

Student-centered Learning in Higher Education in Vietnam

A comparative study of public and
private universities

Thu Tran Phuong Le



Department of Education
Faculty of Educational Sciences
UNIVERSITY OF OSLO

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Thu Tran Phuong Le

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Abstract

This study addresses student-centered learning in higher education in Vietnam. The overall aims of this study are to provide theoretical justifications for Vietnam's adoption of student-centered learning method and examine and compare how two different types of universities, namely a public university and a private university are mediating student-centered learning method in Vietnam through their different institutional contexts. Steiner-Khamsi's (2014) concepts of cross-national policy borrowing, cultural-history activity theory, together with student-centered learning evaluation frameworks including Brandes and Ginnis's (1986), Cullen & Harris's (2009), and Neumann's (2013) are used as theoretical frameworks.

This study is designed within the qualitative case study research paradigm, including semi-structured interviews. Two sampled higher education institutions in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam were investigated and a total of eighteen teachers and students from the two universities were individually interviewed. Furthermore, a number of governments documents and course syllabi from both universities are also been utilized in this study.

The study shows two major findings. First, under pressure from forces of globalization and the fears of falling behind, Vietnamese policy makers opt for student-centered learning as a quick fix solution because it is perceived as better suited for the types of learning Vietnam needs. Second, while both higher education institutions analyzed fit into the student-centered learning criteria adopted in this study, the education philosophy and practice of the private university in this study are more compatible to the student-centered learning principles. The study attempts to provide an insight into the issue how student-centered learning is practiced differently through different educational and economic conditions between two individual universities, suggesting that rather than seeking external solutions and mulling over the outcomes of 'best practice' from elsewhere, the government should adopt of a bottom-up approach and be more concerned with the details of actual practice at lower levels to develop practical prescribing reform in its education system in general and in higher education in particular.

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Acronyms

AFTA	ASEAN Free Trade Area
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
MOET	Ministry of Education and Training
RMIT	Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology
WTO	World Trade Organization

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

The emergence of globalization and knowledge economies leads to a widely-recognized role of higher education as a fundamental driving force for national development in both developed and developing countries (UNESCO, 2004). In this context, there is a call for new forms of pedagogy in higher education to better support acquisition of skills such as critical thinking, effective communication, problem solving through negotiation and collaboration, which are needed to respond to complex global challenges (Scott, 2015), and Vietnam was not left out of this trend.

The “Doi Moi” national economic reform in 1986 (literally translated as “to make a change”) has provided an important backdrop to changes that have occurred in Vietnamese higher education system. Before Doi Moi, each government ministry is responsible for training the workforce needed for their own sector; therefore, universities graduates were promised to be offered positions in government ministries and state-owned enterprises (George, 2010; Harman & Bich, 2010; Tran, 2013b). The system has been significantly affected by the country’s high economic growth and greater openness to the rest of the world, which was followed by an educational crisis in terms of its inability to meet the new demands of the economy (Dung, 2004; Harman & Bich, 2010; London, 2004). Despite the popular school of thoughts shared by most Vietnamese is that without a degree, a person has no future, being a university graduate does not guarantee them a job in the future. Today's employers expect their new hires to possess a varied set of attributes, skills and knowledge such as problem-solving skill, multi-tasking skill, and communication skill that ensuring they have the capability of being effective in the workplace (Riddell, 1996). Meanwhile, the traditional learning method of memorizing information in order to reproduce information without understanding it is often blamed for producing low-quality labor force (Tran, 2013b). One graduate suggested in the interview by Tran (2013c):

Vietnamese education does not encourage children to think critically. Adults do not like children to question; they want their children to be obedient. Since we were little, we were educated that way. It is hard to change. Even in university, we know for sure that something is wrong, but we do not dare to speak it up.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The traditional pedagogical approach in higher education system in Vietnam which was inherited from both Confucian culture and the old Soviet top-down approach turned out to be problematic when they continue to create a passive workforce who is obedient and only able to do planned work (Tran, 2013b). Given this context, Vietnamese policy makers tended to be more dedicated to importing other teaching and learning approaches from developed countries, especially a student-centered approach, and see these approaches as 'standards' for local education reforms (Thanh, 2010; Thompson, 2009). However, the section of teaching method reform only makes up a small part in the government resolution on the renewal of tertiary education without any clear explanations; in fact, it serves more as a guideline for the changes that should take place, and the implementation relies on the universities and the lecturers themselves.

As Steiner-Khamsi (2014) states in her interpretive framework for comparative policy studies, “the local context is key to understanding why policies are borrowed (externalization), how they are locally modified and implemented (recontextualization), and what impact they have on existing structures, policies, and practices (internalization)” (p. 162). While much attention has been paid to the call for the implementation of student-centered learning (e.g., Handelsman et al., 2004; Le, 2001; Le, 2005; Pham, 2016; Van-Dang, 2006), during the literature review, little has been found on the justification for Vietnam’s adoption of student-centered learning method instead of developing its own policy to best suit the Vietnamese context as well as the actual implementation of student-centered learning in education in general education and in higher education in particular. In the existing theoretical literature, a number of possible barriers that hinder the practice of student-centered learning in higher education were explored (Pham, 2016; Thanh, 2010; Thompson, 2009). Nevertheless, the empirical investigation into the way teachers and students perceive and practice this approach

has been largely ignored. The question over whether the so-called student-centered learning in Vietnam is actual student-centered learning or not is left unanswered, considering that previous scholars in this area suggest that many institutions or educators claim to be practicing student-centered learning, but in reality they are actually not (Farrington, 1991; Lea et al., 2003).

The literature also suggests that student-centered learning is an umbrella term that encompasses a wide variety of theoretical origins, each holding different meanings and implications for education (Neumann, 2013; Schweisfurth, 2013a). This has led to another issue that education researchers are more likely to face the risk of not discussing about the same thing when the topic is of student-centered learning (Neumann, 2013). Particularly, the positive claims or criticism of student-centered learning made in previous researches were usually based on a set of loose definitions instead of specifically pointing out what the term was referring to. In addition, during the literature review, little comparative research specifically examining the issue of how different types of higher education institutions in Vietnam attempt to develop a student-centered environment and try to overcome the hindering factors within their own contexts has been found. Given that macro studies tend to over-generalize, and therefore fail to properly investigate local differences (Bray & Thomas, 1995); as well as student-centered learning practice is bound to particular contexts of experience (Schweisfurth, 2013a), my assumption is that a comparative study looking at individual types of institutions is needed. These are the gaps the current study aims to contribute to fill.

1.3 Research Aims and Research Questions

Given all the above stated shortcomings, this study questions the following: Why did the Vietnamese policy makers choose to adopt student-centered learning approach? To what extent student-centered learning approach is understood and applied in actual situations in the context of higher education? How far is the teaching and learning process relevant and responsive to the needs of students? How can the supporting factors of the implementation be maximized and how can the obstructing factors be avoided?

Directly related to the aims of the study which are mentioned above, the following research questions and sub-questions are raised:

- 1) What are the reasons underpinning the adoption of the student-centered learning approach in Vietnam?
- 2) To what extent is student-centered learning is practiced in two different types of higher education institutions in Vietnam?
 - a. How do the lecturers in the respective institutions perceive student-centered learning and how do they try to implement it?
 - b. How do the students in the respective institutions understand and adapt to student-centered learning approach?
 - c. What are the factors that support and/or put pressure on the practice of student-centered learning in Vietnam higher education?

In order to better investigate how student-centered is put into practice, it is crucial to find out the reasons why it is adopted at the beginning. Then, to explore and compare how student-centered is perceived and implemented in the two institutions, the review of course syllabi and data gathered on what the students and teachers believe and what they put in practice are scrutinized. Through this examination, the factors that support and hinder student-centered learning in each university are expected to emerge.

1.4 Significances of the Study

The implementation of student-centered learning which is drawn from Western models instead of being planned to best suit the socio-political norms of Vietnam is likely to experience several obstacles due to the possible cultural and infrastructural mismatches. Moreover, the section of teaching method reform only makes up a small part in the government resolution on the renewal of tertiary education without any clear explanations; in fact, it serves more as a guideline for the changes that should take place, and the implementation relies on the universities and the lecturers themselves, which generates different policy responses at the institutional level. Given this context, I believe it is important to investigate the reason underpinning this adoption of student-centered learning approach and what is going on in higher education institutions in actuality. With various roots of student-

centered learning theories, there exists no consistent definition of the student-centered education, which has allowed different ways of interpreting this approach in teaching and learning practice across different contexts (Farrington, 1991; Neumann, 2013, Hoidn, 2016). As Schweisfurth (2013a) puts it, “if we add to the mix the fact that it has manifestations within many different cultural, political and resource realities, then it becomes even less easy to pin down and define with universal clarity” (p. 2). In this regards, first, this study provides theoretical justifications for Vietnam’s adoption of student-centered learning method. Second, given that the implementation relies on the universities and the lecturers themselves, this study examines and compares how two different types of universities, namely a public university and a private university are mediating student-centered learning method in Vietnam through their different practices, content of the course syllabi, and provision of resources. In terms of financing, the main difference which distinguishes a public and a private higher education institutions in Vietnam is that private institutions are not publicly funded (The Prime Minister of Government, 2010). In terms of academic autonomy, while all public universities and regular Vietnamese owned private universities’ curriculum are generally subject to the uniform frameworks set by the MOET, foreign higher education institutions, which are also regarded as private, have complete curriculum autonomy (The Government, 2012). The detailed contextual background in which the research is carried is delineated in Section 2.3. Third, since this is a qualitative study, the various points of view, beliefs, and perspectives that teachers and students raise on this issue provide a better insight for further studies. Last but not least, this study adds its own value to contribute to fill the research gap in the given field of study and makes further recommendations for future renovation.

1.5 Theoretical Frameworks of the Study

A set of theories that considers policy borrowing and student-centered learning is the lens employed to guide this study. The theoretical framework used to shed light on the issue of why the educational reform from elsewhere is introduced to the domestic reform includes the concepts of cross-national policy borrowing (Steiner-Khamsi, 2014). In addition, cultural-history activity theory which allows for the investigation of the interrelationships between different levels of activity systems (i.e. classroom, institutions, social context, and national

policies) is used as the main tool to guide the interview questions. To specifically address the issue of how student-centered learning is understood and practiced in higher education in Vietnam, the study also employs other frameworks and tools that relate to student-centered learning and enable the assessment of how student-centered learning is enacted (Brandes and Ginnis, 1986; Cullen & Harris, 2009; Neumann, 2013). These latter frameworks are presented in Section 3.3 and Section 3.4 in Chapter 3.

1.6 Methodology

This is a qualitative case study investigates firstly the justification underpinning the adoption of student-centered learning approach in Vietnam and secondly what is actually going on in its higher education institutions, using a comparative research design. The selection of two sampled higher education institutions in this study was based on their type of institution and their documented interest in adopting student-centered pedagogy in their teaching and learning practice. A total of 18 teachers and students from the two universities were individually semi-structured interviewed about their beliefs and experiences. 15 interviews were conducted in Vietnamese and 3 interviews were conducted in English. They were audio-taped, transcribed and translated to English. Qualitative data using English language was then analyzed using NVivo 11. Furthermore, a number of governments documents and course syllabi from both universities are also been utilized in this study. The justification for methodological choices is further represented in Chapter 4.

1.7 Positionality

I was born and grown up in a country where for many people all over the world, whenever they think of it, it comes to their mind stories of the Vietnam War. It is undeniable that the consequences of wars have left a strong impact on the society of Vietnam, but more than that, our society was also significantly influenced by the Confucian philosophy due to 1000 years of Chinese rule. From childhood my parents taught me to be obedient to them and my teachers, so I could be considered a good kid, and my parents could be proud of me. However, kids are always curious. I remember I questioned my parents' knowledge once, and they vented anger at me. They asked me: "Who taught you to become this spoiled child?" I knew I

disappointed them. I wanted them to love me; therefore, I had never questioned anything again since then in order to please them. I dared not question my teacher either. When I was a student in Vietnam, I held a strong belief that a dedicated teacher was the one who transferred all of his knowledge to students. I felt very happy and satisfied when I left school with a notebook full of notes taken during the lectures, because I knew I only needed to learn by heart all of those before the examination in order to get good marks. I was hard-working, I was really good at rote learning, and I was always one of the top students during my school years in Vietnam.

At university, the learning environment encouraged students to take initiatives, to be proactive, and to think critically. However, most of my classmates and I shared the same opinion that it was very superficial. While most of our teachers seemed to encourage us to be critical, at the same time, they also tended to practice their authority over students. Therefore, we were still unwilling to voice our opinions or to propose solutions to problems that arose during the learning process.

My educational experience totally changed when I came to Norway to pursue my Master's degree. I would call it 'a whole new world'. During my first semester here, I faced a lot of difficulties in adapting to the new pedagogical approach as well as the new teacher-student relationship. I was passive and uncritical, while most of my classmates were active and able to stake out their ideas easily. Before I arrived in Norway, I expected the teachers would give lectures and students would listen carefully to them. However, instead of lectures, we had a lot of workshops and class discussions, where students stated their opinions even more than teachers, and there was no power distance between teachers and students.

During my studies, I came across several journals stating that Vietnam was making effort to reform its outdated higher education system to prepare graduates to effectively function in the globally competitive workforce, and policy-makers were in favor of introducing student-centered education to Vietnam, which, according to them, is more effective (Handelsman et al., 2004; Harman & Bich, 2010; Pham, 2016; Thanh, 2010; Thompson, 2009). From my personal experience, I could tell that there would be several possible mismatches and obstacles that educational researchers should be aware of when student-centered education is

implemented in Vietnam; however, it alone cannot make my statement cogent and valid. Thus, I made a start to conduct a study on the issue of the implementation of student-centered learning in Vietnamese higher education.

One possible bias is acknowledged when it comes to this research. The bias comes from the personal background of me and my previous experience with student-centered learning in my home country before the research is conducted. Certain aspects of the issue could be overlooked or misinterpreted given my former experiences in the field. For these reasons, it is important for me to practice reflexivity on my own bias and previous knowledge in order not to affect the research outcomes.

1.8 Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is divided into seven chapters. The first chapter presents an introductory background of the study with the rationales, aims, research questions, theoretical frameworks and methodology. In chapter two, the literature on the historical roots, the trends in the implementation of student-centered learning approach, student-centered learning in Vietnamese context, and further, a detailed background on higher education in Vietnam will be reviewed. Chapter three presents the theoretical aspects, highlighting the key components of the study (cross-national policy borrowing, cultural-historical activity theory and student-centered learning). In chapter four, the elements of the methodology, including sampling, materials, procedure, ethical issues, analysis, and the validity and reliability of the study are outlined. The final findings are presented in chapter five. Chapter six summarizes and discusses the findings presented in the former chapter in line with the theoretical frameworks and the selected literature. Finally, chapter seven concludes the thesis, presents its limitations, and gives future recommendations.

2 Literature Review

This chapter will introduce a wide range of literature in order to provide a background to the topic of student-centered learning approach. The pertinent literature was obtained after thorough research using keywords in online search engines, such as Oria, Vietnam's Legal Normative Documents Website Google Scholar, as well as physical material available at the University of Oslo library. The keywords used in search included "student-centered learning", "student-centered learning in Confucian heritage contexts", "higher education in Vietnam", and "student-centered learning in Vietnam".

The chapter is divided into four parts. The first part reviews different theoretical underpinnings of student-centered learning. Then, the broad implications of student-centered learning are presented in the second part. The third part is an overview of higher education in Vietnam. The fourth part scrutinizes the student-centered learning initiatives and its implementation in Vietnam higher education.

2.1 Historical Roots of Student-centered Learning

Student-centered education has varying historical roots in "romantic notions of childhood, visions of a more democratic society through schooling, emancipatory ambitions for oppressed adults, and teachers as facilitators of individual learning" (Schweisfurth, 2013a, p. 1). This explains why there exists no consistent definition of the student-centered education, which has allowed different ways of interpreting this approach in teaching and learning practice across different contexts (Farrington, 1991; Neumann, 2013, Hoidn, 2016). Therefore, the objective of this section and the next section is to review various definitions and interpretations attached to student-centered learning and set the foundation to provide a working interpretation specific to this research.

Two of the main contributors to the foundation literature of student-centered learning were Vygotsky (1978) and Bruner (1966), who provide psychological justifications for student-centered learning in cognitive constructivist paradigm where it suggests that students' control

over the content and learning process helps them “build up from existing knowledge neural connections and meaningful patterns which lead to more effective and sustainable learning”, and their active involvement is central to learning processes and desirable learning outcomes (Schweisfurth, 2013a, p. 2). Vygotsky proposes a well-known theory linking a general psychological perspective on child development with school teaching, which is called the zone of proximal development (Hedegaard, 1996). The zone of proximal development is the difference between the level of what the child is able to perform with understanding and independently, and the level of what he is able to perform only with adult assistance (Vygotsky, 1982). Accordingly, teachers should use this theory as a tool to plan their classroom instruction by assigning tasks and providing just enough guidance so that students can adapt their knowledge to a new situation and complete the tasks by themselves, and then creating an environment that encourages students to do harder tasks (Wass & Golding, 2014).

Another popular way of interpretation of student-centered learning is reflected in the educational philosophy of ‘progressive pedagogy’ given by John Dewey (1938). He advocates a shift from the old traditional didactic approaches where teachers are the main authority while students are passive recipients of knowledge in classroom to a new educational paradigm in which teachers should act as facilitator and the students’ needs, interests, and engagement to be put at the heart of learning process: “To imposition from above is opposed expression and cultivation of individuality; to external discipline is opposed free activity; to learning from texts and teachers, learning through experience; to acquisition of isolated skills and techniques by drill, is opposed acquisition of them as means of attaining ends which make direct vital appeal; to preparation for a more or less remote future is opposed making the most of the opportunities of present life; to static aims and materials is opposed acquaintance with a changing world” (1938, p. 18-19). Rogers (1951) extends the ground literature on the subject with his hypotheses of student-centered learning, which originally comes from humanist psychological theory known as ‘client-centered therapy’, such as “We cannot teach another person directly; we can only facilitate his learning” and “A person learns significantly only those things which he perceives as being involved in the maintenance of, or enhancement of, the structure of the self” (389). Echoing Dewey and Rogers’ foundational work, Freire (1968) goes on to introduce ‘critical pedagogy’, which is to fight oppression and liberate students

through practice, defined as "reflection and action directed at the structures to be transformed" (p. 126). Freire (1968) calls for a 'problem-posing education' that encourages students to co-construct the knowledge with their teachers and emphasizes critical thinking. Knowles (1975) later defines student-centered learning as follows: "A process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning outcomes."

These definitions all share the core values of student-centered learning, which are the emphasis on the active role of learners in constructing their own independent knowledge rather than the passive reliance on teacher part in order to empower them to achieve a deeper level of understanding as well as an increased autonomy in the sense that their needs and interests in the whole learning process to be brought to the fore.

2.2 Broad Implications of Student-centered Learning

With various theoretical origins of how individuals should learn, different education researchers and practitioners provide different particular implications of applying student-centered learning and teaching approach to practice. Two main approaches to student-centered learning could be identified in recent literature.

The first approach affirms that student-centered learning is not open learning. Fay (1988) provides a framework to clearly distinguish between the two. Fay (1988, p. 8) employs two of Bernstein's concepts of 'classification' and 'framing' to structure his framework: 'classification' refers to "the relative demarcations of subject matter in terms of disciplines, content and boundary" and 'framing' refers to "the defining agents of learning and to the conditions of learning such as pacing, selection, location." According to Fay (1988), the truly student-centered model is defined as a learning environment where both content and conditions are determined by the student. If the content is nationally or institutionally controlled while conditions in terms of selection, pacing, etc. are left to students' decision, the model should be called the open learning model instead of student-centered learning. In the same vein, for Schweisfurth (2013b), student-centered learning "gives learners, and demands

from them, a relatively high level of active control over the contents and processes of learning. What is learnt, and how, are therefore shaped by learners' needs, capacities and interests" (p. 20). Scholars who employ this strict definition of student-centered learning as operational definition in their researches also raise a main pragmatic issue with the implementation of this approach, which is many institutions or educators claim to be practicing student-centered learning, but in reality they are actually not, with the teaching and learning practice and the educational beliefs being demonstrated to be teacher-centered (Aliusta & Özer, 2017; Farrington, 1991). Interestingly, John Dewey, who advocates for progressive learning, later criticizes this educational paradigm for its "lack of discipline, learner-centeredness, focus on trivial problems, little attention to subject matter, anti-intellectualism, and a lack of a clear definition of the teacher's role" (Elias and Merriam, 2005, p. 56). Similarly, as Maton (2000b, cited in Mckenna, 2013, p. 2) puts it, "student-centered learning, in its singular focus on the students' needs, fails to take sufficiently into account what the discipline 'needs' or, more precisely put, what the knowledge and knower structures of the discipline are and how are these legitimated". A research conducted on human cognitive architecture by Kirschner et al. (2006) further suggests pedagogical discourse should not be abandoned in student-centered researches, since learning without instruction, which helps to alter long-term memory, is ineffective. The findings in previous studies provide strong empirical evidence for these arguments, in which students generally preferred student-centered learning, but they also expressed anxiety about the absence of robust structure and lack of guidance from the teacher of such an approach (e.g., Hynes, 2017; Lea, Stephenson, & Troy, 2003).

