Chapter 11

Processes of Modernisation in Two Public Universities in Vietnam: University Managers' Perspectives

Ta Thai Anh and Richard Winter

Introduction

Various recent accounts of change in Vietnam's higher education system have focused on change at the national level (Pham and Fry, 2004; St. George, 2007; Hayden and Lam, 2007). What tends to have been largely ignored are the kinds of changes taking place within Vietnam's universities, particularly from the point of view of their strategic management. It is, however, important to understand the nature and extent of pressures for change at the institutional level, particularly in light of the official drive to make Vietnam's universities play a more central role in the development of a modern economy. This chapter draws on interviews with managers of two public universities in Hanoi for the purposes of throwing light on the impact of official policies on these institutions. Specifically, it aims to document key processes of modernisation that shape the strategies Vietnam's public universities are adopting. The timeframe for the research is from 2000 onwards, this being a landmark year for Vietnam's higher education system given the launch of the Higher Education Development Strategy 2001–2010.¹

The Case Studies

Traditionally, the function of Vietnamese universities has been to provide both long-term and short-term training programmes focused on the development of human resources in response to specific national development needs.² The state has always

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¹ Decision of the prime minister on the approval of "The Education Development Strategic Plan for 2001–2010". Decision no. 201/2001/QĐ-TTĐ, 28 December 2001.

² In Vietnam, "education" refers to primary and secondary education, while "training" refers to higher education. This is reflected in the name of the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET).

played an important role in regulating attendance at these programmes and in determining the staffing needs of particular institutions. Research was a responsibility assigned to independent research institutes, as well as to institutes within ministries. Following reforms in the early 1990s, in the aftermath of adoption of the policy of *doi moi* in 1986, multi-disciplinary public universities began to be developed nationally and regionally. A non-public sector of higher education was also established. These developments, in combination with the rapid growth of the system that occurred in the early 1990s, have resulted in a system that is now quite varied. By 2006/2007, there were 139 universities in Vietnam, of which 30 (22 percent) were non-public.³ The larger of the public universities are multi-disciplinary in terms of the range of training programmes offered.

Two public universities, both located in Hanoi, provide the case study material reported in this chapter. The two universities, Hanoi University (HANU) and the Hanoi University of Technology (HUT), were selected for investigation because of the distinctiveness of their development strategies since 2000. One of them is among a small group of 14 universities that have been accorded key university status by the state.⁴ In terms of the distinctiveness of their development strategies, HANU is proactively engaged in multi-disciplinary expansion through the internationalisation of its educational programmes, while HUT has a focus on the development of a strong research culture. Both universities have in common a focus upon being nationally and internationally recognised for their achievements, and both offer a comprehensive range of training programmes including programmes with English as the language of instruction.

In mid-2007, the first-named author conducted 20 semi-structured interviews with senior managers (rectors, vice-rectors) and middle managers (deans, heads of department) from the two universities. She also attended various workshops and seminars as an observer. The interviews were, on average, of one hour in duration, and they were digitally recorded and transcribed in Vietnamese to capture the respondents' interpretations very precisely and to ensure that the social interaction in the interview did not suffer (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995). The questions framing each interview were intended to explore managers' perceptions of and perspectives on changes to their institution since 2000, the institutional development strategy they adopted, the constraints they faced in performing their roles, and the impact of official policies. The data were analysed in relation to three broad themes: multi-disciplinary expansion through internationalisation of the education programme, the development of a research culture, and university managers' perceptions of market-change processes that might explain the two former themes. In conducting the interviews, due account was taken of the separate roles of rectors, who were assumed to have the most comprehensive knowledge of strategic changes in their

³ See <http://www.moet.gov.vn/?page=11.10&view=9266> for details.

⁴ Key university status is an official recognition of the leadership role of the university in the process of modernising Vietnam's higher education system. More details about key universities in Vietnam can be found in Hayden and Lam (2007).

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universities, and deans and heads of departments, who were seen not only as the agents and recipients of change but also as important bridging channels between senior management and academics (Gmelch et al. 1999; Ramsden, 1998).

