers, and from an institution that has always been circumscribed by time and geography to one without boundaries’ (Atkinson 20010). It is also crucial to differentiate globalization from internationalization because these two terms are often mistakenly used interchangeably. In this paper, globalization is presented as a phenomenon influencing higher education while internationalization refers to the ways in which higher education responds to the opportunities and challenges of globalization (Uvalic-Trumbic 2003). More specifically, Egron-Polak (2002) viewed ‘internationalization as a pro-active effort on the part of universities to embrace their universal nature by opening their curriculum, their research, their classrooms and networks to the world’.

Globalization is a multifaceted process with economic, social, political and cultural implications for higher education. The impact of globalization is profound. In Viet Nam, in the era of globalization, the higher education system is facing challenges as well as opportunities, many of which are in common with the whole world higher education’s challenges and opportunities. Some of the opportunities are ‘increasing supply of education and opportunities for students, support for the knowledge economy, development of joint degrees, growing comparability of qualifications and economic benefits for education providers’(Uvalic-Trumbic 2003).

Opportunities

It is obvious that advanced information and communication technologies such as the internet and the World Wide Web, electronic libraries are providing powerful new tools to forge global networks for teaching and learning (Uvalic-Trumbic 2003). Students now can have more opportunities to receive ‘transnational education’ such as online courses, internet-based distance learning, off-campus delivery. A global university can teach students anywhere. In reality, Vietnamese students can take many online programs for postgraduate studies without traveling abroad. Moreover, the growing importance of the knowledge economy strengthens relationships between industries, mainly the growing technology-based sector and education, especially higher education. In this global era, knowledge becomes a huge power. In the past, socio-economic development of the country used to depend mainly on natural and labor resources, which are traditional and basic capital of the economies. Now, in the knowledge-based economies, people do not simply rely on vast natural resources, huge population, and advantageous geographical position. The realities of many countries with developed knowledge economies have proved that high quality human resources with creativity and ability to utilize new ideas or initiatives are the key factor of a nation’s socio-economic growth and development. Such resources can only be fully obtained through a highly advanced education, and universities must play a pivotal role in knowledge preparation. In fact, globalization can help the country benefit from higher education development. The country with developed education can have better conditions to attract more foreign investment, participate more effectively in international affairs and enlarge the labor markets (Bloom 2002).

Challenges

In addition to opportunities, the process of globalization has also raised some challenges. The five most potential challenges are *the comparability of quality and standards; the multi-nationalization of higher education; the problem of brain drain; the problem of intellectual property; and maintaining a university as a learning organization* (Atkinson 2001; Altbach 2004). According to Atkinson (2001), these challenges of globalization are subject to the institutional structures and habits of mind. Firstly, when universities are internationalized, there is a rising level of concern of quality and standards, and accreditation quality is the great concern for most institutions (King 1995). There is a common situation that credits earned at one university are not equally transferred to another. Universities usually offer more opportunities and advantages of further studies to undergraduates or graduates if these students already earn the degree from the same university rather than from other institutions. Despite many efforts, until now, the Ministry of Education and university leaders have not agreed on the common standards of quality assurance among universities and colleges. Lack of the comparability of these standards has resulted in difficulties in program and institution transferring.

Secondly, multi-nationalization refers to ‘international delivery of education’ (Uvalic-Trumbic 2003). In Viet Nam, there have existed different programs of cross-border education such as ‘twinning’ programs linking to academic institutions or programs in one country with counterparts in another, and programs offered by foreign universities in the home country. Existing realities have shown that multi-nationalization causes inequality because the foreign institution usually dominates the local institution in terms of curricula, academic models and management. Of more concern is that some foreign universities simply lend their names and curriculum, and the local institution is permitted to grant degrees of foreign institution to local students. The problem is that students receive the ‘international degree’, but they are not receiving the same level of educational quality provided in the foreign institution.

Thirdly, brain drain is also the big problem for many developing countries like Viet Nam in the process of globalization. Thanks to the social and economic progress and international cooperation in recent years, more Vietnamese students can have opportunities to pursue their studies abroad. Although precise statistics are not available, there are significant numbers of students do not return Viet Nam. Consequently, the country in general and institutions in particular have lost talented academics.

Intellectual property is another challenge for higher education, especially for universities in developing countries like Viet Nam. In this new economy-based market, the notion of education as a public enterprise is more popular, and knowledge is also commercialized. Individuals and institutions that provide online courses and conduct research expect to be paid for the use of their intellectual property. This ‘privatization of knowledge’ is obviously generating new constraints for the higher education development.