The second approach indicates that student-centered learning should not only be understood in opposition to teacher-centered learning. With an aim to providing framework that better conceptualizes student-centered learning, Neumann (2013) proposes a framework that specifically divides it into three contours: learning relationships that center in students, that center on students, and that center with students. Regarding the ownership of learning content, unlike the above mentioned approach where the students are the only ones who determine the topics of inquiry, he suggests that "in contexts centered in students, students select the content; in contexts centered on students, educators select the content; and in contexts

centered with students, teachers and students collaboratively select the content” (Neumann, 2013, p. 171). Hence, learning contexts that center in students proposed here aligns with the truly student-centered learning model provided by Fay (1988).

Learning contexts that center on students is the most common context found in educational settings today, where students have more authority to proceed through learning activities at their own pace, while learning content remains controlled by other stakeholders. This educational paradigm is in line with the definition of student-centered learning provided by Cannon and Newble’s (2000) “Student-centered learning is a broad term that is used to describe ways of thinking about teaching and learning that emphasize student responsibility and activity in learning rather than content or what the teachers are doing. Essentially, student-centered learning has student responsibility and activity at its heart” (p. 16), other student-centered learning models developed by several scholars in the area (e.g., Hodge, 2010; Hannafin & Land, 1997), and is implicitly used as operational definition for student-centered learning several empirical studies (e.g., Hsu, 2008; Schumacher & Kennedy, 2008; Wu and Huang, 2007).

The third contour of student-centeredness in this framework is learning contexts that center with students, which puts emphasis on teacher-student collaboration. The theoretical support for this contour aligns with the work of influential scholars such as Dewey (1938), Rogers (1951), and Freire (1968). This approach is advocated by Weimer (2002) with her notion about ‘the balance of power’. While this contour seems to be very promising to flourish in the contemporary education settings, several concerns are raised. In terms of the teacher-student partnership, how could the two sides balance the authority in case the students came up with irrelevant learning outcomes (Hodge, 2010)? In terms of the relationship among students, if student-centered learning is implemented in the large class setting, how are minority views be taken into account (Hodge, 2010)? Accordingly, Hodge (2010) advocates the retainment of disciplinary knowledge, but also suggests a weak framing structure in higher education sector.

From the above sections, it can be seen that the definitions utilized in this study follow the main tenets of student-centered learning, wherein the independent and active role of those who learn is emphasized along the process of knowledge creation, as opposed to a passive

dependence on the educator's position. This helps the learner to accomplish greater levels of autonomy and understanding regarding their own interests, needs and priorities concerning the learning process as a whole. However, student-centered learning itself has broad implications, which might put researchers at risk of not speaking the same language when the term is generally mentioned. Specifically, there is no agreement yet on the ownership of learning content and the role of instructors in a student-centered learning environment. For this reason, it is crucial to precisely position the findings of this study within a specific educational context. This is further discussed in Section 3.4.

2.3 Overview of Higher Education in Vietnam

Before moving on to the next section, it is essential to delineate the contextual background in which the research is carried. Understanding how higher education in Vietnam, both in public and private institutions, as well as the culture are tied to the main ideas of student-centered learning may help elucidate questions that might arise in the coming chapters of this thesis. Additionally, covering the background in which the research takes place can be especially important for studies carried outside the main, Western-based circle of academia.

2.3.1 Higher Education System in Vietnam

For many people all over the world, whenever they think of Vietnam, it comes to their mind the story of wars. The consequences of wars have left a strong impact on Vietnam's society in general and its educational system in particular. Take the period after French colonial rule as an example. At the time Vietnam government took control from the French and declared the country independence in 1945, 95% of Vietnamese people were illiterate and there were only three universities which used French as the instructional language (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2008). It is understandable that anti-illiteracy as well as basic education level quickly became the main focus of national education policy. As Nguyen & Nguyen (2008, p. 111) stated, the ability to read, write and calculate was "perceived as a criterion for demonstrating a person's education."

The year 1986 marked an important milestone in the economics and society of Vietnam with the implementation of Doi Moi Policy. In the economic sphere, Vietnamese Party and Government facilitated the economic transition from a centrally planned economy to socialist-oriented market one as a resolution policy for the 1980s economic crisis. On the eve of Doi Moi Policy, higher education system in Vietnam was built following the old Soviet system, and thus, it was designed to supply the labor needs of the central command economy. The whole education system was centralized under the control of state ministries regarding administration, finance and curriculum (George, 2003). There were no private institutions at that time. Universities were placed under the administration of the relevant government ministries which are responsible for training the workforce needed for their own sectors (George, 2010; Ngo, 2005). The purpose of central planners then was to keep education progress in line with economic development, and education should neither surpass nor fall behind the needs of economy (George, 2010). Following this state-centric model, employment of the time could be state driven and universities graduates were promised to be offered positions in government ministries and state-owned enterprises (Harman & Bich, 2010; Tran, 2013b).

It was not until the period after Doi Moi Policy that the importance of higher education became noticed. To a developing country like Vietnam, especially in a post-war context at that time, it is essential to focus on basic level of schooling and more specifically, to reach the universal primary and secondary school goals. Nevertheless, the question over how education should be in order to support economic development when Vietnam was taking its very first steps to the global economy also arose. The vital role of high quality higher education and scientific research obviously should not and cannot be set aside if a country wants to create and improve the competitiveness in a global economy (George, 2003). According to George (2003), the early years of 1990s were the time when the relationship between education and economy became highly controversial among Vietnamese scholars in leading economic and political journals. Some people argued that education as a form of investment, which later could bring returns to the economy, should therefore be made ahead of economy while others, departing from classical Marxist framework, argued that education should or must strictly follow the needs of economy, otherwise, it would result in an abundant workforce. The former

argument gradually received wider support from the state. This proved that human capital theory began to have a noticeable effect on the underlying thinking of socialist Vietnam's political leaders. As human capital theory gradually found wider acceptance, educators were given a theoretical foundation on which they can build their claims for greater commitment to education.

The high economic growth and greater openness to foreign trade and investment since the outset of Doi Moi Policy were followed by the increasing demands for a tertiary educated workforce and a need to reform the outdated higher education system. Even though the educational system in Vietnam has undergone several radical changes in organization structure, educational objectives and curricula since the early 1990s, as well as the general institutional management has been decentralized at all levels of basic education, higher education is still put under the control of MOET and other central government ministries (Dung, 2004; The Government, 2016). Self-management at the institutional level is encouraged; however, they are controlled in terms of developing their own curriculum frameworks (Hayden & Lam, 2007). According to the 2005 Education Law, all higher education curricula are subject to the uniform frameworks set by the MOET, including “the core program for each field of training for college and university degrees, including content structure of all subjects, duration of training, proportion of training duration among different subjects, between theory, practice and internship”, and institutions “shall design their own programs based on the core program” (Vietnamese Assembly, 2005). In other words, the educational objectives concerning content knowledge and practical skills; structure of the program; and obligatory courses are specified for every program. The explanation given to these foisted frameworks was to assure that the quality of teaching and learning in higher education institutions is identical without regard to institutional differences in mission and scope (Tran et al., 2011).

The goals of education specified in 2005 Education Law are “to train Vietnamese into comprehensively developed persons who possess moral qualities, knowledge, good health, aesthetic sense and profession, and are loyal to the ideology of national independence and socialism; to shape and foster personality, quality and capacity of citizens, satisfying the national construction and defense requirements” (Vietnamese Assembly, 2005). In Vietnam,

the Communist Party remained its monopoly on politics and policies; therefore, regarding undergraduate and postgraduate curriculum, the state strictly requires all students to take Principles of Marxism-Leninism, Ho Chi Minh Ideology and Revolutionary Policy of Vietnamese Communist Party as compulsory political science courses, while higher education institutions have more control over remaining courses (Dung, 2004; Fry, 2009; Hayden & Lam, 2007; Vietnamese Assembly, 2005). MOET is the major state management of education agency responsible for the governance and management of education in Vietnam, with all types of higher education institutions being put under it, especially in terms of curricula, except for those of foreign-owned institutions, which will be presented in the next section (The Government, 2012; Vietnamese Assembly, 2005).

Regarding financing in education, in 2002, the rate of state expenditure spent on higher education of Vietnam lagged far behind that of other countries in the Southeast Asian region, with the shares of higher education out of GDP was 0.41 percent and approximately 1.6 percent respectively (The World Bank, 2008, p. 72). According to a recent financing report issued by The Government (2016), in 2013, government expenditure on education reached 20 percent of total government spending on all sectors and there was a slight increase in its contribution to education spending from 5.1% in 2009 to 6.0% of GDP in 2013. This proportion of GDP allocated for education is considered high compared to other countries in the region of Asia; however, due to the small scale of GDP, the actual allocation has not sufficiently met the funding requirements to satisfy the ambitious development plan of education and training (The Government, 2016, p. 27).

2.3.2 Private Higher Education in Vietnam

Under the new policy line of market-oriented reforms, the Soviet model of higher education vanished and the country's economy started to develop rapidly (Boothroyd & Pham, 2000). In order to meet the rising demand for a larger number of highly skilled human resources, the government had to make a sudden transition from an elitist higher education system mass higher education, which is at the same time lead to certain financial challenges (Harman & Bich, 2010; London, 2004). Since state education budget was limited, it was not enough simply to develop its public institutions at that time (Fry, 2009). Confirming that financial

constraints would lead to deteriorating education quality, an elite group of Vietnamese mathematicians aspired to the share of education cost from the state onto fee-paying students (George, 2003). As a result, privatization in education was sanctioned by the government in order to help solve the problem of cash-strapped public resources for education, which led to the foundation of Vietnam's first non-state university in 1993, Thang Long University, where students pay tuition fees for their studies (Hayden & Thiep, 2010). Here, it is worth pointing out that these changes could be not only the natural result of changes to the economy but also influenced by the new thinking about how higher education should operate, which has been filtered through by an international organization's policy - the World Bank policy. In the 1990s, the government of Vietnam requested the World Bank's assistance for higher education, particularly in terms of funding for new construction and equipment purchase, not for technical support (Dang, 2009). However, the World Bank attempted to bring about a paradigm shift to change the institutional and government traditions embedded in the Vietnamese higher education system (Waitte, 2009, cited in Madden, 2014). For the neo-liberal model on higher education which the World Bank was pursuing, institutions should be based on high levels of competition for students and resources and substantial administrative independence, market competition is required for efficient resource allocations (George, 2003).

Since the idea of 'private' could be interpreted as being for-profit, which was normally suspected in socialist Vietnam, the term 'non-state' was used to describe private organizations (George, 2010). The introduction of funding from outside of the state subsidies was labeled 'socialization', referring to the shifting of financial cost from public sector onto society, which is exactly opposite to how Westerns define the term (Dang, 2009; London, 2004). This is clearly stated in Education Law of Vietnam: "To develop education and to build a learning society are the responsibilities of the State and the entire population" (Vietnamese Assembly, 2005). Interestingly, shifting costs to households also fits a Confucian perspective of the role of the family in the education of children, which has had a strong impact on Vietnamese society since the ancient days (Madden, 2014). This idea may have contributed to ease the reaction of the state leaders to the expansion of private higher education institutions.

In official documents, private institutions are defined as educational institutions established by social, professional, or economic organizations without state funding (The Prime Minister of Government, 2010). Excluded from state funding schemes, private higher education institutions are responsible for raising their operating budget; therefore, the main source of revenue for these institutions is from their consumers' tuition fees (Hayden & Dao, 2010). Most private institutions tend to “provide undergraduate programmes that do not require much investment in equipment, and programmes that are in demand by society such as foreign languages, business administration and informatics” (Ngo, 2005, 223).

Under the Decision on approving the planning on the network of universities and colleges in the 2001-2010 period”, the government of Vietnam planned to develop non-public higher education sector to make up for 30 percent of the total student load in higher education by the year 2010 (The Prime Minister of Government, 2001). At present, there are 95 private higher education institutions in the academic year of 2016-2017, with the number of students accounting for 13.7 percent of the total higher education sector (MOET, 2017). Although the number has not reached the desired goal yet, the rapid expansion of the sector during the last 25 years is still obvious. This reflects the state's recognition that the financial burden on public budget and the growing social demand for higher education could be alleviated by allowing students to pay tuition fees (Hayden & Dao, 2010).

Although tertiary education after Doi Moi have been recognized as a key site for the production of highly skilled and internationally experienced labor force to take the lead on economic development, Vietnamese political leaders were still reluctant to welcome foreign participation in education sector at that time (George, 2003; Welch, 2010). Nevertheless, acknowledging the persistent shortcomings in the country's current education system that higher education still faced 10 years after several major changes, The Government (2000) subsequently opened its door for foreign-owned universities to offer education in Vietnam. Under this decree, the RMIT International University from Australia was allowed to establish its first campus in Vietnam in 2001 (Fry, 2009; Welch, 2010).

Together with the country's commitment to permit 100% foreign-invested higher education entities upon accession to WTO in 2007, the Vietnamese government has gradually changed

its tone on foreign competition by starting to encourage further foreign investment in higher education, alongside with the stress on increasing public investment in higher education and promoting further privatization of higher education (Hogan-Lovells, 2018; Welch, 2010; WTO, 2006). According to the Decree 73 on foreign cooperation and investment in education, “foreign-invested education institutions include wholly foreign-owned education institutions and education joint ventures between domestic and foreign investors” (The Government, 2012). Regarding the curriculum, while all public universities and regular Vietnamese owned private universities’ curriculum are subject to the uniform frameworks set by the MOET, foreign higher education institutions have complete autonomy over their curriculum (The Government, 2012).

2.3.3 Cultural Influence on Education

It is important to be noted that due to 1000 years of Chinese rule (from 111 BC to AD 1858), Vietnamese culture has been profoundly affected by that giant northern neighbor. The Confucian philosophy has left its mark on Vietnamese society, in terms of both social structure and learning style, and it is still very much alive until now (Fry, 2009; Marginson, 2011; Welch, 2010). In Confucian view, a person must appropriately position himself among relationships with other people of the community by respect for age, social status and family background in order to develop and maintain a well-ordered and harmonious society as a whole (Berthrong & Berthrong, 2000). Since the culture of Confucian heritage countries is rooted in agriculture that requires people to live in a more settled lifestyle within a fixed community, Confucian doctrines place much stock on the concept of harmony (Them, 1997). When people live together as a whole, community interests should be prioritized over individual interests, which represents a great emphasis on collectivism and an avoidance of individualism in Confucianism (Phuong-Mai et al., 2005; Yang, 2012).

As harmony is one of the basic concepts of the Confucian doctrines, Confucian heritage culture is also considered as the ‘face saving’ culture and it is inappropriate to cause someone to ‘lose face’ (Bond, 1996, cited in Tran, 2013a; Truong et al., 2017). In education settings, students in Confucian heritage countries perceive the class as a unit where a person should not stand out from the crowd with individual interests or thinking (Omokhodion, 1989; Kanu,

2005). This explains why students from Confucian heritage culture countries rarely ask questions for clarification during lecture because it would be interpreted as interrupting and publicly challenging teachers in class. This is seen as not only to keep face to the teachers, but also to be respectful. Borton (2000) further highlights that “loss of face is painful in any society, but unbearable in Vietnam” (p. 24). In addition, Vietnamese students tend to be passive, shy and reluctant to raise their voice in class because they neither want to show off their knowledge nor to lose their face in case the answers are incorrect (Park, 2000; Song, 1995). These claims are in line with the findings by Sato (1982), where she found that Asian students spoke up less than their non-Asian classmates did in classroom interaction (36.5% and 63.5% respectively). Students favoring this learning style are likely to follow the teacher's guidelines to the letter, to be focused on the present, and demand full information rather than drawing their own conclusions.

Accordingly, the teacher is considered the main source knowledge and the students, who are taught to be obedient and respect senior people and sacrifice personal feelings and values for the sake of group harmony, normally attain knowledge without critically questioning it to avoid disagreement (Nguyen-Phuong-Mai et al., 2012; Ramburuth & McCormick, 2001; Schweisfurth, 2013b). The World Values Survey (2006) also reveals that out of many thousands of Vietnamese respondents, 88.9 per cent of them expected their children to be hard working, 75.3 per cent expected their children to be responsible, but only 16.4 per cent wanted their children to be creative.

In traditional Confucian classes, besides learning how to read and write and how to behave in a morally-accepted manner, students had to learn by heart the same classical texts, in order to pass the national examination which required them to rewrite the texts and make poems, to be eligible for civil administrator positions, who were greatly respected and had a high social position in ancient society (Nguyen, 1975). In the modern-day society, although the Confucian imprint has waned as Vietnam becomes more open to the world and starts to accept new cultural values, Confucianism exists and survives because its own disciplines are accepted as ways of life in hidden values (de Bary, 1988; Jamieson, 1993). For example, Confucian books and learning materials are no longer being used in national education system; however, Vietnamese educational philosophy is still affected by Confucian values as

most schools in Vietnam have a large banner with the motto “First thing to learn is rite, the second thing to learn is knowledge”, which means proper behaviors and attitudes in social custom are prioritized over knowledge (Dam, 1999; Truong et al., 2017).

For a majority of Vietnamese people, those who favor education, education is viewed as the most reliable way to get out of poverty and to raise their social status (Ashwill & Diep, 2011). Farmers send their children to schools in urban areas with a hope that they can be offered better teaching. Parents in large cities are willing to pay for their children’s supplementary classes with a hope that they can achieve better academic performance. All of them expect the same goal, which is a place in university.

2.3.4 Student-centered learning initiatives in Vietnam

One of the main concerns of governments all over the world nowadays is economic development, and this demands responsiveness, critical thinking, and research skills, those that are most likely to be nurtured by educational systems that put students at its heart (Schweisfurth, 2013b). Promoters of student-centered education hold high belief that when the students are enabled to control over their own learning, they are more likely to develop the skills such as flexibility, critical thinking, team-working, creativity and positive attitudes toward on-going learning, which help increase the capacity of students, especially university graduates, to apply knowledge and skills they acquire during higher education years to later work environment, and prepare them for citizenship in the knowledge economy (Brock et al., 2013; Jones & Thomas, 2005; Hallinger & Lu, 2011; Pedersen & Williams, 2004). As a result, student-centered learning reform agenda have been widespread across Asian countries such as China, Singapore, Malaysia and Vietnam as policy makers have recently drawn on research evidence suggesting that the approach can help support the country’s development of a skilled population needed for the future knowledge economy (Handelsman et al., 2004; Pham, 2016). The passive learning style inherited from Confucian culture values, which is popularly seen in Vietnamese students today, is a barrier preventing them from being employed in the new socio-economic context, where obedience and the ability to follow orders are not called for. For Riddell (1996), according to human capital argument, the new economy for flexible production seeks for those who possess a wider range of skills, such as problem-solving skill, multi-tasking skill, and communication skill, rather than those who are

only able to do planned work as told without critical thinking or questioning. The traditional learning method of memorizing information in order to reproduce information without understanding it often leads to low-quality outcomes (Tran, 2013b). This is deemed to become more problematic when now employers begin to seek for those who possess critical thinking skills, creativity, flexibility and ability to take initiative, and the competitiveness among university graduates is even tougher in the context of Vietnam being on its way to regional and global integration.