Hanoi University – A Story of Multi-disciplinary Expansion

Hanoi University (HANU) was established in 1959. In 1967, its name was changed to the Hanoi University of Foreign Studies to reflect its focus on offering undergraduate training programmes in 19 foreign languages. In 2006, its name was changed back to Hanoi University.

The University has a quota from the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) that allows it to admit approximately 1,500 full-time undergraduate students each year. It has a total enrolment of about 6,000 full-time regular students. The ratio of staff to students is approximately 1:20. Since 2000, the University has broadened its curriculum by offering new language programmes in Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish, and it has also diversified into fields such as business administration, finance, international studies, and computer science. Programme restructuring has been accompanied by structural changes. Since 2000, four new faculties have been established – in management and tourism, information technology, international studies, and foundation studies. HANU's vision is to develop into an international multi-disciplinary university based on building blocks across four areas: social sciences, business and economics, natural sciences, and technology.

The University has capitalised on its traditional strength in foreign languages by introducing business and computer programmes delivered in English. Delivering new programmes in English has made it a pioneer in the expanding market for English-language programmes at the undergraduate level. The Rector's message on the University website states coherently the institutional vision of multi-disciplinary expansion based on a solid foundation of language studies:

The university's development strategy is to maintain its leading position in the research and teaching of foreign language studies and international studies at all levels, to gradually develop into a multi-disciplinary institution on the platform of foreign language studies, to provide professional human resources of highest quality to service the modernisation and industrialisation of the country and strive to become an international institution in the region to better contribute to the country's *doi moi* and international integration.⁵

Parallel with the building of the new faculties and programmes, the University was successful in developing a joint initiative with La Trobe University in Australia for the delivery of a suite of business administration programmes at the diploma, bachelor's and master's levels. La Trobe University was initially responsible for the delivery of these programmes, before gradually transferring this responsibility to HANU staff. The quality of programme delivery was audited in 2004 within the

⁵ <http://english.HANU.vn/Home/MessagefromthePresident/tabid/63/Default.aspx> Retrieved: 1 November 2007.

framework of regular audits conducted by the Australian University Quality Agency (AUQA).⁶ The relationship helped HANU to build its teaching staff capacity in the field, and the audit by AUQA impacted favourably on the University's reputation, enabling the smooth beginning of the new programmes that HANU would offer on its own.

As part of HANU's multi-disciplinary expansion strategy, the Rector made a calculated decision to send a number of recent graduates who were now members of the teaching staff overseas to study computer science, business management, and finance. After two years of expanding its human resources, including the recruitment of qualified Vietnamese academic staff who could lecture in English, the business programme recruited its first students in 2002. Information Technology students followed in 2005. To support the expansion of new academic programmes, new operating structures were created, including new Faculties of Management and Tourism, Information Technology, and International Studies. A Department of Foundation Studies was also established with the aim of enabling students to develop a good command of English so that they could fully benefit from the English instruction programmes.

Since 2001, a strong "survival need" has underpinned strategic change in HANU. In recognising that the institution had to diversify away from its traditional roots in language studies, senior managers were perceptive in identifying early a growing market demand for English-language programmes in particular curriculum areas:

At the time we all felt the urgency of [a] survival need for the university. We all knew that if no change was made the university would not survive: foreign languages are the means only. In a blooming economy people should learn a profession and foreign languages are the tools. We therefore had no other choice but to develop into [a] multi-disciplinary institution, taking the best advantage of our strengths: the language background of the university (HANU/MM1).

HANU became the very first public university in Vietnam to arrange for students to study two undergraduate programmes at the same time. HANU also arranged for its students to voluntarily visit high schools in Hanoi to introduce the University and its undergraduate programmes. Between 2002 and 2005, three "Open Day" events were staged allowing HANU to select the best students from the best high schools nation-wide. These strategic moves have had positive outcomes, with HANU experiencing a steady increase in the number of applications registered in the National University Entrance Examinations.

