

STRATIFICATIONS IN UNIVERSITY STRATEGIES:
A CASE STUDY OF VIETNAM

Master Thesis

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A Case Study of Vietnam

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Abstracts

Vietnam has been making significant investments in its higher education. The country's aims are to build up a sustainable and comprehensive higher education sector that keep pace with dramatic changes in the society and be compatible with the international academic community. Vietnamese higher education institutions, on the other hand, are required to handle growing expectations from a variety of stakeholders and the multi-faceted external world. The study investigates tendencies in universities' strategic planning and positioning themselves in such a context. Accordingly, strategic plans from 12 sample universities, including both research and applied university groups, were collected and analyzed. The method in use was thematic content analysis. The findings inform considerable imbalance between societal and economic responsibilities that are addressed in strategic plans of the two groups. Vietnamese universities also show a tendency to 'think global – act local'. While getting more involved in the global narratives of international scholarship and excellence, institutions tightly connect their missions with the local economy and society. Overall, university strategic plans reflect a system of expansion in not only scale but also quality.

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List of Abbreviation

APQN	Asia Pacific Quality Network
ASEAN	Association of South East Asian Nations
AUN-QA	ASEAN University Network - Quality Assurance
CDIO	Conceive – Design – Implement – Operate
GDETA	General Department of Education Testing and Accreditation
HE	Higher Education
HEIs	Higher Education Institutions
HERA	Higher Education Reform Agenda 2006-2020
INQAAHE	Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education
ISCED	International Standard Classification of Education 2011
MOET	Ministry of Education and Training
MOF	Ministry of Finance
MOHA	Ministry of Home Affairs
MOLISA	Ministry of Labor, War Invalids and Social Affairs
MOPI	Ministry of Planning and Investment
MOST	Ministry of Science and Technology
NTTU	Nguyen Tat Thanh University
TDTU	Ton Duc Thang University
TUE	Thai Nguyen University of Education – Thai Nguyen University
UEH	University of Economics Ho Chi Minh City
UFM	University of Finance and Marketing
USSH	University of Social Sciences and Humanities – Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City
VET	Vocational and Technical Training
VETIs	Vocational and Technical Training Institutions
VNUA	Vietnam National University of Agriculture
VUN-HN	Vietnam National University - Ha Noi

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1 Introduction

1.1 Contextual Introduction

Vietnam had long history under influences from dominant power such as China, France or Soviet Union. Besides strongly steering the country's society and culture, the conquerors and colonizers left higher education (HE) system with mixture of unique, diverse, even contradictory concepts in its values, governance and structures. They are, notably, the prestigious value of learning in Confucianism, a European-styled scholar system from French or the Soviet central planning and management. After “Đổi Mới – Revolution” in 1986, the country has been rising as a newly-emerging economy, dramatically changing and moving towards the free market economy with an urge to integrate into regional and international ecology. These massive changes in Vietnamese society and economy do impose both challenges and chances to totally transform the higher education system.

In the country's Strategy for Human Resource Development 2011-2020, higher education holds responsibilities for providing highly-skilled workforce – the elites of the human infrastructure. Therefore, according to Resolution 29-NQ/TW, improvement in higher education content has been strongly highlighted, especially in developing learners' creativity, practical skills, work ethics as well as social knowledge, step by step approaching the world's advanced science and technology. Together with Vocational Training, Higher Education (HE) in Vietnam is facing an ideal chance for transformation and development, in the context when the breakthrough strategies in national socio-economic development are placed on human resource development, emphasizing high quality labor force and ability to apply scientific and information technology. In the past thirty years, Vietnamese HE system has been expanding rapidly. At the national level, Vietnam has developed a relatively comprehensive and diverse HE system with different levels compatible to International Standard Classification of Education 2011 (ISCED). The Higher Education Law enacted in 2012 also provides legislative framework for the HE sector to realize its mission in education, research and serving the country's socio-economic demands. Departing from the old Soviet central planning model with the state as the only provider, Vietnamese HE market nowadays accommodates a variety of shareholders including public, private and foreign investors. The transformation process in Vietnam came in two ways: the reformation of entire public sector

and the rise of privatization in higher education, which is similar to many other countries. In the public provision, the government decentralized its management while gradually taking a supervision role in the last two decades (Harman, Hayden, & Phạm, 2010; Hayden & Dao, 2010; Sloper, Lê, & Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1995; T. T. Tran, 2014). Detaching from the central line-managing ministries, public institutions have been exercising their growing autonomy. In another aspect, institutional accountabilities were step by step fostered through progressive quality assessment and external profile establishment. According to the MOET, up to 2018, 23 public universities in Vietnam have registered and been operating as entirely self-financed institutions (MOET, 2018a). Private institutions, existing in Vietnam's contemporary higher education system for 30 years, are expected to be responsible for 40% of total enrollment in 2020 by its government. The planned portion reflects the manifestation of neo-liberal ideas in Vietnam's economic development and state management, which navigates HE towards massification and marketization (L. T. Tran, Marginson, & Nguyen, 2014). In late 2015, following Decree no.86/NĐ-CP on mechanism for collection and management of tuition fee, the government's decision to triple the tuition caps for all public universities and colleges, almost as high as those in private sector, gave another explicit hint of its intention to build a competitive market of higher education in Vietnam. This circumstance reflected the argument of scholars (Ka Ho Mok, 2007; L. T. Tran et al., 2014) stating that "market forces and market approach have become paramount in the shaping of higher education" (L. T. Tran et al., 2014, p. 134)