As higher education institutions are at the forefront of producing a skilled and productive workforce, they are now being urged to become more innovative and responsive to the changing demands of a globally competitive knowledge economy and labor market (Tran, 2013b). Since job allocation has been abolished, one of the desirable student outcomes of all higher education institutions is to meet the new demand of the economy in order to enhance graduate employability, by which the mismatch between high unemployment rate and the lack of high-quality human resources could be resolved (Harman & Bich, 2010).

Faced with greater numbers of unemployed graduates, Vietnamese policy makers has constantly been under pressure of bringing about radical reforms in teaching and learning methods in order to effectively provide students with life skills and competencies they need to enhance their employability and succeed in the workplace. In the era of globalization when cross-national policy borrowing is the norm, ‘international standards’ or lessons learned from other educational systems have become a common point of reference which policy makers tend to seek solutions from (Steiner-Khamsi, 2014). Under pressure from forces of globalization and the fears of falling behind, Vietnamese policy makers tend to prioritize practices from foreign countries and opt for a quick solution: “Changing methodologies is urgent. The urgency does not allow us to wait until all of the conditions are fulfilled. We have to do it right now” (Solutions for Changing of Teaching Methodologies in Vietnam, 2004, p. 50, cited in Nguyen-Phuong-Mai et al., 2012). Nonetheless, a cautionary advice was given by Smith & Nguyen (2010), stating that the ambitious goals for the reform of higher education remain a pipe dream if there is no strategic direction and certain policy.

2.4 The Implementation of Student-centered Learning

2.4.1 Student-centered Learning in Confucian Heritage Culture Contexts

According to many scholars (e.g., Phuong-Mai et al., 2005; Schweisfurth, 2013b), even though there exists the risk of over-generalizing, several commonalities among many learning styles adopted by students from Asian Confucian heritage cultures, e.g., China, Vietnam, Singapore, Korea and Japan, have been identified. Given that the literature available on the subject in Vietnam is scarce, this section will present a number of student-centered learning researches in Confucian heritage cultures having the assumption that they may provide a glimpse about the nature of teaching and learning style in the region in general and their student-centered education in particular.

Regarding teacher authority, Watkins & Biggs (2001, cited in Schweisfurth, 2013b) states that in comparison to most classrooms in the West, Chinese classrooms are generally more teacher-centered, with less praise and more scolding, and strict discipline is viewed as ‘no pain, no gain’. This practice may be influenced by the famous Confucius quote: “People who praise you are your enemies and people who criticize you are your teachers”. In addition, Liu & Feng (2015) discovers that many Chinese teachers are reluctant to hold a student-centered learning classroom because they try not to lose face when students ask questions that they may not be able to answer. The quote of a Chinese teacher in this study further illustrates the point: “I preferred the teaching method of chalk and talk which makes me feel more comfortable and safe” (p.9). Scollon & Wong-Scollon (1994) provide another cultural explanation which sheds light on the dominant teacher authority in China. They argue that in Asian contexts, the concept of teacher authority is a sign of nurture and teachers, when given that power, are responsible to heartfully carry out their duties, which is to transmit their profound knowledge to students (Scollon & Wong-Scollon, 1994). In the same vein, the studies of Harshbarger et al. (1986) and Woodrow & Sham (2001) indicate that Korean and Chinese students expect teachers to exert the authoritative role on knowledge transmission by lecturing practice.

In terms of cooperative learning, the study of Wong (2004) on Asian international students at an Australian University reveals that there is a preference to work individually rather than in group so that the final product is not affected by other, possibly uncooperative and unreliable, group members. Agelast (1998) and Park (2002) also indicates that the reason for this preference lies in the hidden competition found in Chinese and Korean classrooms, despite the wide assumption that this type of learning is more likely to spring in collectivist cultures.

2.4.2 Student-centered Learning in Higher Education in Vietnam

Although the idea of student-centered learning was brought to the country more than one decade ago, the literature found on the implementation of student-centered learning in education in general and in higher education in particular is very limited. The dearth of researches on student-centered learning in the Vietnamese context can be due to the low research capacity of higher education institutions in general, where higher education functions are heavily focused on teaching rather than researching (Hien, 2010). This weakness is owing to “the inadequacy of government policy and a lack of investment in research and training capacity” (Hien, 2010, p. 622).

Studies related to student-centered education in Vietnam tend to focus on these following two approaches. The first approach indicates a number of barriers that hinder the implementation of student-centered practice in higher education institutions, including teachers' perceptions about teaching and learning which emphasize that teachers are authority figures and they should be respected and obeyed unquestionably, culture as 'face' saving, big class size, limited material resources, and grossly overloaded curricula (Pham, 2016; Thanh, 2010; Thompson, 2009). There were also calls for developing a hybrid form of student-centered pedagogical approach to make this method not only culturally but also institutionally appropriate (Nguyen-Phuong-Mai et al, 2012; Thompson, 2009). The second approach advocates the adoption of student-centered learning in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching and learning in Vietnam and suggests how it should be applied in order to increase the potential for students to be active participants in learning English with the purpose that the English proficiency of Vietnamese young generation is improved (Le, 2001; Le, 2005; Van-Dang, 2006).

Although these studies provide basic insights into the issue of student-centered learning in the Vietnamese context, several shortcomings can be identified. First, while there is an emphasis that factors that hinder student-centered learning should be avoided and reforms should be tweaked to best suit the Vietnamese situation, the question over why Vietnam chose to adopt student-centered learning method instead of developing its own policy to best suit the Vietnamese context as well as whether the so-called student-centered learning in Vietnam is actual student-centered learning or not is left unanswered, considering that previous scholars in this area suggest that many institutions or educators claim to be practicing student-centered learning, but in reality they are actually not (Farrington, 1991; Lea, Stephenson, & Troy, 2003). The second shortcoming is closely linked to the first one, with the fact that all of these studies fail to provide any specific operational definition and therefore generally make claims with regard to a broad and uncertain idea of student-centered learning. Third, these studies are conducted at macro level only, while there exists very little comparative research specifically examining the issue of how different types of higher education institutions in Vietnam attempt to develop a student-centered environment and try to overcome the hindering factors within their own contexts. According to Bray & Thomas (1995), macro studies tend to suffer from over generalization, and therefore local differences are often neglected. These are the research gaps the current study aims to fill.

3 Theoretical Frameworks

This chapter focuses upon a set of theories in order to develop a conceptual understanding of the key issues in which the data gathered during the fieldwork are going to be analyzed and discussed in this study. The concepts of cross-national policy borrowing (Steiner-Khamsi, 2014) are chosen as the theoretical framework to shed light on the issue of why the educational reform from elsewhere is brought on with an aim to reforming the domestic system. In addition, cultural-history activity theory is considered a useful tool to investigate the interrelationships between different levels of activity systems (i.e. classroom, institutions, social context, and national policies). Although cultural-history activity theory is useful for fracturing the activity systems into their structures, which allows for the investigation of interrelationships between different levels of systems, their evaluative potential is limited. Therefore, other frameworks that relate to student-centered learning and enable the assessment of how student-centered learning is enacted (Brandes and Ginnis, 1986; Cullen & Harris, 2009; Neumann, 2013) are also employed. These theories will be used to address specifically the issue of why and how student-centered learning is understood and practiced in Vietnam in public and private universities.

3.1 Steiner-Khamsi's (2014) Cross-national Policy Borrowing

Steiner-Khamsi (2014) has developed a framework including two key concepts in cross-national policy borrowing research that are often used to explain why and how educational reforms travel across national boundaries: reception and translation. The studies on reception analyze the political, economic, and cultural reasons that account for the attractiveness of a reform from elsewhere. On the other hand, translation captures the act of local adaptation or modification of an imported reform.

Steiner-Khamsi's (2014) analytical approach to the study of educational transfer includes typically a political and an economic dimension. In her policy borrowing study, Kingdon's Three-Streams Theory is acknowledged as a valuable framework to identify the favorable timing of policy change. According to this theory, when the three following streams meet,

policy change is likely to happen: (1) the problem stream (recognition of a problem), (2) the policy stream (availability of solutions), and (3) the political stream (new developments in the political realm). Steiner-Khamsi (2014) stated that in the globalization era when cross-national policy borrowing is the norm, solutions found by policy makers to the recognized problem tend to be drawn on “international standards” or lessons learned from other educational systems. Giving explanation to this phenomenon, she argued that the supposed greater impartiality of the policy borrowed from elsewhere makes it more likely to be agreed upon by different political parties and interest groups. Thus, “international standards have become an increasingly common point of reference in such decisions” (Steiner-Khamsi, 2014, p.156). When it comes to the economic dimension, particularly in developing countries context, policy borrowing or particular reforms often happen in the form of conditions for receiving aid. All of these have shed lights on the question when education systems tend to be open to new ideas from elsewhere.

According to Steiner-Khamsi (2014), in comparative education, loose coupling is often resorted as an explanation for profound differences between a borrowed educational policy, practice or idea and its local translation; notwithstanding, she argues that this method is not the ideal for comprehending cross-national policy attraction. Instead, she calls for a more thorough examination and interpretation of the local context to “understanding why policies are borrowed (externalization), how they are locally modified and implemented (recontextualization), and what impact they have on existing structures, policies, and practices (internalization)” (Steiner-Khamsi, 2014, p. 162).

As this study first attempts to examine the justifications for the adoption of student-centered learning in Vietnamese higher education institutions, the concept of ‘reception’, which addresses “the initial contact with the global education policy at the local level and focuses on the selection process”, seems to be a promising lens (Steiner-Khamsi, 2014, p.155).

3.2 Cultural-historical Activity Theory

Cultural-historical activity theory was initiated by Lev Vygotsky in 1934, proposing the triangular model in which the crucial role of mediation between the subject and the object was

identified (Vygotsky, 1978; Engeström, 2001). However, the unit of analysis in Vygotsky’s study limited on individual (Engeström, 2001). Then, Leont’ev went a step further by analyzing the difference between an individual action and a collective activity, but the original framework was not expanded into a model of a collective activity system (Engeström, 2001). Engeström (2001) then took up the foundation work and developed the third generation by adding the elements of community, rules, and division of labor to represent the social/collective elements.

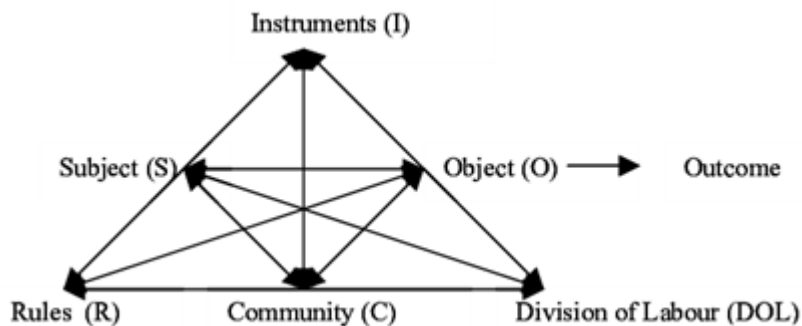


Figure 3.2 Structure of an activity system (Engeström, 1987, p.78)

The concept of the third space/boundary crossing is also suggested within the third generation to account for the potential contradictions within or between the activity systems (Gutierrez et al., 1999). The development and change of every human activity is an outcome of contradictions generated in the activity system itself as it is “always a community of multiple points of view, traditions and interests”, and at the same time is a result of transformations imposed by new needs which are produced by networks of interacting activity systems (Engeström, 2001, p.136). In other words, an activity system is not an isolated unit but nested in other superposed activity systems and is also interacting with many other activity systems (Kuutti, 1996; Nunez, 2009; Engeström, 1987). This development takes place concurrently across two dimensions. On the vertical level, the micro system could be included in the broader macro educational context levels. In educational context of higher education, the activity system of a classroom is nested in the university activity system at the institutional level and this is structured by the educational system of a country and in the society considered as a broader culturally and historically framed activity system. On the horizontal

level, Engeström (1987) points out that instead of just vertical movement across different levels of analysis, development of activity systems should also be viewed as horizontal movement across borders. This means tensions and contradictions created between two interacting activity systems can also be another source of change and development.

Cultural-historical activity theory is employed as a theoretical framework to guide the data collection process in this study for the following reasons. First, it enables the researcher to interrogate the interactions between teachers and students as well as the range of psychological or physical tools they use in order to achieve their objectives. In other words, it allows for the investigation of the way the process of implementing and adapting to the student-centered learning approach is influenced by the collaboration between teachers and students and mediated by not only of cultural but also of possibly other factors. Second, cultural-historical activity also allows the researcher to investigate not only a single activity system in which teachers and students interact but also how it works with other superposed systems, where the social interactions within the community, the rules, and the division of labor are identified. Third, cultural-historical activity provides a promising lens to conceive the contradictions between various elements in the activity system as a source of change and development, through which an adjusted form of student-centered learning can be built.

Within this study, the subjects of the activity system refer to the lecturers and students. The object of activity of lecturers can be described as a productive teaching attaining the goals set by curricula or developing skills or motivating their students to learn, while for students the objects of classroom activity can be defined as responding to the teacher instructions or constructing their understanding and knowledge through interaction and collaboration. The instruments in classroom are both material tools (e.g. books, computers, etc.) and symbolic tools (e.g. group work, one-to-one instruction, and discussion, etc.). The community is comprised of not only teachers and students, but also other stakeholders such as parents, policy makers, and universities who provide curriculum resources, technical supports, and fund guarantee. The rules of the system can be set by the institution regulations, as well as by the social traditions and the agreement of teachers and students aiming to regulate the learning activities in the classroom. The division of labor refers to the sharing of tasks and responsibilities between the teacher and the students in classroom. Teacher plays the role of

guider to provide instructions and facilitate students' learning. Students as the active learners are responsible for their learning and work with their teacher and peers to explore the knowledge. The division of labor can also be interpreted as the way work is assigned and the way teaching and learning is managed at the institutional level.

3.3 Cullen & Harris's (2009) Instrument to Assess Learner-centeredness Using Syllabus as an Indicator

Cullen & Harris (2009) have developed a mechanism to assess learner-centeredness in academic environment, focusing particularly on teachers' intentions to create a learner-centered environment in the classroom, not necessarily the outcome of those intentions. More than an outline of a course, the syllabus serves as an initial communication tool between instructors and students, clarifying mutual responsibilities, describing the instructors' beliefs about the educational purpose of the course learning as well as their attitude towards students (Grunert, 1997, cited in Eberly et al., 2001). They also argued that the presence of learning outcomes and clear methods for assessing those outcomes is deemed a basic requirement of student-centered pedagogy. Obviously the information given on a syllabus cannot necessarily prove that in reality a learner-centered approach is applied, but "the absence of learning outcomes is an indication of a lack of intention and/or understanding on the part of the professor to address a key feature of a learner-centered environment" (Cullen & Harris, 2009, p. 117). This mechanism promisingly enables the researcher to examine and compare the nature and content of the course syllabi from one public university and one private university in Vietnam to better understand their attributes and characteristics and to identify the difference in the ways they reflect professor's intention to develop a student-centered environment. This is the very rationale that justifies the employment of this instrument as one of the analytical framework in this study.

The indicator framework to assess learner-centered qualities in course syllabi was developed in the form of a rubric (see Appendix 1). In order to examine to what extent professors try to develop a student-centered environment, the course syllabi collected for this study would be reviewed based on three criteria in the rubric: (1) community, (2) power and control, and (3)

evaluation/assessment. First, the sense of community is assessed via the level of collaboration, the presentation of learning rationale for assignments and activities, and the accessibility of the professor. Second, the degree to which the professor attempts to create a student-centered environment where power and control between them and their students are shared is assessed via teacher's role, student's role, outside resources and syllabus focus. Third, the indicators for evaluation/assessment include how the course is graded, mechanisms for feedback from professor to student and vice versa, the presentation of learning outcomes, and the opportunity for students to revise their works.

3.4 Student-centered Learning Frameworks

Along with cultural-historical activity theory, these following frameworks are also employed as promising lenses through which the findings are examined. They together serve as a precise language about student-centeredness that enables the researcher to investigate the issue of how student-centered learning is understood and practiced in Vietnam holistically with the involvement of teachers and peers, while the others tend to provide broad and uncertain generalizations of student-centered and merely focus on the learners themselves. Therefore, the findings are going to be analyzed in line with the principles and considerations of these following frameworks.

3.4.1 Brandes and Ginnis's (1986) Principles of Student-centered Learning

Brandes & Ginnis (1986) have developed a set of core tenets of student-centered education to help operationalize it in practice as followings: (a) the learner has full responsibility for their own learning; (b) subject matter must have relevance and meaning for the learner; (c) involvement and participation are necessary for learning; (d) relationship between learners is important; (e) the teacher should be a facilitator and resource person.

Principle 1: The learner has full responsibility for their own learning

Apparently, 'student-centred learning' describes itself exactly as a system of providing learning which has the student at its heart. External intervention can help, but the focus should still be on the students' personal effort to make sense of the social world and build their new

knowledge upon their existing conceptions and understandings (Hannafin & Land, 1997). In other words, when students are given more autonomy, namely making choices and being able to pick their topics of interest, they will gradually develop greater responsibility for their learning, as well as their own knowledge can be constructed as their initial ideas of interests are generated, expanded and refined progressively (Land et al., 2012).

Principle 2: Subject matter must have relevance and meaning for the learner

Activities and contexts that allow connections between learners' life experiences and subject matter are recognized as fundamental to learning by cognitive and sociocultural theories of learning (Bell et al, 2009). More importantly, when learning is tied in contexts in which students are aware of the learning rationale and values of the subject, they are more willing to increase engagement, invest effort and thus more likely to understand how concepts are applied and why they are useful, which facilitates a deeper level of understanding (Bransford et al., 2000, cited in Land et al., 2012).

Principle 3: Involvement and participation are necessary for learning

Student-centered learning has its root in situated learning theory, in which learning are contextually based and knowledge is believed to be constructed through participation in authentic process (Brown et al., 1989). According to Brandes & Ginnis (1986), this principle stems from the idea of 'intrinsic rewards' - the fun of discovering new knowledge, of becoming competent in new areas that comes from within. External influences can only make a person to compel to attention, but they cannot compel to interest and a person optimizes their learning experiences only if they are truly interested (Illich, 1971; Neill 1962, cited in Brandes & Ginnis, 1986). This is what is meant by participation; and "when everyone in learning group is awake, alert, interacting and yet acting individually, there is involvement (Brandes and Ginnis, 1986, 14)."

Principle 4: Relationship between learners is important;

Creating space for students to learn from their peers through class discussions and group works is considered a key feature of the student-centered class (Cullen & Harris, 2009). This

enables both individuals and the group as a whole to learn by sharing their individual opinions and amalgamate multiple perspectives from others and to solve problems in a variety of ways (Bielaczyc & Collins, 1999).

Principle 5: The teacher should be a facilitator and resource person

As Duffy & Cunningham (1996) suggest, besides the emphasis on an active process of learning, another key concern of constructivism is that instruction should support constructions of knowledge, but not communication of knowledge. This principle clearly provides the stark contrast between the role of teachers in student-centered education and in conventional, didactic education, where “teachers are qualified in their subjects; they know; and they are not satisfied until they have told their pupils what they know” (Hargreaves, 1982, p. 200). In order to avoid ‘teaching by telling’, student-centered education requires teachers a willingness to spend extra time in preparatory work, to be pedagogically competent to share his expertise without imposing, to master the content knowledge to be capable of finding the materials requested by students, and last but not least, to have a degree of sensitivity to identify student needs (Brandes & Ginnis, 1986). In the same vein, according to Bull and Gilbert (2012), while twenty-first century teachers are not required to be proficient in all topics of the curriculum, “they are experts in working out, along with their students, how to do something, how to find out something or how to use something to do something new” (p. 6).

3.4.2 Neumann’s (2013) Framework of Student-centered Learning

Arguing that since student-centered learning encompasses a wide range of different meanings, the educators are more likely to face the risk of not discussing about the same thing when the topic is of “student-centered learning”, Neumann (2013) proposes a framework that specifically divides student-centered learning into three contours: learning relationships that center *in* students, that center *on* students, and that center *with* students. Therefore, Neumann’s (2013) framework of student-centered learning is selected in this study as a useful tool to enable the researcher to make claims of the findings in a precise language by pointing to the specific contour of the relationship.