⁶ AUQA is an independent body established by the state and federal governments in Australia to conduct audits and produce reports that assure students, the community, and external university partners that Australian universities produce high-quality outcomes in terms of research, teaching, and community service. See <http://www.auqa.edu.au/>

Hanoi University of Technology – Building a Research Culture

Hanoi University of Technology (HUT) was established in 1956 on the basis of its technical expertise. It now offers over 90 programmes at undergraduate and postgraduate levels across 33 disciplines in the science and technology, economics and business, and language areas. The University has a quota for the admission of approximately 3,700 full-time, regular undergraduate students. In addition, it admits 2,000 in-service students and 1,200 postgraduate students. It is a relatively large university by national standards, with a total enrolment of some 30,000 full-time students. HUT employs 1,192 academic staff of which 59 per cent hold doctoral degrees.⁷ Since 2000, HUT has diversified into business administration, language studies (English programme), and a number of inter-disciplinary programmes. In 2006, as an officially recognised key university, HUT was selected by MOET to offer two programmes delivered in English in conjunction with international partners. In 2007, its strategy paper *Master Plan for the Development of Hanoi University of Technology 2006–2030* was endorsed by MOET, and indicated its ambition to become an international research university.

At HUT, senior managers have disseminated likely pathways to international research university status on the University's website.⁸ An important strategic goal is to maintain HUT's key position as a leading university in technical studies and technology in Vietnam. The Rector's message on the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the University envisaged "a multi-disciplinary and multi-field research university of international quality and status, a centre of excellence for research in sciences and technology", which would join in the "community of regional and international universities" and be "a partner to organisations, local and international businesses to better contribute to the industrialisation and modernisation of the country".⁹ A senior manager made the following comment in respect to HUT's strategic path of research development:

If you, the university, want to sustain your leading position, you have to do the kind of pioneering research. No one other than HUT has to undertake [this research pioneering role]. More importantly, as one leading institution in Vietnam, you have to work with international researchers, you have to become their partners. At the same time, you have to be the place [for] Vietnam's businesses to resort to. [With research development], you make yourself distinguishable [from others], and you will be the leader. (HUT/SM3)

Research commercialisation is seen as a vital element in HUT's plan to achieve its goal of being a leading research university. Indeed, the senior management of the University considered that this was the only realistic means whereby HUT could generate more revenue and, more importantly, nurture a research environment at the institution. Commercial activity is seen as an important step in preparing to meet the government's policy of sector decentralisation. Revenue generation from research

⁷ This is an extremely high proportion by national standards.

⁸ <http://www.hut.edu.vn/content/view/15/>. Retrieved 20 October 2006.

⁹ <http://www.hut.edu.vn/content/view/15/>. Retrieved 20 October 2006.

commercialisation is also seen as a way of being able to pay higher wages to staff so that they have reduced teaching loads and can spend more time on research.

HUT's research development plan focuses on the establishment of a group of spin-off technology companies headed by a parent holding company. Learning from Chinese models of university economic groups, HUT is planning to develop a science park to support the incubation of technology and business ideas. The science park is expected to be the place where research can be commercialised and transferred to industry:

The idea starts from R&D, but not only that. Our motto is [we have to] start from the market and return to the market. [...] We know there are markets for basic research and [markets for] applied research. Applied research must originate from social reality and industry demands. Research projects that can be realised into products entering the markets are successful. [To do this] we must have someone seeking and finding out the market, someone solving [the] issues. Not only that, we must have someone who can turn research results into products in the labs, in the workshops, and pilot production. The products will be standardised and accordingly production/design options are developed. Intellectual property registration follows all that. Then comes the parent company and its spin-off affiliates who will launch the products to the market. (HUT/SM2)

However, the building of a research culture in HUT has some way to go at both the senior and the middle levels of management. There is an acute awareness of the fact that lecturing staff have neither the time nor the motivation to do research, mainly because they are constantly being pushed to do teaching in order to generate funds and salary.¹⁰ Making things worse is the absence of appropriate reward systems for research activities. Universities are confined by official regulations in this regard. Middle managers commented on the narrow range of indicators taken into account when considering academic promotions and professorial appointments. They observed also the emphasis given to the attainment of a doctoral qualification and scholarly publications, rather than collaborative industry research projects (HUT/MM1/MM3). One middle manager talked about the case of his institute:

Actually, [in our institute] the colleagues work on their own projects with business partners. The success [of our institute] in terms of revenue last year could have been ten times bigger if staff had devotedly worked under the name of the institute. It is the role of the individuals, not the leadership. Usually, the university cannot administer this. We think the publications [for professorship] now in Vietnam are meaningless, contributing nothing to development. (HUT/MM3)

¹⁰ Lecturers in Vietnam tend to work long teaching hours, sometimes at more than one institution, in order to boost their monthly wage. The minimum monthly wage for academic staff is scheduled to increase to VND 540,000 in 2008.

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University Managers' Perceptions

Public universities in Vietnam are embracing the market in an attempt to develop out of their historical situation of being small, narrowly specialised institutions. This section addresses the perceptions of university managers concerning the impact of market-induced changes to the environment of their institutions; it also highlights appropriate change-management strategies in response to these changing conditions.

Market-Change Perceptions

University managers regularly referred to the market for higher education services, reflecting a change even in their own perceptions of themselves and of their situation. Two to five years ago, most higher education actors in Vietnam would have avoided terminology such as "market demand", "market niche", "enterprise", and the like. In 2005, for example, when the first author conducted her preliminary fieldwork, one middle manager went to extremes to explain that "it is not market demand, it is social needs that we [universities] are responding to". Another higher education official kept a more neutral tone: "the market in the higher education sector is [an] issue heatedly debated and it is not concluded [yet] whether the market exists in the sector". By mid-2007, when interviews for the present investigation were conducted, market-laden terminology had become commonplace in university managers' communications:

We, at the time, had to find a market niche, so that we can place our feet in it. (HANU/MM1)

In principle, a comparison may not [be] in the right place, but the university is like an enterprise. It owns intellectual brains, research results, and of course management must predict the market. What the society needs, they will have to adjust accordingly. The State does not need to involve [itself] in [this]. (HUT/SM3)

Talking about the market in higher education, university managers were well aware of the constraints they were facing. Tuition fee limits set by the government were seen to be a major problem, especially as government funding allocations to higher education were falling relative to the rise in student numbers.¹¹ Public universities were considered to be extremely constrained by restricted quotas and low tuition fee levels, both of which are regulated by MOET:

It is very unequal when the private universities can charge much higher tuition fees than [the governmentally-set range of fees] for public ones. . . The government does not need to concern [itself] about tuition fees. The university can set the fee for itself, and if it sets [the

¹¹ Despite the government's commitment to prioritise budget spending on education, higher education has received a falling share of education allocations, from 12.43 per cent in 1998 to 9.71 per cent in 2002 (Socialist Republic of Vietnam and World Bank, 2005). These reductions may reflect the priority accorded to basic education and education in the remote, ethnic, and disadvantaged regions in Vietnam. Over the same period of time, the total number of students in higher education rose from 682,300 to 1,020,700, an increase of 67 per cent over the 4 years (St.George, 2007).

fee] too high, simply students won't come to it. Then university management can make the decision to reduce the fee. (HUT/SM2)

Everybody knows the major functions of the universities: research and teaching. But we cannot do research and teach if we don't have money. Therefore, generating revenue is the most important. The university must be rich. It must have its wealth to invest in research and teaching. (HUT/SM3)

Market competition was seen by university managers as a pressing need that would enable them to identify and develop discretionary sources of revenue creation:

Of course now all universities are competing. It is the competition for best students, not for the number of students, as this is already fixed by the government. It is not the competition for government funding as fund allocation is based on a number of criteria. [We see that] it is the competition to improve our profile in order to tap non-government funding such as those from teaching services to the society. [At HANU] we see the competition for training contracts with the government and industry. As our main stream is language teaching, we also have to compete with international service providers (HANU/SM1).