Lastly, maintaining the university as a learning organization is also a big challenge because in the era of globalization, universities no longer have a monopoly on the production of knowledge. As one American management expert, Peter Drucker, commented, ‘thirty years from now the big university will be a relic. Universities won’t survive in their present form. The main reason is the shift to the continuing education of already highly educated adults as the center and growth sector of education’ (Atkinson 2001). Further, universities that have traditionally provided instruction and measured students in the old way are losing their competitiveness with other international institutions. Universities, to meet the increasing social demands, need to reconstruct teaching and learning modes so that students can be motivated and have the skills for independent, self-directed and life-long learning (Hallinger 1998).

Vietnamese higher education: Realities and solutions

While every nation may face these challenges, they present special problems in the Vietnamese higher education system because of the country’s social, political and economic and cultural conditions. Vietnamese higher education system has developed through different stages: feudalism, French and American colonization, socialism and at present, free market economy – socialism oriented. In the process of renovating the economy and integration into the world, Vietnamese education in general, and its higher education in particular have not yet adapted, and some shortfalls are apparent. One of the biggest weaknesses is the lack of stable development strategy. After nearly 15 years of educational reform since 1986, the Vietnamese higher education system has still been in the ‘trial phase’ experiencing many unexpected changes to the curriculum framework; the institutional scale and size; the lecturer and student ratio; levels of management among institutions; the choice of centralization or decentralization in management; measures of training quality; and administration and implementation of the university’s entrance examination. Lack of autonomy and accountability in management also causes difficulties in enhancing educational quality and competitiveness of Viet Nam universities, making them unable to join the ranking list with other regional or international universities. Outdated modes of teaching and learning are also big obstacles hindering students’ independence, creativity and problem-solving capacity. More seriously, re-training labor force before use is becoming very popular, costing society a lot of money, wasting time and discouraging learners. The traditional Vietnamese emphasis on rote learning and strict discipline still exists in most universities, but it is no longer appropriate when the business world is demanding that ‘school graduates be able to go beyond simple reproduction of knowledge’ (Hallinger 1998). In fact, Vietnamese universities are very concerned about changing methodologies, encouraging the shift from teacher-centered to learner-centered approach of teaching and learning. However, this process of change is very slow because of the lack of qualified lecturers, facilities and materials. In addition, ineffective utilization of education technology is also the problem for higher education development at present. Although the infrastructure of universities is much better than before with the establishment of modern laboratories, libraries, learning resource centers, intranet, and internet, the utilization has revealed some weaknesses such as the low percentage of regular users including lecturers and students for academic purposes, limitation and low transferring of internet, and lack of

supervision and plan of using these modern facilities effectively. In many universities, computers are used as a decoration, and e-mail and internet are mainly used for personal communication. The main reasons are due to the lack of skills in using computers and English: most middle-aged and older lecturers do not wish to learn information technology skills, and students are not well trained. The consequence is that advanced costly facilities are used ineffectively.

Transformation of Vietnamese higher education: Roles of the leaders

All the aforementioned problems can be observed in most universities in Viet Nam at present. Facing many changes and difficulties in the new era, universities leaders need to redefine their vision for future development, modify core values and establish new policies. Pressures for cultural integration, technological development, critical thinking, and life-long learning are altering many priorities and values of educational system in Viet Nam. In order to meet the requirements of a fast-changing society, 'the country's university system needs an overhaul' as the Deputy PM Pham Gia Khiem commented at an international forum on Viet Nam's higher education reform (VNEconomy 2004). One important task of the Vietnamese government and educational leaders is to have adequate investment and long-term strategic plans to complement and fulfill the goals of the country's higher education: to provide human resources that are capable of meeting the needs of social development in the information and knowledge era; to enhance competitiveness of universities to integrate into international education and reach standards of education accreditation, and assessment; and most importantly, to equip learners with the ability to 'learn to know, learn to do, learn to live in harmony with other people' (Nguyen 2000). Experiences of many countries in the world have revealed that improving the efficiency of management is the first priority for adapting to changes and enhancing the quality and effectiveness of education. School leaders must be the key 'agents of change' in their attempts to bring about necessary transformation (Fullan 1993). Resolutions about enhancing autonomy, accountability or utilization of technology rely on the personnel management of every university. School leaders can influence individuals, departments and the entire institutional culture. Now when globalization has become a fact of life, leaders therefore need to recognize the complexities of the changing situation. Universities are no longer the only part of the national system, funded and protected by the government (Ginkel 2002). Like many other universities in the world, Vietnamese universities need a radical transformation to improve the quality and effectiveness of education in order to meet the 'diversified demand for human resources' (VNEconomy 2004).

Conclusion

Globalization, an inevitable and irreversible process, has significantly affected Vietnamese society in different aspects, and has posed both challenges and opportunities for the country's higher education system. Higher education today is a 'complex, demanding, and competitive reality' (Montez 2004). In efforts to optimize good performance in serving society in this age of globalization, university administrators and leaders need to recognize key changes and develop good strategies to manage changes. A

university in the new millennium will only succeed if it is able to manage major changes effectively.

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