First, learning contexts that center *in* students have the individualistic focus at its heart, where teacher intervention is minimized to the point of being entirely eliminated or in the only form of reaction given after observing the student learning process, and the student is the one who stimulates, directs and organizes the main part of his learning. There are no specific predetermined learning outcomes for students. The lack of collaboration with others, say, teachers and peers, in this contour is criticized to lessen the opportunity of student to learn beyond their individual capacity.

Second, learning contexts that center *on* students is the most prominent context found in educational settings today. They allow students more choice to proceed through learning activities at their own pace, but they have much less freedom in making fundamental choices (e.g., topics of inquiry, readings, objectives and course products), which are determined by the teacher. The teaching and learning process is about the teacher pre-establishing plan for what their students study, the teacher guiding their students to actively participate in learning activities, which are chosen by students, to reach conclusions determined by the teacher. In other words, the only thing that distincts the centered *on* contour and teacher-centered learning is that in this student-centered learning, students actively take greater part in acquiring the knowledge, instead of passively absorbing the knowledge that the teacher imposes on them. However, Neumann (2013) also points out the risk of encouraging passivity in students, which lead to student to comply with teachers requirements rather than initiate the concepts or topics they believe to be important.

Third, in the student-centered contexts that center *with* students, there is a stress on collaboration between teachers and students. Here the degree of teacher control over the educational process is less than the second contour, but more than the first contour. What the students learn and how they learn it are determined by both teachers and students. The decrease in relational distance between teachers and students creates the ideal balance of power, which seems to be very promising to flourish in the contemporary education settings. The risk of this context is that it might be a difficult process for teacher to give up on part of their authority and find a way to balance the authority in case the students came up with irrelevant learning outcomes (Hodge, 2010); and they also might “become suspect or even

ridiculous from the students' point of view in terms of those things that concern him most" (Bollnow, 1971, p. 532).

3.5 Concluding Remarks

In this chapter, a set of theories utilized as theoretical frameworks to guide this study are presented. In order to address the first research question, the concepts of cross-national policy borrowing (Steiner-Khamsi, 2014) are chosen as the theoretical framework to shed light on the issue of why the educational reform from elsewhere is brought on with an aim to reforming the domestic system. In addition, cultural-history activity theory is considered a useful tool to investigate the interrelationships between different levels of activity systems (i.e. classroom, institutions, social context, and national policies). In term of assessing the degree of how student-centered learning is enacted in different contexts of the two institutions, student-centered learning evaluation frameworks (Brandes and Ginnis, 1986; Cullen & Harris, 2009; Neumann, 2013) are chosen to address the second research question.

4 Methodology

In this chapter, the methodology for this particular study is introduced. In particular, it presents the choice of the research approach, research design, the choice of research site, the selection of data collection methods and analysis, the selection of research participants, ethical considerations, and the reliability and validity of the study.

4.1 Research Approach

The world of nature as explored by the natural scientist does not ‘mean’ anything to molecules, atoms and electrons. But the observational field of the social scientist—social reality—has a specific meaning and relevance structure for the beings living, acting, and thinking within it. By a series of common-sense constructs they have pre-selected and pre-interpreted this world which they experience as the reality of their daily lives. It is these thought objects of theirs which determine their behaviour by motivating it. The thought objects constructed by the social scientist, in order to grasp this social reality, have to be founded upon the thought objects constructed by the common-sense thinking of men [and women!], living their daily life within the social world (Schutz, 1962, p. 59).

As being presented in the previous chapter, the overall goal of the study is to explore why student-centered learning was introduced, and how it was perceived and put into practice in higher education in Vietnam. Several research sub-questions are formulated to seek answers for the stated aim: (i) How do the lecturers in the respective institutions perceive student-centered learning and how do they try to implement it?, (ii) How do the students in the respective institutions understand and adapt to student-centered learning approach?, and (iii) What are the factors that support and/or put pressure on the practice of student-centered learning in Vietnam higher education? It is clear that the study is intended to generate an in-depth understanding of perceptions of teachers and students in relation to student-centered learning in higher education, not to test a predetermined hypothesis. According to Bryman (2012, p. 399), “the social world must be interpreted from the perspective of the people being studied, rather than as though those subjects were incapable of their own reflections on the

social world”. Thus, this study is conducted in the context of qualitative research strategy with an aim to constructing and understanding the perspectives of teachers and students on student-centered learning, how their beliefs influence their actions, and how those beliefs and actions are affected by the social and organizational contexts they are in.

4.2 Research Design

Bryman (2012, p. 72) defines a comparative research design as the one that “entails studying two contrasting cases using more or less identical methods. It embodies the logic of comparison, in that it implies that we can understand social phenomena better when they are compared in relation to two or more meaningfully contrasting cases or situations”. Given the comparative nature of this study in which two sampled higher education institutions are investigated, I am convinced that the most promising type of research design to this study should be a comparative design adopting a multiple-case study approach.

4.3 Research Site

The research site in this study was selected based on a purposeful selection. As Maxwell (2005, p. 88) puts it, purposive sampling is “a strategy in which particular settings, persons, or activities are selected deliberately in order to provide information that cannot be gotten as well from other choices”. In my case, the predetermined criteria for the selection of the first sampled university are: being a public higher education institution located in Vietnam and identified with student-centered learning approach; and the predetermined criteria for the selection of the second sampled university are: being a private higher education institution located in Vietnam and identified with student-centered learning approach. Therefore, two universities were chosen in this study firstly on the bases of their type of institution, secondly because of their clear interest in adopting student-centered pedagogy as indicated by their visions and missions which are officially published on their websites. Both universities are located in Ho Chi Minh City (South East Vietnam), in which there is a high concentration of national and foreign education providers (World Bank, 2008; Ziguras & Pham, 2014).

University A is a long-established public university in Vietnam; therefore, its operation is put under the management of the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training in terms of training programs, curriculum frameworks, enrolment quotas, tuition fees, expenditure norms (Van-Khanh & Hayden, 2010). The medium of instruction in University A is Vietnamese. Tuition fee is around 300 USD per academic year.

In contrast, University B is one of the foreign-owned universities in Vietnam. Accordingly, it has been given three full rights by the Vietnamese government: (1) University B designs all curricula, (2) University B is free to set tuition fees, and (3) its home university is responsible for quality assurance with the same standards at home. All degree programs are recognized by the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training (MOET). University B is an English speaking university and all teaching is conducted in English. Tuition fee is approximately 10.000 USD per academic year. Due to the “foreign-owned” label, one might be tempted to suggest that university B might already be experienced in student-centered learning. Nevertheless, given the fact that this branch is operated in the socio-cultural context of Vietnam as well as its higher degree of academic autonomy compared to public higher education institution and regular Vietnamese owned private institutions, the researcher believes that this sample is promising to help shed light on the issue of how student-centered learning is put into practice through different educational and economic conditions between two individual universities.

4.4 Data Collection Methods and Data Analysis

Given the purpose of the study was to explore the issue of why student-centered learning was introduced, and how different types of higher education institutions in Vietnam attempt to develop a student-centered environment through the voices of teachers and students, the sources of data collection in this study comprise: (i) semi-structured interviews for university teachers and students and (ii) document review. The methods of data analysis are also described in this section.

4.4.1 Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were adopted as a primary source of data collection since the researcher wanted to achieve a deeper understanding of the experiences, feelings and perceptions of the interviewees reported in their own words by giving them a great deal of leeway in how to reply (Bryman, 2012). In order to avoid “descriptive excess” in qualitative research whereby the amount of irrelevant detail may inhibit the analysis of data (Bryman, 2012), interview guides were prepared with lists of questions which focused on the information relevant to the study (see final versions of the interview guides in Appendix 2 and Appendix 3). Nonetheless, the researcher was free to ask spontaneous questions wherever appropriate to gain a better understanding of the views expressed. In other words, the prepared semi-structured interview guide allowed the researcher to take control of the interviews while being responsive to emerging circumstances.

Different interview guides for different interviewees were developed. Four teachers and five students from University A, as well as four teachers and five students from University B were interviewed individually. The interviewees were chosen because of their accessibility, as well as their availability. Invitation letters to participate in the study were first sent to a list of teachers and students. In particular, in order to recruit the student interviewees, the researcher visited University A and University B and made contact with four class representatives and kindly asked them to send the invitation letter to their classmates. Five students from each university showed their interest to participate in the study by sending personal messages to the researcher on social media. After that, they were all provided with more information about the research and meeting schedules. Regarding the teacher interviewees, although not all of the email addresses of lecturers at University A were published on the websites, they were helpful enough to enable the researcher to get initial contacts with two lecturers. One lecturer agreed to participate in the research interview. The other one refused to join but he helped forward the invitation letter to other six lecturers working at the university. Three out of six lecturers agreed to join the interview. By the help of a friend of the researcher who is working at University B, a list of nine supervisors for PhD programs in the university was obtained. Out of nine lecturers whom the letters were sent to lecturers, two lecturers agreed to participate the

interview, three lecturers refused to join. One lecturer later helped forward the invitation letter to two of his colleagues and two of them agreed to join the interview.

The place and the time of interviews were chosen by interviewees at their convenient. Each interview lasted between 1 and 1.5 hours. In this study, 15 out of 18 interviews were conducted in Vietnamese and the rest was conducted in English. This was all determined by interviewees' preference. Despite every teacher and professor interviewed having good knowledge of the English language, most interviews were carried in Vietnamese with the intent of making communication easier and more fluid. This is important so interviewed subjects can better express their views, and to avoid misunderstandings created by the use of a non-native language.

The characteristics interviewees are as follow:

Table 4.4.1a Lists of research participants

TEACHERS	University A	University B
Gender	1 female and 3 males	2 females and 2 males
Age	From late twenties to early fifties	From late twenties to early forties
Teaching Experience	Ranging from 5 years to 30 years	Ranging from 5 years to 20 years
Education Level	Completed bachelor degree in Vietnam (1), completed bachelor and master degree in Vietnam, ongoing doctoral degree in Vietnam (1), completed bachelor degree in Vietnam, completed master degree overseas (1), completed bachelor degree in Vietnam, completed master degree and doctoral degree overseas (1)	Completed bachelor degree in Vietnam and master degree overseas (1), completed bachelor degree in Vietnam, master degree overseas and ongoing doctoral degree run by an overseas university (1), completed bachelor and master degree overseas (1), completed bachelor, master and doctoral degree overseas (1)

STUDENTS	University A	University B
Gender	4 females and 1 male	4 females and 1 male
Age	Early twenties	Early twenties
Education Level	Sophomore (2), junior (1), senior (1)	Sophomore (1), senior (4)

In this current research, the data analysis process started with transcribing the audio-recorded interviews into transcripts. Then, data relevant to the research was translated to English by the researcher. Key concepts and specific terminologies with more complex interpretations were translated by the interviewees themselves, upon request of the researcher, in order to prevent misrepresentation of their ideas. Additionally, translations were reviewed by a professional Vietnamese-English translator, after request of the researcher. Subsequently, all data from individual interviews were coded based on the similarities of ideas, both deductively using the provisional categories developed based on the activity theory framework and inductively with additional categories developed to be responsive to emerging issues. Table 4.4.1b shows how the codes were formed by breaking down the responses of participants to pick out the key phrases.

Table 4.4.1b Example of coding interviews

Interview question	Participants' responses	Key phrases	Code
What is your favorite learning activity in class?	<i>My most favorite learning activity is <u>group work</u>. Firstly, in order to discuss something, you have to have knowledge and opinions about that topic. Secondly, you will <u>get to hear other students' opinions</u> which help you to see one issue from different perspectives. After the discussion, someone in the group will present the group's ideas and teacher will give us feedback (PUB-S4).</i>	Group work, get to hear other students' opinions	Cooperative learning among peers
What do you think of student-centered learning?	<i>Although I am quite up for the new approach, which means I try to stay open-minded, and I often feel happy when students are able to stake out their opinions, I still prefer the traditional values. The hierarchical relationships between teachers and students should be respected. In addition, I think in order to gain respect from students, a teacher must show their students that they are a master of their subject. I am very dedicated to my teaching career, therefore, I have the <u>responsibility to transmit the knowledge</u> I know to my students (PUB-L3).</i>	Responsibility to transmit the knowledge	Teacher views on their role

All responses of different interviewees were given code names in the form of abbreviation for the recorded files and in the presentation of data. Quotes from University A's lecturers and

students were coded as PUB-L and PUB-S respectively. Similarly, quotes from University B's lecturers and students are coded as PRI-L and PRI-S respectively.

4.4.2 Document Review

Legislative documents

In order to examine the justification for Vietnam's adoption of student-centered learning approach, several important documents at the national level relating to higher education in general and student-centered learning in particular were collected and utilized as research instruments. All official documents from the government reviewed in this paper were publicly available on the website of Vietnam's Legal Normative Documents. The documents were all read through with an aim to (1) seeking for forces that resulted in the adoption of student-centered learning (if stated in written form), and (2) identifying how student-centered learning was manifested in them, how much emphasis was put on student-centered learning as well as on students themselves.

Official syllabi at the institutional level

Official course syllabi from two sampled institutions were also used as research instruments to enable this study to go beyond only capturing views held by interviewees, but also to enhance the validity of the data gathered from the participants in this study. Due to limited access and limited availability of course syllabi from the two universities, fourteen syllabi from University A and eight syllabi from University B were collected and reviewed adopting Cullen & Harris's (2009) instrument to assess learner-centeredness using syllabus as an indicator. No syllabus from University B was available for public access and they had to be requested. The course syllabi from University A collected for this thesis were publicly available on the university's website but it should be noted that not all the courses either offered a syllabus or were publicly available.

4.5 Ethical Considerations

The data collecting process in this study respects the ethical guidelines for this kind of investigation. An informed consent form was developed, abiding the Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD) before the researcher's travel to the research site, entailing the followings: the topic, purpose and methods of the study; its voluntary nature; the possibility of withdrawing data at any time without giving any reason; confidentiality of responses; anonymity of the respondent' information, which was assured by using code names for the recorded files (with the consent of the interviewees) and in the presentation of data. In addition, anonymity of the institutions are protected by not using their real names in the writing of this thesis.

4.6 Validity and Reliability

Although reliability and validity are originally criteria in developing and assessing the quality of quantitative research, qualitative researchers also assimilate the terms to quantitative researchers when they establish criteria for assessing research (Bryman, 2012).

4.6.1 Validity

LeCompte & Goetz (1982) refers to internal validity as “the extent to which scientific observations and measurements are authentic representations of some reality” (p. 32). In order to ensure the findings are accurate, the transcripts of individual interviews were sent to the interviewee teacher and students to approve the contents of the interviews. However, it should be noted that since the transcribing process was very time consuming, the researcher could not send the transcripts right after interviews were conducted. There were one teacher and two students further commenting on the transcripts to clarify their responses, while the rest of the participants agreed with the transcripts.

Furthermore, this study facilitates validation of data through the use of triangulation method. Triangulation is a technique that “entails using more than one method or source of data in the study of social phenomena”, which is used to confirm that the research findings are credible

(Bryman, 2012, p. 392). Accordingly, different data collection methods including semi-structured interviews and document review were used.

While internal validity is concerned with the credibility of a study, external validity is concerned with its generalizability, which means the extent to which the findings can be generalized or extended legitimately across social settings and this can pose a problem for qualitative studies (LeCompte and Goetz, 1982). One of the key issues concerned with the nature of case study, which is usually employed as the research design by qualitative researchers, is that the findings deriving from it cannot be generalized (Bryman, 2012; Merriam, 1998). In this study, only two higher education institutions were studied and they may not be truly representative of the whole population. For this reason, I am convinced that this may limit the generalizability of the findings in this study. However, the purpose of this qualitative study was not to generalize but to attempt to give in-depth findings of the current status of student-centered learning in the context of these institutions.

4.6.2 Reliability

LeCompte and Goetz (1982) refer to reliability as the degree of replicability of scientific findings. They argue that establishing reliability in qualitative research is complicated and even impossible due to the issues of uniqueness and idiosyncrasy. However, as suggested by Silverman (2001), the consistency in qualitative research can be achieved by recording face-to-face interviews, transcribing them verbatim and presenting direct extracts of the participants' opinions. In this study, every interview was audio-recorded with the consent of participants and transcribed in detail.

5 Findings Presentation

Within this chapter, the findings of the study are presented based on the data collected through legislative documents, course syllabi and individual interviews of teachers and students. This chapter first presents the impact that globalization and international agencies had on Vietnamese education system, particularly its higher education system, as well as how the state responded to those socio-economic changes through selected official policies. The data gathered from the review of course syllabi of two sampled universities are also presented in this finding chapter. Last but not least, how teachers and students in each university perceived the nature and the implementation of student-centered learning in their own institutional context is also the main issue addressed in this chapter.

5.1 Findings from document review

5.1.1 The impact of global integration

One the eve of Doi Moi Policy, Vietnam experienced a thorough economic crisis, which was followed by hyperinflation peaking at 775 per cent in 1986 (Vuong et al., 2011). According to Communist Party of Vietnam (1987), Vietnam was facing several socio-economic challenges; the State and the Communist Party also admitted that the bureaucratic and centralized management mechanism had failed to generate development momentum for many years, had weakened the socialist economy and limited the improvement of other economic sectors. Therefore, two of the new objectives directed at the Sixth National Congress were: (i) to abolish the bureaucratic centrally planned model based on state subsidies, and to move to a multi-sector, market-oriented economy, which formalized the role of the private sector; and (ii) to adopt an open-door policy to expand foreign investments and international economic cooperation (Communist Party of Vietnam, 1987). The Sixth Congress was followed by a policy to position higher education in a multi-sector economy, in which “higher education institutions were now instructed to: 1) train manpower for non-state sector jobs, 2) obtain income from outside the state sector, 3) develop their own institutional plans and learning programs to meet the needs of society as well as the state. While graduates would: 4) be

responsible for finding their own work” (MOET, 1995a, 236, cited in George, 2003, 138). At first glance, it is true that the case of Doi Moi itself is actually not “global” at all because the reform itself was initiated by Vietnamese leaders in order to help the country come out of its economic crisis. It was, however, the first time that the terms “foreign investment”, “foreign-owned enterprises” appear in official documents after the formal reunification of Vietnam in 1975, with the Law on Foreign Investment being issued by the National Assembly in 1987 (Van-Arkadie & Mallon, 2003). Vietnam at that time was in the early period of being integrated into the global economy. The double transition, from a centrally planned economy to a socialist-oriented market and from an inward-orientation towards greater regional and international economic integration, has paved the way for the first flow of foreign direct investment (FDI) into Vietnam, which also led to an increasing number of foreign firms (Van-Arkadie & Mallon, 2003). Together with this, Vietnam’s integration into the region and the global system, symbolized by its joining of AFTA in 1995 and WTO in 2007, call for higher level learning and a more skilled labor force to meet the pressing demands of the country’s moves (Harman & Bich, 2010; Elliott, 2012).

In the globalization era, the obedient, the traditional pedagogical approach in higher education system inherited from both Confucian culture and the old Soviet top-down approach turned out to be problematic (Thanh, 2010; Tran, 2013a). The obedient, quiet and based on rote memorization learning style which considers students the passive recipients of knowledge is often claimed to be no more appropriate when the 21st century skills including critical thinking, creative thinking, communicating, flexibility; ability to take initiative and being proactive; positive attitude towards learning are what employers in the new economy look for in their new hires (Trung & Swierczek, 2009). If the closed economy had not been replaced by open-door economy with the increasing presence of international companies, higher education may have remained obsolete and not have had to change to adapt itself to meet the new requirements.

5.1.2 International agency influence

The findings from international agencies also support the above arguments. It has become widely accepted that the globalized workforce demand of employees to think critically and

know how to respond independently and effectively to spontaneous changes in the work-related contexts. The World Bank (2002, p.29) has emphasized:

The learning process now needs to be increasingly based on the capacity to find and access knowledge and to apply it in problem solving. Learning to learn, learning to transform information into new knowledge, and learning to translate new knowledge into applications become more important than memorizing specific information. In this new paradigm, primacy is given to analytical skills; that is, to the ability to seek and find information, crystallize issues, formulate testable hypotheses, marshal and evaluate evidence, and solve problems. The new competencies that employers value in the knowledge economy have to do with oral and written communications, teamwork, peer teaching, creativity, envisioning skills, resourcefulness, and the ability to adjust to change.