There was some uncertainty about the wisdom of the government's support for providing more opportunities for private higher education.¹² The opening of more new and relatively small private universities, together with the upgrading of some former public colleges of education into public universities, was seen by some senior managers as being somewhat unplanned. One compared the leading of a university in Vietnam with the driving of a car in Vietnam's traffic conditions where rules are not fully obeyed and where the capacity of the traffic system is weak. The managers interviewed were not, however, overtly pessimistic about the changing environment. One manager commented, for example, that:

We know it is the system and for any system, it is difficult to change. We as actors must raise our voices so that the government must make change. If no change is made, then a leeway must be created so that we the universities can grow. The leeway will become the main road after many people use it. (HUT/SM3)

When asked about their changing roles and tasks, managers strongly emphasised the need for new ways of thinking about and managing their own problems. They felt that they had to find innovative ways to manage their institutions' development in the context of an economy that is making a transition to a market system, and in which the importance of the government's higher education budget is steadily being reduced:

The problem that universities in Vietnam are now being challenged with is to get over themselves. University managers must change their perceptions. They must change the way they think. [...] HUT itself in the past 50 years is a leading university in technology. However, in today's context of rigorous competition, the establishment of numerous private universities, the penetration of international higher education institutions, we must find a way. If

¹² The number of private higher education institutions rose from 22 in 1999–2000 to 47 in 2006–2007. Over the same period, the number of students in private higher education rose from a total of 107,538 to 163,471, a 52 per cent increase over a 7-year period representing a significant increase in private funding.

we just think in a common way that our role is to provide education to develop the human resources, as before, we cannot sustain HUT's leading position. (HUT/SM3)

We have to find a way that is distinctive [for our] university. We make it our own way of development. We cannot just simply wait for orders and instructions from MOET as before. (HANU/SM2)

Change Management Strategy

University managers in the two institutions emphasised the importance of making planned, incremental adjustments (not radical changes) to their institutions' structures and management processes in response to government and labour market directives and needs (Tichy, 1983; Waddell et al. 2007). Paralleling Vietnam's moderately high power distance culture, where societal members show a great deal of respect for those in authority, and where unequal power distributions in organisations are readily accepted (Hofstede, 1980, 1991), these change initiatives were usually driven by senior university managers and presented to stakeholders, including deans, MOET officials, and university alumni through seminars and meetings. This direct approach to change management involved the use of managerial authority and direction to frame major decisions about the institution's future and the strategies required to bring about organisational change. Because strategic decisions were tightly framed and controlled by senior management, managers and staff at lower levels tended to accept them and to view the proposed changes in a consistent way; a tightly framed strategy also contributed to overall institutional commitment to strategic plans over a 10- and 20-year period.

The adoption of the 2050 Master Plan for HUT's development is a case in point. A section of the plan outlined the establishment of a new school, the Institute for Technology Advancement. All of the senior managers expected that this school, when provided with sufficient resources by the university and the government, would gain international status. Indeed, the performance of this school was expected to spill over to other units in the university, and, accordingly, transform HUT into the international leagues of world universities. One senior manager, speaking metaphorically, offered the image of a thrown stone creating numerous circles on the surface of a lake to imaginatively describe the way change can impact on the university. Comments by another senior manager about a university centre whose performance and standards have been accepted by French institutions also reflected the idea of change effectiveness as a process of "spillover" and "impact":

The importance of a change initiative is not with its location of change, but its effectiveness and [the] effectiveness that can impact on others. If there exists one centre of excellence like [this one] for each major field in [HUT], [I believe] we can progress very fast (HUT/SM1).