After the adoption of a market-based economy in 1986, one of the main constraints affecting Vietnamese education and training systems and the labor market reported by the World Bank was that the obsolete and inefficient teaching method, which created a generation of passive learners and workers, did not appear to be suitable in the transitional times (World Bank, 2008). Likewise, OECD (2014) pointed out the insufficient capacity of Vietnamese higher education institutions to produce high-quality human resources for the economy, which led to a lack of relation between what is offered in tertiary education and what the labor market and the economy need, is partly due to the old teacher-centered pedagogical practices. They also suggested that the pedagogical approach needs reforming to produce more soft skills and emphasized that a student-centered approach is generally pedagogically more effective in tertiary education than a teacher-centered approach (OECD, 2014). In addition, after conducting a yearly examination and evaluation of Vietnamese education, UNESCO also suggested that “Vietnamese students need to be trained with new methods so that they can be provided with the new working skills such as activeness, cooperativeness, creativeness and argumentativeness” (UNESCO, 2000, cited in Thanh, 2010, p.25). Among the conditions to be met by a multi-million dollar loan for Vietnam’s Higher Education Project from the World Bank is to “increase coherence, flexibility, and responsiveness of higher education to the changing demands of society and the market economy” (World Bank, 1997, cited in Mason et

al., 2001). As budget constraint is one of the main causes that hinder the improvement of the higher education quality in Vietnam, and the World Bank represents as a vital source of financial assistance for developing countries, it is likely that Vietnamese government will have to pay more attention to develop an educational reform project that not only focuses on learners' needs but also aligns with the demands of their emerging market economy (Mason et al., 2001).

5.1.3 Review of Vietnam's government documents on higher education reform

Mindful of Vietnam's socio-economic needs in the global knowledge society, the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) has launched ambitious higher education reforms in order to meet the new demands of socio-economic development. It was around 1990s that Vietnamese leaders started to officially announce that the traditional teaching and learning approaches must be changed:

There must be radical changes in training methods: to change from passive knowledge transmission in which teachers are talking and learners are taking notes; to advise learners on the ways of active thinking and receiving knowledge, to teach students the methods of self-learning; to teach students the methods of self-learning, systematic collection of information and of analytic and synthetic thinking; to increase the active, independent attitude of students in learning process and self-management activities in schools and social work. In sum, students need to be provided with new skills so that they are capable of undertaking leadership tasks and preparing the country and a new generation of workers and citizens for the twenty-first century (Pham-Minh, 1995, p.59, cited in Thanh, 2010).

Motivated by the idea that learners should be the ones who construct their own knowledge by actively controlling over the contents and processes of learning, in 2001 the Prime Minister has issued a decision in which the adoption of a credit-based system was officially approved: "To formulate a flexible training process; to step by step transform the year-based training regime into the certificate-based study regime" (The Prime Minister of Government, 2001,

p.7). With school-year training being replaced by a credit-training system, learners were then enabled to be more flexible, improve independent study, research abilities and critical thinking skill (Harman & Bich, 2010). This aspect of the higher education reform can also be attributed to the loan condition set by the World Bank as mentioned above.

In order to meet the higher education development objectives from 2001 to 2010, which is “to satisfy the demands for human resources of high levels suitable to the socio-economic structure of the period of industrialization and modernization, raising the competitiveness and equal cooperation in the process of international economic integration”, The Prime Minister has required higher education institutions to “renew and modernize the educational methodology, shifting from the passive passage of knowledge with teachers doing the teaching and learners taking notes to guiding learners in their active thinking in the process of approaching knowledge; teaching learners ways for self-study, self-reception of information in a systematic way with analytical and synthetic thinking, developing the capability of each individual; enhancing the activeness and initiative of pupils and students in the process of their study and self-governed activities at schools and to participate in social activities” (The Prime Minister of Government, 2001b, p.16)

In 2005, a very important legal document was promulgated by the Prime Minister called Resolution No. 14/2005/NQ-CP on Substantial and Comprehensive Renewal of Vietnam Higher Education in the period of 2006–2020 (which is also known as Higher Education Reform Agenda). It called for fundamental and multi-faceted renovation in higher education in order to achieve fundamental changes in the quality, efficiency, and the operation of Vietnamese higher education system (Van-Dang, 2013). The higher education development objectives in this resolution were almost the same as those of the Decision No. 201/2001/QĐ-TTg, with the addition of “satisfy(ing) people’s learning demands”, which marked a significant turning point in Vietnam’s efforts to renovate its higher education system: this was the first time learners’ need was put specific attention to and officially documented in Vietnamese governmental publication. One of the tasks assigned to higher education institutions to achieve the new objectives was:

To renew training methods along three directions: equipping learners with learning methods, promoting their initiative,... To choose and use advanced educational programs and teaching courses of foreign countries” (The Government, 2005, p.4).

As Steiner-Khamsi (2014, p. 157) put it, “it was vital to interpret the choice of ‘reference society’, that is, the educational system from where policies, practices and ideas were borrowed”. It is clear that Vietnamese policy makers failed to specify why and of which “foreign country” the educational programs should be adopted. This has shed light on the argument made by previous researchers in this field that Vietnamese policy makers were certainly more dedicated to importing other teaching and learning approaches from developed countries and see these approaches as 'standards' for local education reforms (Thompson, 2009; Thanh; 2010). The idea of students and lecturers learning and sharing knowledge with one another, mostly drawn from Western educational theories, was assumed to be more consistent with the kinds of learning believed to be needed for Vietnam. This has led to the introduction of laboratories, discussion sections, field experiences, and seminars in the sample curriculum generated by MOET (Mason et al., 2001). Lecturers in Vietnam’s higher education institutions were therefore under pressure to move from their traditional ‘chalk and talk’ method to a more effective use of teaching methods that produce deeper learning. Greater emphasis were being laid on interactive teaching and problem-based learning, which strongly promote learners’ activeness and improve their ability to participate in team work, adaptability to the work environment they will enter after graduation (Harman & Bich, 2010; Tran, 2012). Indeed, “teaching how to learn” and “learning how to learn” were the new principles of higher education training promoted by MOET (MOET, 2005, p. 18).

Even though the idea of student-centered learning approach has been introduced to Vietnam since the 2000s, in one way or another, it was for the first time directly specified in 2013 in the resolution No. 29-NQ/TW on fundamental and comprehensive renovation in education (Central Steering Committee, 2013). However, the guidelines No. 527/KTKĐCLGD-KĐĐH for the application of criteria in the assessment of the quality of higher education institutions and the national curriculum frameworks, seem to be in contradiction to the resolution (MOET, 2013). Explicitly, while the resolution states that education in Vietnam need to “consider learners the epicenter of any education process” and “keep making dramatic and

comprehensive changes in fundamental elements of education towards valuing learners' capacity and personal qualities" (Central Steering Committee, 2013), there seems to be an indirect teacher-centered view underpinning the latter publication.

Criteria 06.01 - Learners are specifically instructed on the education program, assessment process and other regulations in the training regulations promulgated by the Ministry of Education and Training.
Criteria 06.09 - Learners are allowed to evaluate the teaching quality of the lecturers at course end and the overall training quality of the institution before their graduation (MOET, 2013).

The publication seems to take learners as passive knowledge recipients by the use of "instructed" and only heard by the end of the instruction period, rather than constructors of knowledge empowered to evaluate and, most importantly, demand changes in their training along their academic lives, not only by the end of those. Ultimately, these evaluations may seem to give students some control over their learning experience but in fact they can be more illusory than effective. Likewise, the national curriculum frameworks are driven by the same educational beliefs, with the educational objectives in higher education being put as "to transmit the knowledge and practical skills of [...]" (Bachelor of Geography) (MOET, 2005); "to introduce basic knowledge of [...] to students" (Bachelor of International Relations) (MOET, 2005); "to arm students with the knowledge of [...]" (Bachelor of Mathematics Teacher Education) (MOET, 2006).

In addition, there is an inherent restriction identified in an important legislative document - the 2005 Education Law. According to the law, school councils are responsible for "resolv(ing) on the objectives, strategies, projects and development plans of the school" and they also "have autonomy and take self-responsibility as defined by laws and their charters" to "formulate educational programs, curricula, teaching and learning plans for the permitted training fields" (Vietnamese Assembly, 2005). However, the law seems to curtail institutions' freedom to design their curricula, since they are subject to the uniform frameworks set by the MOET, including "the core program for each field of training for college and university degrees, including content structure of all subjects, duration of training, proportion of training

duration among different subjects, between theory, practice and internship”, and institutions “shall design their own programmes based on the core programme” (Vietnamese Assembly, 2005). In other words, institutions are free to pursue their own teaching objectives and strategies, and to design and implement their own curricula and teaching plans, as long as they follow the MOET’s guidelines. Objectively, this limits the authority of institutions over their own curricula.

5.2 Review of course syllabi

This section presents the findings obtained from the review of course syllabi using Cullen & Harris’s (2009) rubric to assess learner-centeredness (see Appendix 1). Each syllabus was broken down to enable the researcher to classify them based on the rubric criteria. For instance, according to the rubric, on the scale of 1–4, with 4 being the greatest degree in student-centeredness, if the content of a syllabus indicated “mid-term and final test grades with minimal other graded work. Tests not cumulative”, it was marked as 2 in ‘feedback mechanism’. In the case of University A, all syllabi were marked as 2 in ‘feedback mechanism’. Therefore, as can be seen from Table 5.2a, fourteen syllabi, which made up 100 per cent of the total number of syllabi collected for the review, were marked as 2. Likewise, for the ‘accessibility of teacher’ criterion, five syllabi from University B were marked as 2 and three syllabi were marked as 3, which respectively accounted for 62.5 per cent and 37.5 per cent of the total number of syllabi. None of the syllabi from either university mentioned whether rewriting or redoing of assignments was allowed or encouraged. For this reason the ‘revision/redoing’ criterion was noted as “not available”.

Table 5.2a Syllabi assessment of University A

	1	2	3	4
COMMUNITY				
Accessibility of teacher	0 0%	9 64.3%	5 35.7%	0 0%
Learning Rationale	7 50%	5 35.7%	2 14.3%	0 0%
Collaboration	0 0%	1 7.1%	3 21.4%	10 71.5%
POWER AND CONTROL				

Teacher's role	14 100%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%
Student's role	2 14.3%	1 7.1%	8 57.2%	3 21.4%
Outside resources	0 0%	11 78.6%	2 14.3%	1 7.1%
Syllabus focus	0 0%	3 21.4%	11 78.6%	0 0%
EVALUATION/ASSESSMENT				
Grades	0 0%	14 100%	0 0%	0 0%
Feedback mechanism	0 0%	14 100%	0 0%	0 0%
Evaluation	0 0%	3 21.4%	2 14.3%	9 64.3%
Learning outcomes	0 0%	1 7.1%	8 57.2%	5 35.7%
Revision/redoing	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
	N=14			

Table 5.2b Syllabi assessment of University B

	1	2	3	4
COMMUNITY				
Accessibility of teacher	0 0%	5 62.5%	3 37.5%	0 0%
Learning Rationale	0 0%	5 62.5%	3 37.5%	0 0%
Collaboration	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	8 100%
POWER AND CONTROL				
Teacher's role	0 0%	0 0%	4 50%	4 50%
Student's role	0 0%	0 0%	2 25%	6 75%
Outside resources	0 0%	5 62.5%	3 37.5%	0 0%
Syllabus focus	0 0%	0 0%	5 62.5%	3 37.5%
EVALUATION/ASSESSMENT				
Grades	0 0%	3 37.5%	2 25%	3 37.5%
Feedback mechanism	0 0%	3 37.5%	4 50%	1 12.5
Evaluation	0 0%	0 0%	1 12.5%	7 87.5%
Learning outcomes	0 0%	0 0%	3 37.5%	5 62.5%
Revision/redoing	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
	N=8			

Based on the review of fourteen syllabi for University A, it was shown that the greatest degree of student-centeredness referred to the community criterion (collaboration). Most syllabi had high ratings regarding the extent the collaboration was required. This suggested lecturers' shift from being the primary source of knowledge to encouraging students to learn from one another through the use of groups for class work and team projects. University B presented a similar result when it comes to the degree of student-centeredness manifested in the syllabi: the criterion of collaboration scored the highest among all other criteria. All assessed syllabi from University B indicated lecturers' requirement for group works.

In terms of power and control, students from both units were given responsibility to present the material to class in general, but the difference regarding teacher's role were extremely significant. No shared power was found in the syllabi collected from University A, which means all classroom rules were determined by lecturer and students were expected to follow. In contrast, University B's students were given much more flexibility for policies and procedures. The syllabus focus criterion also witnessed the same pattern. Even though a large number of course syllabi from both universities balanced between policies and focus on learning, upon closer examination, University B's course syllabi tended to weight towards students' learning and policies were left to class negotiation while on University A's side there are still some syllabi weighting towards policies and procedures, leaving less space for the learning content.

In terms of evaluation/assessment, all the syllabi from University A emphasized learning assessment based on the accumulative study progress of students, but all the student work would be graded, while University B's students, through the forms of both small graded assignments throughout the course and non-graded assignments, were offered opportunity to obtain feedback from their professor and to self-assess to what extent they had met the learning outcomes. The criterion regarding the extent of rewriting assignments were allowed could not be assessed due to the unavailability of those information presented in the syllabi from both units. However, it should be pointed out that nearly all of syllabi from University A strictly indicated that there would not be makeup exercise/midterm or late paper submission accepted, while all the syllabi from University B shown that students were allowed to apply

for deadline extension and also for a special consideration in case he or she believed that that his or her performance had been affected by illness or other serious cause.

5.3 Findings from individual interviews

This section presents the findings of how student-centered is perceived and implemented by teachers and students in the two institutions. Through this investigation, several factors that support and hinder student-centered learning in each institution emerged. Those factors are all related to the five principles of student-centered learning suggested by Brandes and Ginnis (1986). The categories of analysis “Student preparedness” and “Academic load and control over learning process” are closely related to Brandes and Ginnis’ (1986) Principle 1 – learner’s responsibility for their own learning. Similarly, the “University admission process” is also relevant to this principle, since it was found to affect students’ learning attitude. The “Curriculum” category is particularly relevant to Principle 2, regarding the relevance and meaning of subject matter. “Student previous education” was found to fit Principle 3, of involvement and participation in learning. “Cooperative learning among peers” is fundamental to stress the relationship between learners (Principle 4). Finally, “Teacher views on their role” as well as how they perceive “Previous student attainment” are related to Principle 5, which considers the teacher as a facilitator and resource person.

The section starts with the presentation of teacher perspectives of student-centered learning. Then it is followed by the findings of students’ views. In the end of this section, other factors that were also found to promote or obstruct the practice of student-centered learning in higher education are presented.

5.3.1 Teacher perspectives of student-centered learning

5.3.1.1 Teacher views on their role

For the case of University A, there were two main views raised during teacher interviews with regards to their role. One was the urge to keep their ‘traditional image’ and role, which means they still mainly acted as the one who owns knowledge as indicated above. A senior teacher said:

Although I am quite up for the new approach, which means I try to stay open-minded, and I often feel happy when students are able to stake out their opinions, I still prefer the traditional values. The hierarchical relationships between teachers and students should be respected. In addition, I think in order to gain respect from students, a teacher must show their students that they are a master of their subject. I am very dedicated to my teaching career, therefore, I have the responsibility to transmit the knowledge I know to my students (PUB-L3).

The other view was the perception shared by young teachers who did not want the students to keep relying on teachers to spoon-feed them. They wanted to be the real learning facilitator rather than the transmitter of knowledge, stating that teacher and students were both learning together at the same time. They chose to show their vulnerability, stating that although they had mastery in their subject, they may not own all knowledge. However, if they failed to communicate the message to students, their credibility would be lost: students would no longer trust their competence. One of them confessed:

I was one of those teachers. The whole class considered me unhelpful and untrustworthy. If we know nothing about the issues that students raise and we know nothing about how to help to students learn more about what they are not clear, students will of course wonder: “So why are you supposed to be here? What is your job?” It is a very cultural thing. I know many teachers in Vietnam feel worried about admitting they do not know the answer, and they would rather pretend they know it by giving a vague answer. In Western societies, it seems to be more acceptable if the teacher cannot immediately answer a question from their student. We are all human. However, in Vietnam, honesty is not the best policy in this case, but I always try my best to point the student on the road to an appropriate answer. Students’ desire to learn should be respected (PUB-L1).

To give a comparative view from teachers of University B, here is a typical response which represents the view shared by all interviewee teachers:

My role focuses on the idea of facilitation of learning and the change that student will go through at the end of the course or after they graduate. Now that information is

available almost everywhere, so the university lecturers are no longer the sole funds of knowledge. We now have this information coming from this source, that information coming from that source. There are several sources of information now, so it is the skill that students need that we want to give more focus on: what to do with the information they have, how to improve their employability, etc. They cannot get those things from a lecture, but from the experiences the teacher creates in the class setting (PRI-L2).

5.3.1.2 Student preparedness

Lack of student preparation for class was one of the most repeated difficulties all teachers raised when they tried to design a student-centered classroom. All of interviewee teachers from both universities shared similar comments that many activities for seminars when students were divided into groups for discussion were often not carried out as planned because most students came to class unprepared. A teacher expressed his concern:

In order to successfully carry out classroom activities, students have to read before class. The 45-minute class should be for assembling what they get from the readings and expanding their understanding by discussing with teacher and peers. However, there were so many times that I needed to allocate 30 minutes in class for the students to read the texts which they should have read before class, and the time left for class activities was only 15 minutes. If the students want to be the center, both teachers and students need to be prepared before class. Effective learning requires preparation. The SCL could not be implemented without students' preparation (PUB-L1).

Other teachers did not explicitly mention such difficulties, despite sharing the concern of inadequate preparation of students. Regarding this issue, all teachers from University B also shared the same view with those of University A, as a professor said:

From my 7 years of teaching experience, I can tell that it is really hard to expect students in Vietnam come to class well prepared. If the teacher does not set the mindset at the starting point, do not expect the students to come to class with a question from the readings or to be active in class. The majority of Vietnamese students expect the course to be easy and relaxed and to get high scores for the final tests. The mindset of

teachers and students do not match here. Therefore, setting the mindset at the start of the class is really important (PRI-L3).

5.3.1.3 Student previous education

Interestingly, the reasons for the lack of preparation for class in general were also raised during the interviews. Regarding the lack of interest in reading, as textbooks and teachers' lectures were considered unique sources of ultimate knowledge since basic education schooling, as well as the academic load was already too heavy, students did not find the need to spend time reading from extra sources. Most teachers from University A shared this view:

I think few Vietnamese students have the habit of going to the library or read books. One of the reasons for this is that the basic educational system seems to discourage creative and critical thinking. The students' learning process in from elementary schools to high schools relied heavily on textbooks and notes taken during lectures, and they mostly needed to rote learn those information in order to get high marks in exams (PUB-L3).

Another professor from University A also explicitly described how students' previous education issue matter on their activeness in university classroom:

Fresh students often experience a teaching and learning method shock when they enter college. They got used to sitting nicely, listening to teachers, taking notes on all of what the teachers say, then learning everything by heart and reproducing those information word by word in exams when they were in basic education schools. Fresh students are the most to be influenced by Confucian heritage culture, when they are still in their transition time between high school and higher education. They were born and have grown up with that culture, so even though the teacher can be very open and encouraging students to ask questions or even make argument, it is still quite difficult for some students to do so (PUB-L2).

5.3.1.4 University admission process

Findings gathered from the teachers interviews also showed that the learning attitude of students might be affected by the university admission. Specifically, four out of five interviewee teachers from University A attributed the lack of learning interest to the changes in university admission process. One of them described the situation:

In previous years, students had to choose the study program in a university of their interest before taking the university entrance exam. They knew that it was the field that they were truly interested in. However, for the last recent years, students used the results of the exam to apply it to universities or colleges of their interest. If they knew they were at risk of not being admitted by comparing their scores to other candidates, they could withdraw their application for other universities (PUB-L4).

As most Vietnamese families consider having their children attending higher education a must to maintain or advance their social ‘face’ or social position (Tran, 2015), this has lead to the fact that most students, under their parental guidance and rules, only wanted to secure a place in university, no matter what the program would be. That can explain why students are increasingly showing a lack of interest in studying. With the absence of initial learning interest, it is unlikely that learners take full responsibility for their own learning.

In contrast, findings from the interviews showed that the student recruitment of University B was not subject to the national university entrance exam. The general academic and English language requirements that students needed to satisfy in order to be eligible to apply for a program at the private university included high school graduation diploma with a specific minimum grade point average and a certificate of English proficiency. However, it should be noted that if the students did not meet the requirements, they could still apply for the university preparation course. Upon their completion of the course, they could pursue the formal bachelor degree. One of the teachers explained how this could benefit students’ learning motivation:

There is a ubiquitous perception that students at private higher education institutions are those who are not admitted to a public university, but I do not agree with that

thinking. Students at our university purposely sign up for an international experience of a program of their interest, right here in Vietnam. They are usually willing to go along with the approach and the request for a certain kinds of activities. They seem to be much more willing to do so because they are aware that the learning environment here is going to be different. Students are prepared for a more student-centered and active learning approach. Vietnamese students come to our university expecting an international experience. They often look for lectures that provide them international experience, so they are more up for it (PRI-L1).

In order to develop a system of providing learning which has the student at its heart and encouraging students to take full responsibility for their own learning, students being given more autonomy, namely making choices and being able to pick their topics of interest should be prioritized (Land et al., 2012). The fast-paced production of new knowledge at higher education level cannot operate efficiently if it is put under a rigid framework. As mentioned earlier, although University B was not subject to the national university entrance exam, many interviewee teachers from University B pointed out how the current university admission process suffers from several shortcomings. As some of the interviews tell, for the last five years, MOET has made radical changes in the procedure mostly every year, which has troubled both students and higher education institutions. Even grade 12 students are sometimes unclear about what the changes in process could be because they usually make changes only 6 months before the actual examination. In addition, the way in which students are tested for higher education admission set by MOET is also considered problematic by many interviewee teachers from both universities. The exam generally consists of three subjects (e.g. group of Mathematics, English language, and Literature, or group of Mathematics, Physics, and Chemistry, etc.), and is not designed to evaluate students on other skills such as problem solving, critical thinking, ICT skills, etc., which are important for readiness in higher education and work. Students need to be competent in at least 3 major subjects from basic education in order to have a chance to attend university with this kind of assessment, which is clearly not following a student-centered learning approach and not an efficient way of assessment either. For example, one of the professors from University B explicitly mentioned:

Higher education requires much more than basic education, and we should know that there are students who do not really excel in basic education can be capable of pursuing higher education, but they can only do so when we change the ways we test them. Therefore, MOET should consider giving more autonomy to higher education institutions in respect to how students are recruited, given that the institutions are the ones who know best of what makes a potential candidate (PRI-L4).

This finding is in line with the explanation made by Liu & Feng (2015) where they point out why student-centered learning may not be appropriate in Asian contexts. The assessment systems found in several Asian countries place much emphasis on theoretical knowledge and grades, while the university entrance exams in Western countries encompass varying evaluation criteria, which, according to Liu & Feng (2015), paves the way for higher order thinking skills.

5.3.1.5 Previous student attainment

As learned from the interviews, the changes in university admission process mentioned above also led to some changes in the quality of students in University A. In previous years, after finishing their last year of high school, students had to take high school graduation exam and university entrance exam separately, and the latter one was always more challenging than the former one. However, MOET decided to merge the two exams into one, namely high school graduation exam, and students could use the exam results to apply for university admission, which, according to some public teachers, led to the decrease in student quality. Some of them showed their disappointment:

In previous years, successful candidates in our program were picked based on their scores of Mathematics, Literature, and English. For the last 3 years, MOET has added another group of subjects, which is Literature, History, and English. In the past, students who scored 8/10 on English at the university entrance exam were indeed those who had advanced level English. For now, the amount of students who scored 8/10 increased but mostly their English skills are only at beginning or lower intermediate level (PUB-L4).

The majority of Vietnamese students nowadays are choosing the program based on the trends without understanding the learning objectives and future career. Guidance in career orientation has been neglected within our education. University students must orient themselves to become future scientific researchers. If their ultimate goals is only to get a job after graduation, they can attend colleges or vocational schools instead of universities. The scientific attitude of my students is quite low. They seem to be very unmotivated when it comes to writing academic paper (PUB-L2).

All the way through teacher interviews at University A, a predominant perception had been, one way or the other, demonstrated that the difference in the students' abilities was an important factors affecting learning outcomes. University B, on the other hand, adopted a view that learning outcomes could be attributed to the teachers' understanding and teaching techniques. The quotation below represents the view explicitly shared by most professors from University B:

My job is to facilitate students' learning, it is not about me teaching. I always make the joke that I am clay, mold me a teacher, I am in your hand. If you think of student learning as a zone, and the teacher is out here, the teacher's job is to pull the student to the place where they are ready to learn. The students may be stretching in some directions, and the teacher's responsibility is to look at each individual student, again individual, and look at where are they stretching, where are they trying to go, what is the next step of learning for them. It is all about facilitation (PRI-L1).

5.3.1.6 Academic load and control over learning process

The credit-based training system has been accepted and implemented in Vietnam with an aim to enabling higher education learners to be more flexible, improve independent study, research abilities and critical thinking skill (Harman & Bich, 2010). However, some interviews from University A's professors revealed that the adoption was problematic in Vietnam, and the heavy study load of students was a big challenge. In University A, the credit-based system was operated based on the number of periods spent in class (1 period = 45 minutes), leaving aside the amount of time students needed to spend preparing for class. The time frame for completion of a 2-credit course (which is equivalent to 30 periods in class) was

6 weeks and a 3-credit course (which is equivalent to 45 periods in class) was 9 weeks. Basically, students University A had to study 6 subjects in approximately 25 - 30 periods of contact hours per week.

This was the main reason why students failed to spend an appropriate amount of time studying outside classroom and preparing for next class. With this stuffed curriculum, students tended to give more priorities and more efforts on subjects of which the teachers in charge were tough, ignoring other subjects (PUB-L3).

As learned from responses of interviewee teachers and students, University B allowed students to apply for credit point transfer to have their previous learning or courses that they undertook elsewhere count toward their current degree. In contrast, the integration of departments in University A seemed to be poor, and the credit point transfer was not officially documented. Another teacher from University A commented:

Since students still have difficulties taking courses of their interest as well as courses in other departments, they seem to follow the same curriculum that was set by their faculty, which discourages them to learn more of what they are really interested in. The institution should work more on developing a credit point transfer system to give all students opportunities to design their own academic path (PUB-L1).

5.3.1.7 Curriculum

The centralized curriculum with mandatory subjects required by MOET in University A such as Principles of Marxism-Leninism and Ho Chi Minh Ideology was considered by all students as being mostly irrelevant to the needs of students and the labor market. Findings from teacher interviews provided evidence for Harman & Bich's (2010) comment that "any such questioning or suggestions for amendments to the Marxist-Leninist curriculum offerings have been met with a forceful defence by party officials who argue that any attack against continuing such study is essentially an attack against the socialist fabric of Vietnam" (p. 79), as most teachers in University A refused to comment further on this issue, even though they all confessed that the teaching methods of these subjects were outdated and made students feel unmotivated. As Tran (1999) puts it, "Vietnam is probably the only country in the world

that both embraces market economics and adheres to Marxism-Leninism. How can an education system, guided by two contradictory philosophies develop in a consistent manner? (p. 2)”. Criticisms of this clear contradiction between the central control over socialist teaching and the pursuit of capitalist market principles can be found in several academic publications about higher education in Vietnam (see, e.g. Dung, 2004; Harman & Bich, 2010; Tran & White, 2012).

Meanwhile, as university B is a foreign-owned institution, they have complete autonomy over their curriculum. The mandatory subjects required by MOET are excluded from their training curriculum. Most teachers mentioned their institutional education objective during the interview. For example, one of them said enthusiastically:

A really big part of our focus is to facilitate students to prepare themselves for their future career and life-long learning. Everything that we do, every classroom experience that the students have, we want them to be ready for life and work (PRI-L1).

While University B offered their students greater autonomy over the process of learning, the subject content is usually fixed in advance to make sure it is aligned with the standard content in the home university, but this content is also periodically modified based on the feedback given by previous students.

5.3.2 Student perspectives of student-centered learning

5.3.2.1 Cooperative learning among peers

In contrast to the findings from previous studies on cooperative learning in Asian context, which indicated that students prefer working individually than working in a group (Park, 2002; Wong, 2004), the majority of students from in this study expressed strong preference for group work since it encouraged them to practice organizing their own thinking and speaking up. The following quote can be taken as a representative of the perception of students from University A:

My most favorite learning activity is group work. Firstly, in order to discuss something, you have to have knowledge and opinions about that topic. Secondly, you will get to

hear other students' opinions which help you to see one issue from different perspectives. After the discussion, someone in the group will present the group's ideas and teacher will give us feedback (PUB-S4).

In this study, cooperative learning was that one factor that could both support and hinder student-centered learning in a society where collectivism is a norm like Vietnam. On the surface, it seems that the collectivist culture shared among Vietnamese students can pave the way for the operation of cooperative learning; however, as cooperative regime is often associated with the issue specified in the saying “Everybody’s business is nobody’s business” (Nguyen & Johanson, 2008), it can at the same time lead to several challenges. Despite their general preference for group work, a student from University A stated that there existed problem in terms of irresponsible group members. She talked sadly:

I like working in group projects in general, but sometimes there were teammates who did not seriously commit to the group work. When I was in a group of four, me and the other two worked very hard, except for the fourth student. When it comes to grading, that lazy student got a zero out of ten, me and the other two got eight, seven and eight respectively. Because we were in the same group, the score for each student was graded as the mean score of all students, which is 5.75. This seemed very unfair to us, so we tried to explain our case to the teacher but in vain – she did not care. As the Vietnamese culture is always about how students respect teachers, now it is time for them to think in the reverse direction (PUB-S3).

The factor which obstructed student-centered learning here was not the problem itself, but the way educators dealt with it. University A did not have any specific institutional mechanism to guarantee the rights of student, leaving them to be contingent on teacher’s emotional feelings and personalities. University B, on the contrary, adopted a presaged approach to this problem with their institutional grading systems being designed to consist of several graded and non-graded small assignments where grades and feedback are given throughout the course by the teacher and peers, to both individual and the group as a whole in order to ensure that students rights are guaranteed and encourage them to be responsible for their own work and progress. Rust (2002) calls self-assessment and peer assessment “student-centered assessment

practices” and suggests that those practices help strengthen student learning. The following quote reflects a typical view of the students from University B.

If it is a group project, our grades will be given by teacher and by our teammates. Although the score given by our teammates makes up a small percentage, which is 10 per cent, of the grading, but it really helps us to keep up with the responsibility (PRI-S4).

It should be reminded that the finding obtained from the review of course syllabi presented in previous section suggested teacher’s shift from being the primary source of knowledge to encouraging students to learn from one another through the use of group work. On the students’ side, however, as data gathered from the interviews showed, even though students from University A appreciated the chance to discuss their opinions with their peers, they still held an underlying belief that teachers were the ultimate source of knowledge, whose job was to give them final correct answers to the discussing problems or the main points of the lesson as “the standards”, instead of believing that they could construct the knowledge themselves. The following are the responses of them to the question of what they expect from their lecturer:

...to give us detailed instruction and explanation during lectures (PUB-S1).

...to be more creative in searching the information for lessons. I want more updated documents, photographs and videos (PUB-S2).

...to focus on important points of the lesson instead of talking non-stop about something students cannot understand or feel interested in (PUB-S3).

This type of learning activity [group work] gives us the chance to think, speak up our mind and also exchange views with each other, but still under guidance of the teacher who gives us the final conclusion of that lesson (PUB-S4).

...the knowledge from the lesson is transmitted fully... (PUB-S5).

This finding is consistent with previous studies which suggest that Asian students tend to be dependant on the teacher's knowledge and authority (Harshbarger et al., 1986, cited in Zhenhui, 2001; Yang et al., 2006). In order to give a comparative view from teachers' side, here is what was heard from the teachers from University A with regards to how they perceive their own role in relation to the teaching and learning process. As learned during the interviews, in Vietnam teacher is still the one who owns knowledge. If the teacher seems to have no idea about a specific thing that a student asks, their credibility will decrease. It is undeniable that Vietnam is still strongly influenced by Confucian values. Students before entering higher education got used to didactic teaching in their twelve years of basic education, which reduced their critical thinking ability and learning independence because they always believed that all the teachers said were true and passively received the knowledge from their teacher without questioning.

The views of most students from University B on the authoritative role of teachers were generally not as same as those of students from University A. For instance, two of them said:

After every group discussion, teachers never "correct" us. They only point out the strengths and weaknesses in our arguments, and give advices on how to make our arguments more persuasive. The group discussion is often followed by a home assignment where we have to present our own reflection upon our understanding of the topic (PRI-S4).

A good teacher is the one who can inspire me to learn (PRI-S5).

5.3.2.2 Student preparedness

As learned from the student interviews from both public and private university, while they generally often complained about the ineffectiveness of the traditional teacher-centered learning approach in the past, but when they were put in a student-centred classroom, all of them seemed not to feel happy with the increased workload either. One of the students confessed:

I know teachers always expect their students to read before class and self-study, but I believe most of us [Vietnamese students] do not have habit of reading. We only start to have required readings in university so it is quite late to pick up that habit. That is why we do not intentionally grab the reading materials unless we were asked to do so. Some teachers usually have unannounced quizzes to assess student preparation to force us complete the assigned reading before class, but others are more relaxed, so we only read before classes of the tough teachers (PUB-S2).

Regarding this issue, all students from University B also shared the same view with those of University A. For example, a student confessed their lack of preparation for class:

Before class we are often given the reading materials and a PowerPoint file of the next lecture, but we mostly only read the slides so that we can catch up with the teacher's lecture more easily. The reading texts are usually long so we often ignore them, but we think it does not affect much. Most of my friends and me still passed all of my previous courses (PRI-S1).

5.3.2.3 Student previous education

In general, students valued the opportunity to take the initiative and freely express their ideas in classroom. However, most of them they still encountered particular difficulties due to their past experience during twelve years of previous basic education. Below is the explanations from two students:

My role in class is quite a passive one. In class we mostly sit and listen to the lecturer. Some lecturers encourage us to have questions or debate with them but some only focus on their lecture. In classes where we are encouraged to have a more active role, we still tend to be passive as it is the way we have been taught since primary school (PUB-S1).

I feel quite difficult when it comes to studying in college. I got used to the 'chalk and talk' teaching method back in 12 years of basic schooling, where teachers gave me almost everything I need to prepare for exams. All I did before taking an exam is revising the notes and try to learn everything by heart. I studied really hard and usually

passed the exams in high school with flying colors. However, I almost failed my first exam in college, which shocked me and my parents a lot. I also feel awkward if I have to ask questions or share my opinions in class (PUB-S4).

A student added a comment on the study load during her high school years:

Outside time spending on extra workload is even heavier than what I had to study in the class. If extra classes were skipped, I myself could not even pass the basic quizzes, especially in classes of basic sciences (PRI-S2).

5.3.2.4 Academic load and control over learning process

It was indicated by some students from University A that their academic load was heavy. For example, here are some complaints from the students:

We have too much subjects and knowledge to learn since I was in primary school. When studying at university, I have to attend class 5 periods [3.75 hours] per day. My teacher told us that each period at school need 3 periods [2.25 hours] of self-study at home. Not yet, after class, we have a lot of homework with tight submission deadlines. Our study load here is too heavy (PUB-S3).

The institution does not build up any conveniences in studying for the students. For example, teachers always require us to make full effort for studying their subject, they seem not to care about students' having to study other subject. Most of our courses have very high workload (PUB-S4).

Most students in University A revealed that they had more freedom in certain aspects compared to when they were attending high school. However, for more important things like the freedom to choose which course they wanted to take, how they wanted to learn and how they were assessed was very limited. In fact, all of these things were chosen and determined by teachers. In contrast, most students at University B shared the view that they were given almost full control over their academic load:

Here we usually choose to take 3-4 courses per semester. There are still some prerequisites for certain subjects, but we can basically choose the course, the number of courses we want to take, the timetable, and the lecturer. The institution encourages us to be responsible for our studies. They say students' abilities are different from person to person, they give us advices and recommendations, but they never force us to follow the same mainstream pathway (PRI-S1).

5.3.2.5 Curriculum

In terms of the curriculum at universities, all students from University A shared the same view that the centralized curriculum was mostly irrelevant to the needs of students and contemporary labor market. For example, one of the students explicitly said:

There are some mandatory subjects we have to take during our first semesters at university, such as Principles of Marxism-Leninism and Ho Chi Minh Ideology. Most of us find those subjects too boring and hard to understand. Teachers always come to class, lecture continuously from start to finish, then leave, without asking if we understand or not. At the end of the course, we are given some notes of 15 to 20 pages that we have to learn all of them by heart in order to pass the test. Some of my friends are even planning to cheat during exam because they find it a waste of time to memorise those for nothing, because we know we will never apply them in our future real life work (PUB-S5).

In addition, all interviewee students in University A clearly showed their preference for subjects that relate to work-readiness. Explaining the reason for this preference, one of them said:

These classes are more practical than theory-focused, which allows us to develop the skills needed in the future workplace, but we do not have many classes like that. The theory-focused classes are very boring and impractical. We are pretty sure that we will not remember anything after we graduate (PUB-S5).

As mentioned previously in the section of teacher views on the curriculum, University B has complete autonomy over their curriculum and their focus is put on work-readiness for students. As learned from student interviews, this was found to match students' preference for work-readiness and practical subjects. Accordingly, all students from University B expressed their high learning satisfaction during their studies. For instance, one of them said:

For specialized subjects for final years, our assessments are mostly project-based or campaign-based. What I like most is when our works are given feedback not only from our teachers but also from real people working in the field. These kinds of activities provide us with hands-on experiences that will be useful for our future career (PRI-S1).

5.3.3 Other factors that promote or obstruct the practice of student-centered learning in the two institutions

5.3.3.1 Cultural consideration

Some students from University A expressed that although their teachers encouraged them to be more active and to ask questions, the power distance seemed to remain high. This is somehow in line with the above mentioned findings indicating that no shared power was found in the syllabi gathered from University A; and classroom rules were determined by the teacher and students were expected to follow. One student honestly shared her concern:

There are some teachers who encouraged us to question and think critically, but when we asked them or spotted their mistakes, they immediately expressed their anger and said we did not have enough knowledge to question them. Therefore, we do not ask any question or raise our voice later on (PUB-S5).

Quite similar comment was provided by another student, and she said:

Regarding socializing with students, most of my teachers are not very friendly. I mean they always act like the teacher and the student are not at the same social and academic status, so we cannot be friends, we should only be teacher and student. Moreover, I wish they could be more polite in the way they give us feedback.

Complaining about students' mistakes in public makes us feel very shocked and embarrassed. No one wants to lose face in front of their peers. If they could give us feedback in person, it would have been better (PUB-S4).

Teacher authority was also found in the way teachers controlled how students reflected on what they had learned. That student continued to talk sadly:

When learning with Vietnamese teachers, not all of them allow students to think freely. This is all about their mindset from the past. For example, if I have to write a literary analysis paper, I tend to follow my teacher's ideas so that I can get better grades, because I know there were students writing papers with their own opinions and arguments and they failed the assignment (PUB-S4).

It is interesting to find out that, in comparison to University A, the cultural consideration is more taken into account in University B where one might be tempted to suggest that it would be neglected due to the “foreign-owned” label. One of their teachers said:

At the beginning, my biggest concern is that students do not talk in class, do not ask questions and so forth. We all expect student to participate, because that is needed for students to develop an active learning environment. The initial start of the class to get their mind set ready for what is expected in the course is important. The face-saving culture makes it hard to speak in front of their peers, to put them in a situation they have to feel vulnerable. Therefore, I need to consider staging a little bit more. I make it clear from the beginning that they do need to be able to express their opinions, their ideas, and so forth but I also keep in mind that they may need time to work individually or in pair to sort of talk through it in a more comfortable setting before I then ask them to speak in front of the class. Same outcome expected, but we do need to plan our strategies to approach students from a different culture. It is about the technique we use (PRI-L2).

Most interviewee students in both universities are observed to still retain a Confucius cultural legacy in one way or another, but students from university B seems to acknowledge that they have more freedom to behave and raise their opinions in classroom. One of them said:

Here my teachers do not care much about those cultural things. I have even debated with my teachers and they seemed to like it when we much engaged in their lesson that way, but of course we should not do it in a brash way. Back in high school I dared not to do that. To be frank, I was scared of most of my teachers in basic education schools (PRI-S3).