In both of the universities investigated, structural change was seen as being a means of changing the attitudes and behaviour of staff. Senior managers expected

that innovative actions undertaken by new faculties, departments, schools, or centres would be learnt by other organisational units, and accordingly their behaviour would be changed:

The changes can more obviously be seen in new faculties where faculty management play a more active role in finding new approaches, new thinking, and new solutions. It is then expected to be learnt and followed by the more established units. (HANU/MM1)

Conclusion

The modernisation of the university in Vietnam is an ongoing process that is being shaped by various forces. Resource constraints and tight government controls have pressured universities in Vietnam to expand into multi-disciplinary institutions that will better meet the surge in student demand for higher education programmes taught in English. Multi-disciplinary expansion has been accompanied by new academic programmes, structures, and partnership agreements with overseas universities. Not only has this expansion built up qualified staff capacity for teaching programmes in English, but it has allowed universities to boost their claims of international quality and status. Such claims are important distinguishing markers given the inexorable shift towards global rankings for defining the terms of competition amongst research universities (Gunn and Hill, 2008; Hazelkorn, 2008). In terms of the domestic market, such rankings are likely to play an important differentiation role. Research-led institutions with strong reputational status will be able to attract students that score highly on University Entrance Examinations. Under a more self-regulating fee model, universities that attract the best students will be able to charge higher tuition fees for specialised niche programmes. This should, in turn, generate more revenue for these institutions and give them greater flexibility in deciding the appropriate mix of teaching and research activity.

Academic research is still an area that needs stronger initiatives for improvement in Vietnamese universities (Nguyen, 2004; MOET, 2005). Although most university managers are well aware that research and teaching make a good university, they are severely restricted in their choices of research development given their limited resources. Research commercialisation through university-industry R&D partnerships is seen by public universities in Vietnam as an important strategy of boosting their discretionary funding and signalling to government they are ready for more operational autonomy. Although such partnerships are in alignment with the government's intentions of increasing private funding to higher education, a policy shift that has taken hold in most OECD countries over the past two decades, it does carry particular risks to universities (Fulop and Couchman, 2006). For universities striving to carve out international positions of excellence for research in science and technology, the risks of financial loss and the associated damage to the institution's reputation are of major concern. Universities also face significant

risks in assuming management, and research staff members have the required levels of innovation and entrepreneurship needed to commercialise research findings (Slaughter and Leslie, 1997). If these skills are not in place, and if the trust dynamics that underpin successful research and innovation are damaged, it is likely that the industry collaboration will not succeed. To minimise these substantial risks, universities need to develop comprehensive policies to manage the risks of commercialisation and R&D collaboration with industry partners (Fulop and Couchman, 2006).

Accepting the Vietnamese government's support for the provision of private funding for higher education, it is perhaps reasonable to speculate that universities will be granted more control over the setting of tuition fees. Although the introduction of fee-paying students was closely watched and hotly debated in Vietnam, voices condemning the principle of paying fees for higher education have been largely muted. As in Australia and other OECD countries, the legitimisation of a "user-pays" fees regime has been accompanied by reductions in higher education government expenditure and large increases in student numbers. This translates into less higher education funds from government in constant dollars per student terms. To supplement their shrinking revenue base, it seems likely public universities and staff in Vietnam will follow universities in other countries and engage in "academic capitalism" to gain non-government funds (Slaughter and Leslie, 1997: 8). The commercial side of university operations offers greater potential for institutional discretion and funding independence and hence is likely to become more central to university operations in Vietnam.

As user-pays market principles become more established in Vietnam, universities are likely to spend more time and money publicising their teaching and research activities to students and distinct business groups in the community. In this regulated market, university managers will increasingly voice their preferences for more institutional autonomy and the independence to raise student fees based on student preferences. As in other regulated market environments, voicing opinions as to the primacy of the market is likely to be met with scepticism and caution by public officials. During the 1990s when numerous private universities were allowed to open with minimal ministerial oversight, there was a loud public outcry about the deteriorating quality of education and the way in which students were being swindled by educational institutions (St. George, 2007). For a government committed to ensuring both the quality of education is maintained and that it meets national development needs, this response highlighted the political risks involved of allowing universities greater autonomy over their financial operations.

Processes of modernisation represent a major challenge to public universities. A recurrent managerial challenge will be how to embrace market-driven strategies in a regulated environment characterised by student quotas and tuition fee ceilings. This contradiction will perhaps lessen as the government reframes the division of responsibility between state and university and delineates the limits of university autonomy. Of more pressing concern to university managers is the extent to which they can learn to find innovative ways to manage their institutions' distinctive path of development.

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