5.3.1.2 Shared responsibility of the institutions and teachers

When asked to think of the advantages they had in implementing student-centered learning, teachers from University A tended to refer to them as their personal qualities, teaching strategies, dedication, or self-motivation.

I feel great when my colleagues and I share the same motto, which is “always for students, always become better” (PUB-L1).

My commitment and dedication to teaching career motivates me. I always try to encourage my students to have a can-do attitude (PUB-L3).

On the contrary, teachers from University B, instead of using “I”, tended to start their responses with “the institution” or “we”. They put forward the idea which was very much in line with Burden’s (2008) suggestion stating “the education of students is not the sole responsibility of the teacher but one shared equally between all the parties involved” (p. 1473). Here are two typical responses of them:

We consult with student quite a lot. We do it in several different ways. We survey student course experience, program experience survey, and we take that very seriously. It is a systematic process where very students give feedback on every course that they take, very thorough. We ask them a lot of different questions, not just about their course experience but about their whole experience in the university. It’s called institutional survey. We are also aware that we cannot get everything we need from that, so we also do a lot of face to face consultation. We have the student staff consult community in every different program areas, they get students together with the program leaders and they talk about how things are going in the course, what is working, what is challenging

in their course and in their overall experiences as well, and then there will be action taken based on those things. It is a pretty rigorous process. A lot of technological innovations that we brought have been through conversation with students and it seems there are changes in their engagement patterns when they know their ideas are listened to and valued (PRI-L1).

Student-centered learning now is not just about the classroom experience, it is also about other university services. For example, here, the institution has a clear focus on student academic success, that provides individualized support, tutoring, peer tutoring, and lots of other services working together to really look at each and individual students and ask ‘What do you need? How are you different from your colleagues’? Vietnam is a collectivist culture, but I think we also really know students are different individuals, they have individual needs, and if we treat them as individuals, we are more able to provide that customized service. So for us it is not just about classroom teaching, it is about the whole institution working together to try to provide that individualized support (PRI-L3).

5.3.3.3 Provisions of facilities

Big classes and poor-resourced library were two repeatedly mentioned factors that hindered the implementation of student-centered learning in University A during teachers and students interviews. The relation between class size and education quality is complex; some stakeholders even argue there is no correlation between the two variables, but experienced teachers themselves suggest that smaller class size provides a favorable condition for implementing new curricula, particularly when it is more individualized (Benbow et al. 2007). According to Achilles (1996) and Johnson et al. (1994), the ideal teacher-student ratio should be 1:15, and students should be divided in groups of no more than four to effectively work as a group. Nonetheless, it seemed to be impossible in the case of public university as there would be thirteen to eighteen groups working at the same time and teachers, therefore, could not have enough time to monitor and give proper intervention for each group. One of the teachers explained:

Classroom size at public university is problematic. We usually have 50-70 students per class. It is nearly impossible to follow student-centered learning principles because teacher cannot closely monitor and interfere in the group work or individual work of all students. The furniture arrangement here in our university is as same as that in high schools, which do not really support instructional activities such as group discussions or seminars (PUB-L1).

As learned from responses of interviewee teachers and students, library quality at University A was still poor. When students had little chance to get access to academic publications and e-books, their motivation in driving their own learning could decrease. Moreover, reading materials in short supply might also lead to the issue of only one perspective provided by the lecturer or the textbook being presented. Two teachers from University A described how the poor resources and infrastructure of the library kept students away from independent learning and critical thinking:

The resources found in our library are still very limited in terms of both quantity and quality with mostly ten-year outdated books and inaccessibility to online academic resources. How can students individualize their learning when we still cannot offer them adequate provision of study materials and even internet service? The reading room is quite stuffy and we do not even have rooms for students to work on their group project. They usually have to pay to gather at a coffee shop, but of course coffee shops cannot provide them a pleasant study environment. I also see the some of them even gather around university hall, sitting on the floor (PUB-L2).

Here we do not have many qualified librarians to academically advise students and help them pick up relevant books and articles for their studies. Students usually have to search for books themselves and they tend to feel discouraged and lost when they don't know what they should read. More importantly, there is a lack of adequate library resources at our university to support students in self-studying. How can students be critical of what they get from their teachers if they are not given other credible sources of knowledge as evidence to support their arguments (PUB-L4)?

Most students also shared the same view about the material limitation. For example, one of them said:

Sometimes I try to self-study, I want to read more about a topic of my interest to write a paper but the number of books and academic journals available in the library is very limited and quite outdated; therefore I have to use sources on the Internet without knowing that they are academically credible or not (PUB-S1).

In contrast, University B had much more advantages in terms of facility provision. The maximum classroom size was 35 students and the actual spaces allowed for interaction between teachers and students as well as students among themselves. The learning resources center provided learners with traditional library, electronic library, study room, exhibition, and learning services center. One of the teachers described how the physical space could affect the effectiveness of student learning:

Here we have small classroom and small number of students that make it a lot easier. We only have two auditoriums here, the majority classes are in a classroom that have tables and chairs that can be moved around to enable group work and different arrangements. I think physical spaces are really important.. That is the advantage that we got the space, and I do not have to struggle to make interactive of a hundred students. That is impossible (PRI-L2).

All students at University B showed their excitement when talking about the university's facility. One of them expressed:

My first impression of my university was its state of the art facility. The digital library here at my university allows students to search for available books and academic journals, gain access to some libraries of other universities in the world, and make online reservation. It is very easy to gain access to the materials we are looking for. I also really like spending time at the physic library because there I can be more productive than when I study in my room (PRI-S2).

5.3.3.4 Compensation policies

The compensation policies of University A and University B were found to be in sharp contrast to each other. This seemingly unimportant factor indeed influenced the devotion of teachers to developing interesting and engaging lessons. The following are comments from a teacher of University A and a teacher of University B respectively:

Sometimes I feel I am underpaid working here. To teach a class where student learning is put at the heart, I need to put more effort on preparing the lessons, but if the institution pay me as same as they pay a teacher who does not implement SCL in their class, I feel unmotivated. I mean, in a short-term period, I can motivate myself by thinking about how my students learning can become better when they are put in a student-centered learning environment. However, in a long-term period, I still need to take on extra teaching or find a second job in order to support myself and my family financially, which lessens the time I spend on preparing for lessons. Some of my former colleagues were very dedicated to teaching things, they always wanted to create a better learning environment for students, but eventually they had to quit and find a better-paid job (PUB-L4).

To be frank, I feel satisfied with my paycheck and benefits here. My former working place was a public university, so I can kind of give you a comparison. My salary there was much lower. Here I am paid for my contact hours, the time I spend on conducting researches and the time I spend on preparing lessons for my class (PRI-L4).

6 Summary and Discussion

In this chapter, a discussion of the finding presented above is made in line with the theoretical framework of this study as well as the selected literature. It starts with the discussion of the findings referring to socio-economic changes that have taken place since the implementation of Doi Moi and the response from Vietnamese policy makers through the lens of Steiner-Khamsi's (2014) cross-national education policy borrowing framework. The study then examines and compares the nature and content of the course syllabi from the two sample universities with the employment of Cullen & Harris's (2009) rubric for determining degree of student-centeredness in course syllabi. This is followed by the discussion of data gathered from individual interviews, underpinned by Neumann's (2013) framework of student-centered learning and the student-centered learning principles suggested by Brandes and Ginnis (1986).

6.1 The justification for Vietnam's adoption of student-centered learning

Employing Steiner-Khamsi's (2014) cross-national education policy borrowing, findings from the analysis of legislative documents relating to the higher education reform of Vietnam provides the theoretical justifications for its adoption of student-centered learning approach. The problems of higher education quality that has been recognized include the outdated passive teaching and learning style, which is often blamed on the influence of Confucian culture and the old Soviet top-down approach. This is deemed to become more problematic in the context of Vietnam being on its way to regional and global integration, when employers begin to seek for those who possess critical thinking skills, creativity, flexibility and ability to take initiative. Faced with greater numbers of unemployed graduates, Vietnamese policy makers has constantly been under pressure of bringing about radical reforms in teaching and learning methods in order to effectively provide students with knowledge and skills they need to enhance their employability and succeed in the workplace. In the era of globalization when cross-national policy borrowing is the norm, 'international standards' or lessons learned from other educational systems have become a common point of reference which policy makers tend to seek solutions from (Steiner-Khamsi, 2014). This explains why Vietnam's politicians chose to adopt the student-centered method. As presented previously in Section 5.1.3, it was

indicated in official documents that Vietnam should “choose and use advanced educational programs and teaching courses of foreign countries” (The Government, 2005, p.4). Nevertheless, the reasons why and of which “foreign country” the educational programs should be adopted were not specified.

It should be pointed out that although Doi Moi national economic reform involved a major restructuring of state-society relations and the transformation of the country’s political economy, it did not replace the government; the Vietnamese Communist Party remained its monopoly on political power. Therefore, this adoption could not be explained in the way that its neutrality enables different parties and opposing interest groups to rally in support for a reform, given that Vietnam is a mono-party state. Indeed, under pressure from forces of globalization and the fears of falling behind, Vietnamese policy makers, as discussed above, tend to prioritize practices from foreign countries and opt for a quick solution: “Changing methodologies is urgent. The urgency does not allow us to wait until all of the conditions are fulfilled. We have to do it right now” (Solutions for Changing of Teaching Methodologies in Vietnam, 2004, p. 50, cited in Nguyen-Phuong-Mai et al., 2012).

International agencies also influenced Vietnam’s higher education reform by giving out expert advice, encouraging the replacement of the teacher-center teaching practice to the student-centered approach. More significantly, the World Bank in this case tends to be the one of the decision makers by tying funding to explicit conditions regarding the need to increase the flexibility and responsiveness of Vietnamese higher education institutions to the changing demands of society and the market economy. As this set of conditions aimed at enabling students to be more flexible and improve independence in their process of learning, this again indirectly laid a sound foundation for the idea that learners should be put at the center of their study.

On the one hand, higher education reforms in general and HERA in particular have introduced student-centered learning as a change in higher education institutions’ pedagogical approach that should take place to timely meet the changing demands of a globally competitive economy and labor market. On the other hand, first, it failed to give any further explanation on how the government defines student-centered learning and guidelines regarding the

measures of implementation. Relying solely on universities and lecturers' efforts to bring about a revolutionary change in the teaching method that has been deeply rooted since the ancient days is insufficient (Thompson, 2009). Second, the current education policies do not seem to be coherent, with the two contradictory educational beliefs, namely teacher-centered learning and student-centered learning, being advocated at the same time. How can the education reform achieve its goals if the goals themselves are incompatible?

On the economic side, Schweisfurth (2013b) argues that to support a policy change of any kind requires communication infrastructure, budget for training and retraining, and for materials. Taking the credit-based system as an example, although aiming to provide greater flexibility and to ease transfer between institutions by allowing for some electives to be chosen by students, the lack of the human and financial resources to support such a system such as multiple course sections, adequate classroom space and library holdings does not allow much change to take place: students can only be offered the same courses, the same forms of study, and the same timetable during the whole period (Mason et al., 2001; World Bank, 2008). Therefore, in the case of Vietnam, economic change is a major driver for education reform, but at the same time, the economic context also acts as a factor that hinders the implementation of student-centered learning.

In terms of cultural mismatch, there are inconsistencies between modern teaching method and Confucian cultural values that Vietnamese society has been built on. Teachers in Confucian heritage cultures are not only the sources of knowledge but also models of correct behaviors, who are ranked just below the King and above the father (Thanh, 2010). The principles of student-centered approach that allow students to increase their autonomy, reduce teachers' control and ask questions which teachers with limited subject knowledge might not be able to answer at school are against Vietnamese cultural norms. Thus, such respect for teachers may not provide students' initiative with the conditions to develop.

External pressures from global forces and aid agencies have resulted in the current policy movement towards student-centered learning approach. However, the presence of above discussed hindrances together with the fact that Vietnamese policy makers tend to prioritize practices from foreign countries and opt for a quick solution may lead to people's doubt about

government's ability to make good policy. As Steiner-Khamsi (2014) cautions, for borrowing researchers and state leaders, the investigation of why the policies or practices are successful in a particular reference country is crucial since there are a wide range of context bound political, cultural and economic explanations for the success. Indeed, the economy of the country cannot flourish without its educational system being concurrently strengthened. Although Vietnamese government and its policy makers are well aware of the deep crisis that is taking place in the higher education system, their response is rather ineffective and this can be attributed to the low research capacity of higher education institutions. This study provides further updated evidence to support the argument previously made by Smith and Nguyen's (2010) that in Vietnam "the government is simply trying to do too much too quickly, and it is trying to achieve significant outcomes without the benefit of a robust strategic planning process to guide decisions and activities, and without sufficient funds to support strategic objectives" (p. 154).

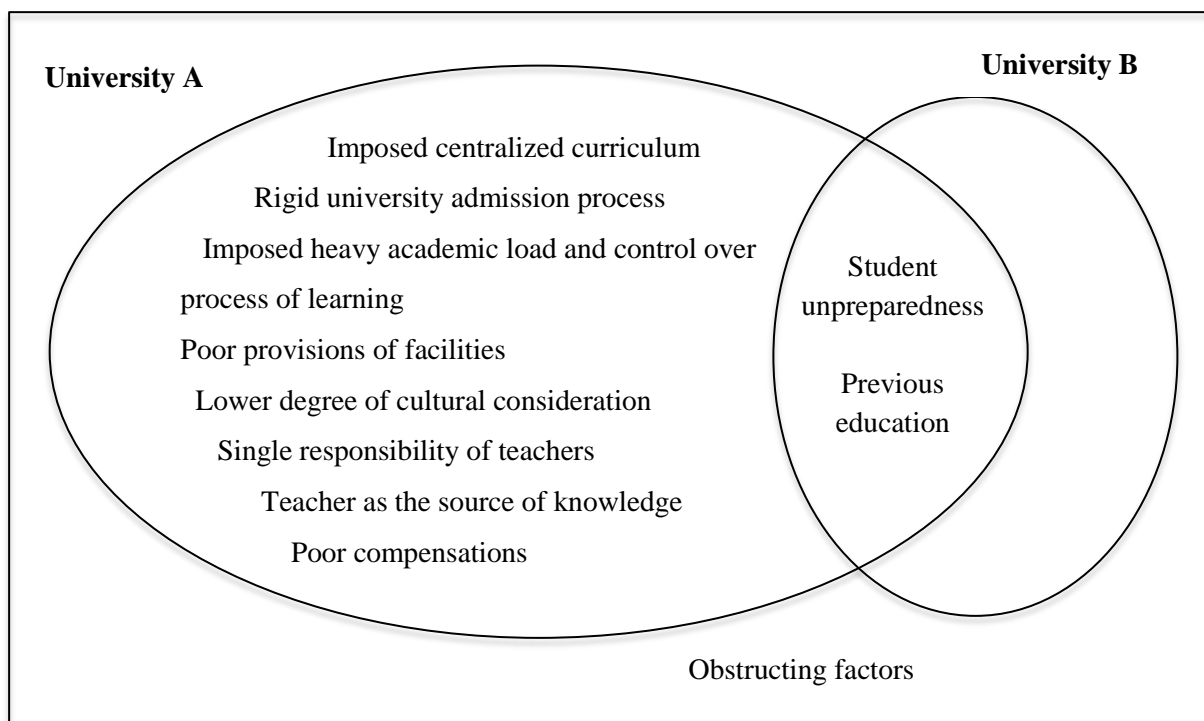
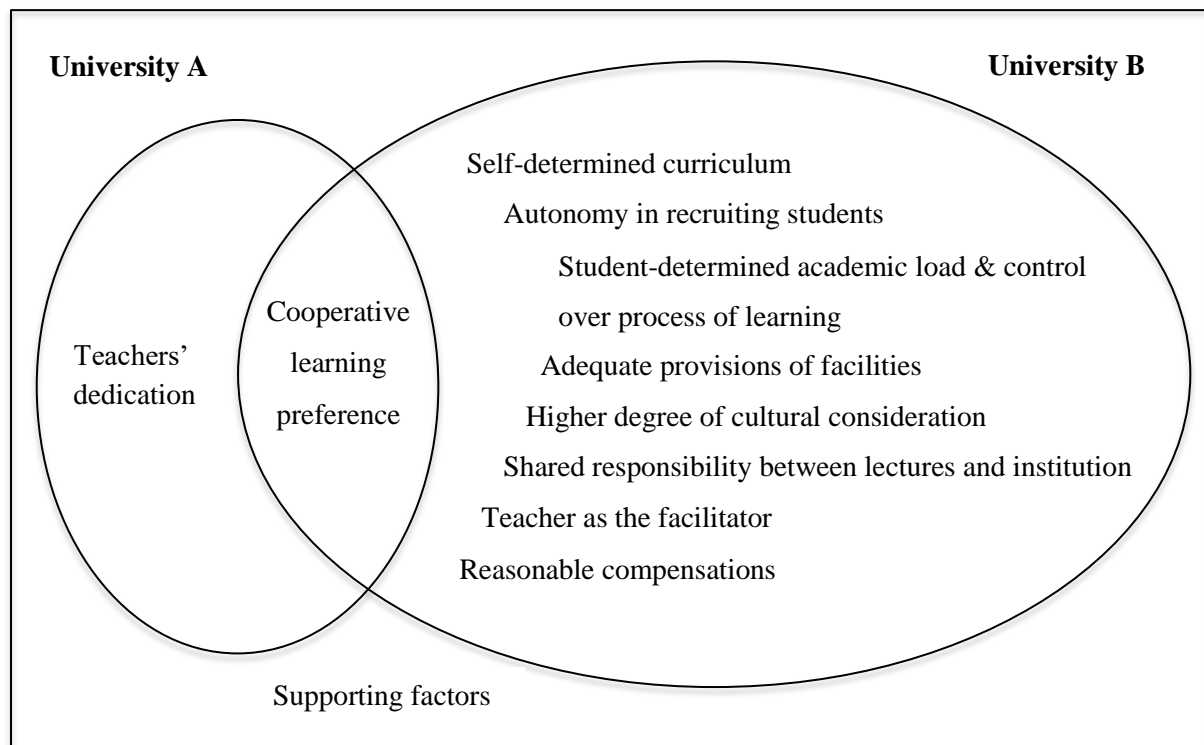
6.2 The practice of student-centered learning found in two types of higher education institutions in Vietnam

Cullen & Harris's (2009) rubric for determining degree of student-centeredness in course syllabi clearly indicates that student-centered learning is not merely a matter of students' learning; it is also about the professor's intention to create that student-centered learning environment. Findings from the review of course syllabi suggest that although in most cases students from both institutions were given opportunity to learn collaboratively, teachers from University B showed a clearer intention to develop student-centered academic environment. The understanding of student-centeredness of University A's professors as indicated in their syllabus design is limited to how students are encouraged to learn from their peers through class discussions and fostering the use of group presentations. While the power distance between lecturers and students is still high in University A, where lectures have ultimate authority over classroom policies and procedures, University B has proved to go one step further. Their students were not only encouraged to learn cooperatively, but also were given opportunity to track their own learning progress without the fear of being graded and voice their opinions on class policies and even on due dates in some cases.

Guided by cultural-historical activity theory, this study investigates not only a single activity system in which teachers and students interact but also how it works with other superposed systems and puts two activity systems, namely two institutions, in comparison. Figure 6.2 shows the comparative perspectives of what sampled students and teachers of the two universities inputted on supporting and obstructing factors that affect the implementation of student-centered learning based on the principles of student-centered learning principles suggested by Brandes and Ginnis (1986). Within the light of this data, the core findings of the study are discussed in the following section.

In terms of students' responsibility for their own learning, findings from the interviews suggest that students in University A and University B are generally found to lack their necessary preparation for student-centered learning environment. The reasons for this long-standing problem are the didactic teaching and learning style that students got from their basic education years. While the rigid national university entrance examination which is held once a year by MOET is found to affect the learning interests needed to drive the active learning process of students from University A, the examination do not have any effect on the learning interests of students from University B, given that University B is a foreign-owned institution, therefore they have full autonomy on how they recruit their students. Moreover, self-determining curriculum, students being given more authority over their academic pathway, and the high-quality provisions of facilities input identified from University B are factors that give favorable conditions for its students to practice their responsibility for their own learning. Meanwhile, centralized curriculum along with irrelevant mandatory subjects that weakly respond to the labor market needs, heavy study load, and inadequate institutional input are, in one way or the other, detrimental factors to the learning attitudes of students from University A. These conditions will not be optimal by any means for improving the quality and effectiveness of student-centered learning. Findings from this study support the argument made by Schweisfurth (2013b) that student-centered learning "is not a cheap option" (p. 46), with most of the above mentioned factors having a great bearing on educational costs.

Figure 6.2 Teachers and students' perspectives on supporting and obstructing factors that affect the implementation of student-centered learning



The two universities are found to be not only different in the institutional conditions, but also divergent in their educational beliefs of teaching and learning. Students' knowledge being constructed through participation in class discussions and group works is considered a key feature of the student-centered learning environment (Brown et al., 1989; Cullen & Harris, 2009). Regarding students' participation and how the relationships between learners are perceived, cooperative learning is operated in both universities and students all seem to experience no major challenge. Nonetheless, a closer examination shows that cooperative learning in University A could be understood as putting students in group with an assigned task, with the absent process of knowledge being acquired during group work time and responding to the rights and the needs of student were generally less concerned. On the contrary, the education process in University B was designed to facilitate students' active learning and gaining knowledge during the time they spend with their peers. New perspectives were encouraged, and students were guided to be more persuasive in their arguments, instead of being taught what the teacher knows or believes to be "correct". Therefore, regarding the role of teacher, the role identified from university B tended to weight towards a learning facilitator. On university A's side, there are various views on how teachers perceived their role: seniors teachers indirectly supported the traditional approach in which teacher is the provider of knowledge while younger teachers showed more interest in implementing student-centered learning approach, leaving more space for learning facilitation. This finding can be in part explained by the previous clarification made by Scollon & Wong-Scollon (1994) of teacher authority in Asian contexts. Moreover, on the one hand, it also implies that University A is witnessing a positive period of transition, with the coexistence of two philosophies of education. On the other hand, it can be argued that the degree of student-centered learning in University A varies from class to class and is very much dependent on the teacher in charge, instead of being systematically applied across the whole institution like in the case of University B. Without certain systematic policies and attendant guidelines, it may lead to confusion rather than improvement of teaching and learning practice.

Another factor that is found to implicitly affect the students' behaviors when being put in a student-centered learning environment is how much cultural considerations are concerned by

their teachers. Most interviewee students are observed to still retain a Confucius cultural legacy in one way or another. However, students from university B seems to adapt better to the principles of student-centered learning, since the cultural consideration is more taken into account by teachers in University B. This is in line with the guidelines for educators to create a learner-centered learning climate provided by Kouzes and Posner (2002, p.309, cited in Cullen & Harris, 2009, p. 121): “A prime requirement for people to be capable of learning – changing and developing new skills – is that they feel safe; they must feel able to trust the system and the people involved. Without that level of comfort (safety) people are generally unwilling to be vulnerable, to take in information that might seem threatening or to develop new skills. The typical reaction is defensiveness, screening out criticism and putting the blame on anyone and everyone else”. In addition, while the previous student attainment is found to in part influence the learning outcomes according to teachers from University A, teachers’ understanding and teaching techniques are the two more important factors affecting learning outcomes as perceived by teachers from University B.

In this study, differences in the educational objectives were also found between the two universities. Maclean (2010) points out that historically, there was a sharp distinction between vocational education and higher education, with the university producing scientific, theoretical knowledge and vocational education providing specific practical application training with little theory. Over time, with the societies more relating to global economy and the request for graduates to be relevant to the economies, the boundary between those two was blurred (Biggs, 1999, cited in Hodge, 2010). In other words, contemporary higher education sector is gradually experiencing a process of vocationalization and becoming more subject to the changing nature of the economy. As learned from the interviews, the mission of University B tended to lean towards providing students with education relevant to real-world issues that helps them to perform professionally and effectively in the workplace. As the majority of interviewee Vietnamese students tend to prioritize acquiring employability skills over theoretical knowledge, in the case of University B, the needs of students and the more vocationally oriented education that the institution offer were found to have a better match. Therefore, even though the learning content is not fully determined by the students, this does not affect their learning satisfaction. On the other hand, students of University A tended to

make reference to the theory-oriented education programs offered as being outdated and irrelevant to the labor market needs. It can be argued that while the imposed centralized curriculum in University A is to blame and should be reconsidered, they should not be overblamed on providing theoretical and scientific knowledge to their students since that is obviously one of the main functions of higher education. In a culture that greatly favors education like Vietnam, as most families consider having their children attending higher education a must to maintain or advance their social 'face' or social position (Tran, 2015), immediate transition to university after high school graduation is seen as a common social pattern. The mismatch between what the university offer and what their students expect could be due to the absence of proper student counseling before they attend university, which leads to student's lack of proper understanding of the main functions of higher education sector.

To sum up, based on Neumann's (2013) framework of student-centered learning and the findings above, the researcher points to the centered on contour of the framework – where students have more freedom to proceed through learning activities, but do not have much authority to determine the learning content – to make a claim that the practice of this approach in the two universities of this study could be called student-centered learning. In other words, both universities analyzed fit into the student-centered learning criteria adopted in this study. Nonetheless, when contrasting university a to University B, the latter presents more favorable institutional conditions, more vocationally oriented courses, as well as consistent educational beliefs of teaching and learning underpinning the support for student active learning. Therefore, due to these factors, the education philosophy and practice of University B are more compatible to the student-centered learning principles suggested by Brandes and Ginnis (1986).

7 Conclusion

7.1 Concluding Remarks

Through the lens of Steiner-Khamsi's (2014) cross-national education policy borrowing, findings from the analysis of legislative documents provides the theoretical justifications for Vietnam's adoption of student-centered learning approach. Under pressure from forces of globalization, the fears of falling behind, taking the best practices from foreign countries at face value, which is student-centered learning in this case, is assumed by Vietnamese policy makers to be a quick fix solution because of its consistency with the kinds of learning believed to be needed for Vietnam. In addition, changes in socio-economic background of Vietnam since Doi Moi has made Vietnam a fertile site for international agencies to influence Vietnam's higher education reform by giving out expert advice, encouraging the replacement of the teacher-center teaching practice to the student-centered approach. More significantly, the influence World Bank on Vietnam's education policy in this case is not only limited to creating conditions for a higher education market in Vietnam on their first arrival to the country in the 1990s but also growing seeds for the ideas of learners should be put at the center of their study.

Employing Neumann's (2013) framework of student-centered learning, this study also concludes that the practice of this approach in both universities in this study manifests as the centered *on* contour of the framework, where content is still determined by the institution, while conditions are more relaxed to a greater or lesser extent. Upon closer examination, from the implementation at the classroom level to the operating mechanism at the institutional level, data gathered from the course syllabi and the interviews demonstrated that University B showed a better match to the student-centered learning principles suggested by Brandes and Ginnis (1986) regarding their education philosophy and practice. Particularly, the institutional conditions and the educational beliefs of teaching and learning perceived by interviewee teachers in University A was found to be generally less responsive to student needs and less supportive to students' active learning than University B, which seems to address the education they provide as "service" manifested in the whole institution. World Bank's (2008)

argument on this issue can be served as a possible explanation for this difference. They suggest since private institutions' operations are utterly determined by the number of students enrolled as well as on student retention, students are often regarded as customers and these institutions are more open to the needs and interests of them (World Bank, 2008).

In general, while student lack of necessary preparation for class and the impact of previous education are found in both universities to be factors that may hinder the effectiveness of student-centered learning in Vietnam, University A suffers from other several obstructing factors, which are: imposed centralized curriculum, rigid university admission process, imposed heavy academic load and control over process of learning, poor provisions of facilities, lower degree of cultural consideration, poor compensations and teacher being considered the source of knowledge. In contrast, student-centered learning seems to be the norm in University B, with the number of supportive factors outweighing its obstructive factors. These include self-determined curriculum, autonomy in recruiting students, student-determined academic load and control over process of learning, adequate provisions of facilities, higher degree of cultural consideration, shared responsibility between lectured and institution, reasonable compensations, teacher being consider the learning facilitator. Preference for cooperative learning is found to be the supportive factor that exists in both universities.

It is important to note that University B's curriculum being designed based on the foreign curriculum, its greater autonomy and its larger operating budget from higher tuition fees basically make the adoption of student-centered method not new and not very incompatible. For the case of University A, changing the traditional pedagogical approach will undoubtedly be a more difficult process, with tightly controlled curriculum and limited financial resources. Therefore, the results of this review and comparison are not for the sake of identifying which university is better in terms of competitiveness. Other than that, the study attempts to provide an insight into the issue how student-centered learning is practiced differently through different educational and economic conditions between two individual universities, suggesting that rather than seeking external solutions and mulling over the outcomes of 'best practice' from elsewhere, the government should adopt of a bottom-up approach and be more

concerned with the details of actual practice at lower levels to develop practical prescribing reform in its education system in general and in higher education in particular.

7.2 Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations. First, it is limited in covering only the case of two universities in Vietnam with a qualitative research design. Since student-centered learning is a concept that is bound to particular circumstances, allowing for different definitions and interpretations across different contexts (Schweisfurth, 2013a), the findings of the present study may not be generalized to other samples in a broader context of the study. Second, this study is conducted with students and teachers in the discipline of Social Sciences. Again, the findings may, therefore, not be truly representative of the whole population. However, the purpose of this study was not to generalize but to attempt to understand the current status of student-centered learning in higher education in Vietnam. The data collected using different methods from various informants yet on the same subject, which include the course syllabi, the voices from teacher's side and student's side, give in-depth findings to the study in its own context. Third, it should be noted that even though the thesis was written in English, most of the interviews conducted during the data collection process were in Vietnamese due to research participants' preference for their mother tongue. Although I tried to make the translation as authentic as possible in order to express the interviewees' answers in another language at its best, I am fully aware of the language barrier.

7.3 Recommendations

The findings of this study suggest that teachers cannot take the sole responsibility for the effective implementation of student-centered learning. Other related stakeholders, including the national policy-makers, the institutions, and the students need to acknowledge the changes in society.

To the government

The prominent paradox in education in Vietnam is that while the government seems to show their commitment to the ambitious education reform by the increasing allocation of state budget to the sector (The Government, 2016), there is a lack of clear guideline as well as coherent policies on how student-centered learning is defined and should be implemented in the context of Vietnam in order to better assess the educational accreditation. Policy-makers should take having dialogue across levels into account. Moreover, more autonomy in terms of curriculum and student recruitment should be given to higher education institutions. With more assistance and less unnecessary control at the national level, there could be more remarkable achievements in education development in general and higher education reform in particular.

To higher education institutions

People who are in the leadership positions in any field tend to have the temptation to be very top-down when the institutional change is needed. College administrators should be clear about, the rationale behind the change, what their goals are and what is needed to achieve the goals. In order to do this, deliberate systematic attempts should be made to engage staff members, especially teachers, in a dialogue about the why, what, and how to implement the change. Teachers are the ones who directly work with students, therefore, institutional support services should not only be for students, but should also be for academic staff since mere efforts by teachers may not carry out the intensive innovations without support from the institution and other stakeholders. Given that student-centered learning has broad implications and the use of its generalized definition should be avoided (Neumann, 2013), administrators at micro level should first position themselves at which student-centered learning contour they are able pursue, then all teachers and students should be informed of the institutional vision so that they are both clear about what their rights and responsibilities are.

To the students

Student-centered learning puts the students' needs and interests as its priorities, but it also means that student, which is another part of the classroom community, have to take more

responsibility for their own learning. Teachers and institutions cannot successfully implement this learning approach without student's effort. Now that they are studying in a student-centered classroom where direct spoon-feeding no longer exists, how can they make the most of the class time without their participation and basic knowledge in hand?

Further studies

As Steiner-Khamsi (2014) states in her interpretive framework for comparative policy studies, “the local context is key to understanding why policies are borrowed (externalization), how they are locally modified and implemented (recontextualization), and what impact they have on existing structures, policies, and practices (internalization)” (p. 162). Although this study gives a glimpse of how student-centered learning is recontextualized and why externalization takes place, it does not examine the issue of internalization. Steiner-Khamsi (2014) cautions that the assumption that once a borrowed policy or practice is implemented, either replacement of existing structures or policy hybridization occurs is incorrect, since it may lead to a third possible scenario, which is reinforcement of existing structures. Given the findings in this study and the caution made by Steiner-Khamsi (2014) above, it would be very interesting to further investigate what impact student-centered learning has on the current higher education system in Vietnam.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Rubric for determining degree of learning-centeredness in course syllabi

	1	2	3	4
COMMUNITY				
Accessibility of teacher	Available for prescribed number of office hours only; discourages interaction except in class or for emergency	Available for prescribed number of office hours; provides phone and email but discourages contact	Available for more than prescribed number of office hours; offers phone, email, fax, home phone; encourages interaction	Available for multiple office hours, multiple means of access including phone(s), email, fax; holds open hours in locations other than office (e.g. library or union); encourages interaction
Learning Rationale	No rationale provided for assignments or activities	Explanation of assignments and activities but not tied directly to learning outcomes	Rationale provided for assignments and activities; tied to learning outcomes	Rationale provided for assignments, activities, methods, policies and procedures; tied to learning outcomes
Collaboration	Collaboration prohibited	Collaboration discouraged	Collaboration incorporated; use of groups for work and study	Collaboration required; use of groups for class work, team projects; encourages students to learn from one another
POWER AND CONTROL				
Teacher's role	No shared power. Authoritarian, rules are written as directives; numerous	No shared power; while teacher is ultimate authority, some flexibility is included for	Limited shared power; students may be offered some choice in types of assignments or	Shared power. Teacher encourages students to participate in developing policies and procedures for

	penalties; no flexibility in interpretation; not accommodating to differences	policies and procedures; some accommodation for differences among students	weight of assignments or due dates	class as well as input on trading, due dates and assignments
Student's role	Student is told what he or she is responsible for learning	Student is told what he or she is responsible for learning but encouraged to go beyond minimum to gain reward	Student is given responsibility for presenting material to class. Some projects rely on student-generated knowledge	Students take responsibility for bringing additional knowledge to class via class discussion or presentation
Outside resources	No outside resources other than required textbook. Teacher is primary source of knowledge	Reference to outside resources provided but not required	Outside resources included with explanation that students are responsible for learning outside of the classroom and independent investigation	Outside resources included with explanation that students are responsible for learning outside of the classroom and independent investigation. Students expected to provide outside resource information for class
Syllabus focus	Focus is on policies and procedures. No discussion of learning or outcomes	Weighted towards policy and procedures with some reference to content covered	Includes course objectives. Balance between policies and procedures and focus on learning	Syllabus weighted towards student learning outcomes and means of assessment; policies are minimal or left to class negotiation
EVALUATION/ASSESSMENT				
Grades	Focus is on losing points; grades used to penalize	Emphasizes the accumulation of points	Grades are tied directly to learning outcomes; students	Grades are tied to learning outcomes; option for achieving

		disassociated from learning performance	have some options for achieving points	points; not all work is graded
Feedback mechanism	Mid-term and final test grades only. Students not allowed to see or to retain copies of tests	Mid-term and final test grades with minimal other graded work. Tests not cumulative. Students may see but not retain copies of tests	Grades and other feedback in the form of non-graded assignments, activities, opportunities to conference with teacher	Periodic feedback mechanisms employed for the purpose of monitoring learning (lecture response slips, non-graded quizzes, graded quizzes, tests, papers, SGID or other feedback on learning
Evaluation	Tests (not comprehensive)	Tests, quizzes and other summative evaluation	Summative and formative evaluation, written work required	Summative and formative evaluations including written and oral presentations, group work, self-evaluation and peer evaluation
Learning outcomes	No outcomes stated	Goals for course stated but not in the form or learning outcomes	Learning outcomes clearly stated	Learning outcomes stated and are tied to specific assessments
Revision/redoing	No rewriting or redoing of assignments allowed	Some rewriting or redoing of assignments allowed, but penalized	Rewriting and redoing of assignments allowed	Rewriting and redoing of assignments encouraged

Appendix 2. Interview Guide for Teachers

– Data on the educational beliefs of the subject (teacher)

1. Have you ever heard about student-centered learning approach?
 - When (and how) did you first hear about student-centered learning approach?
2. What do you think of that idea?
 - To what extent do you agree or disagree with it? Why?
3. How do you define student-centered learning?
4. Had you been in a student-centered classroom while you were a student?
5. What is your ideal student-centered classroom?

– Data on division of labor

➤ How the teacher interacts with students

6. Do you implement student-centered learning approach in your classroom?
7. How long have you implemented student-centered learning approach?
8. What is your role in class?
9. What resources do you use?
10. Do you know what your students expect from you?
 - How do you know it?

➤ Teacher's perspective of student learning in class

11. What do you expect from your students?
12. Based on your teaching experience, what are the typical characteristics of Vietnamese students in your student-centered classroom? (What are major challenges that Vietnamese students face when they are in a student-centered classroom?)

– Information on supporting and/or challenging aspects that occurred in the classroom from teacher’s perspective

13. Can you please describe a situation in your classroom where you think you have advantages in implementing student-centered learning?

14. Can you please describe a situation in your classroom where you think you have difficulties in implementing student-centered learning?

15. How have the following factors impacted on your implementation of student-centered learning? Please explain (This question would be asked in case the interviewee gave vague answers to questions 13 + 14)

- **Rules**: Vietnamese cultural norms, social tradition, etc.
- **Instruments**: Provision of facilities and resources (e.g. library, access to academic publications and research databases, classroom facilities, etc.)
- **Community**: Institutional policy (e.g., classroom size, curricula, how the institutions encourage teachers to implement student-centered learning)

16. Apart from the above factors, could you think of any other factors which influenced your implementation of student-centered learning?

17. Do you have any teaching strategies to help your students (1) maximize their strengths and/or (2) overcome those obstacles?

18. Could you provide some suggestions that could help facilitate the implementation of student-centered learning approach in Vietnamese higher education?

Appendix 3. Interview Guide for Students

– Data on the educational beliefs of the subject (student)

1. Have you ever heard about student-centered learning approach?
 - When (and how) did you first hear about student-centered learning approach?
2. What do you think of that idea? (In case the student have not heard about the term, “What does student-centered learning mean to you?” can be asked and brief explanation will be given by the interviewer)
 - To what extent do you agree or disagree with it? Why?

– Data on division of labor

➤ How students experience learning in the classroom

3. What are your first impressions as a university student?
4. How do you feel about the learning environment?
5. Is it different from when you were a high school student?
6. What is your role in class?

- Is that what you were told by your lecturers or what you really think yourself?

➤ How students learn in class/what they do

7. Can you describe the typical teaching and learning activities in your class?
8. What is your favorite learning activity in class? Please explain.

➤ How students perceive the teaching activities in the classroom

9. Do your lecturers provide you any explanation for the assignments and learning activities?
10. What do you expect from your lecturers?

11. Do you know what your lecturers expect from you?

- How do you know it?

12. Please tell me about your lecturers' pedagogical approach

13. Do lecturers follow the same approach or each lecturer develops their own way of teaching?

14. Which approach do you like the most?

15. How do you feel about that approach?

- Do you find it helpful/inspiring?

– Information on supporting and/or challenging aspects that occurred in the classroom from students' perspectives

16. Can you describe a situation in your classroom where you think you have advantages/perform well in a student-centered classroom?

17. Can you describe a situation in your classroom where you think you have difficulties in a student-centered classroom?

18. How have the following factors impacted on your adaptation to student-centered learning environment? Please explain (This question would be asked in case the interviewee gave vague answers to questions 13 + 14).

- **Rules**: Vietnamese cultural norms, social tradition, etc.
- **Instruments**: Provision of facilities and resources (e.g. library, access to academic publications and research databases, classroom facilities, etc.)
- **Community**: Institutional policy (e.g., classroom size, curricula, how the institutions encourage teachers to implement student-centered learning)

19. Apart from the above factors, could you think of any other factors which influenced your adaptation to student-centered learning?

20. Do you have any learning strategies/ tips to help yourself (1) maximize your strengths and/or (2) overcome those obstacles?

21. Could you provide some suggestions that could help facilitate the implementation of student-centered learning approach in Vietnamese higher education?