Similar to many other countries, HE is one of the most internationalized sectors in Vietnam. In the early efforts of boosting internationalization in higher education, Vietnam joined Brisbane agreements on educational development among 52 Asia-Pacific countries with specific goals of identifying global-standard quality assurance systems, recognizing vocational and higher education qualification frameworks, enhancing cross-border exchange and investment, developing strategies and practices for 21st century content and competencies, etc. (EDNET Coordinator, 2007). Different from market-driven principles for internationalization in largely English-speaking countries, approaches for internationalization utilized in Vietnam are capacity-building and international cooperation (L. T. Tran et al., 2014). In that context, the recent focal is enhancing research capacity in institutions and expanding foreign cooperation for the sake of better regional and international recognition. This year saw significant improvements in those aspects. In early 2019, two Vietnamese universities, for the first time, found their names in QS World university Ranking – a

prestigious international ranking system. Accordingly, Vietnam National University – Ho Chi Minh and Vietnam National University - Ha Noi were placed in the top 701-750 and 800-1000 on the list, respectively. In Asian region, Vietnam also had seven (7) institutions included in the top 500 universities (“QS University Rankings,” 2018). While the quality of HE ranking metrics is controversial, the news still shows positive progress in Vietnamese efforts in integrating into global ecology.

1.2 Problem Statement

Despite certain achievements in Vietnamese efforts to transform the HE system, many scholars noted considerable limits in the sector. The most frequently mentioned issues, notably, were abridged in “disconnections” from World Bank report (2012)(Đỗ, 2014a, p. 62). Those are:

- *Disconnection between higher education and employers (skill users), with a paradox of high unemployment rate among graduates and unfilled positions in trades,*
- *Disconnection between higher education and companies (research users), with limited contributions of higher education institutions to technology adaptation and upgrading in companies, and*
- *Disconnection between higher education and research institutes (research providers) with universities remaining the domain of teaching and research being administrated by governmental research institutes.*

In the context of such massive change at the system level, imparted from both domestic and international factors, universities and colleges in Vietnam are under demand to adapt to on-going changes from both internal and external constituents. Accordingly, transformation at institutional levels is huge as well. Detaching from being units of affiliated line-ministries in the old Soviet model, universities and colleges in Vietnam are becoming more flexible organizations in a fast-growing market (Đỗ, 2014a). Similarly to most of governance reform in other countries, Vietnamese institutions are embracing ‘managerial’ structure with more hierarchical intra-governance and on the other hand, fostering their accountabilities to the outside world.

In fact, regarding both achievements and issues usually mentioned at the macro level of the whole system, many of those were mainly gained and occurred at institutional levels. Decentralization of power goes hand in hand with enhancing institutional efficiency. In

Vietnam, recent quality assurance process wouldn't have succeeded without institutions' support and quick adoption. All 'disconnections' mentioned by World Bank as key issues of Vietnam system eventually reflect the limit in institutional linkage with the economy and other sectors within the system.

Taking all these contextual changes and challenges towards Vietnamese institutions as a point of departure, the current research looks into the question of how universities tackle all these challenges, (re-)define their roles and position themselves in such a fast-growing and fast-changing market of Vietnam. In another word, what responsibilities universities take up and the ways to tackle them, on one hand, strengthen their organizational rationales, and on the other hand, place the starting point where universities define their roles in the entity and argue for their stands to the outside world. All these important decisions are legitimized in one type of universities' official documents: their strategic plans. While strategic planning has long been a useful management tool in universities (Stensaker et al., 2018), its rising prominence comes as a result of the revolution of decentralizing governance power from the state to higher education institutions (Fumasoli & Lepori, 2011) and with the purpose of enhancing their organization rationales (Krücken & Meier, 2006). Strategic plans are documents in which institution define their unique characteristics, their long-termed goals as well as the indicators of how to achieve them (Morphew, Fumasoli, & Stensaker, 2018). These plans involve not only the entire internal staffs but also other key external stakeholders as a mean for institutional accountabilities (Fumasoli, Pinheiro, & Stensaker, 2015). Therefore, strategic plans of 12 universities from diverse groups of institutional profiles have been collected and analyzed.

1.3 Research Questions

The aim of the study is to investigate Vietnam universities' strategic plans to see how the universities position themselves in a newly-emerging higher education market. Differences and similarities in their strategic patterns as well as the underlined influences are expected to draw out. Furthermore, these findings also reveal a potential stratification in strategies of the whole country's higher education landscape.

The research questions are:

1. Are universities' strategies a reflection of HE system characteristics?
2. How are universities balancing different responsibilities in their strategies?
3. How influenced are HEIs with globalization?

1.4 Significance of the study

Limited research on university strategies has been found in Vietnamese context even though strategies have been the subject of study for several contexts all over the world. Existing research has been conducted on a wide range of strategic plan collection, from single national backgrounds (Fumasoli & Lepori, 2011; Guven, 2011; Morphew & Hartley, 2006) to regional comparison (Morphew et al., 2018) or global scale (Stensaker et al., 2018). This research aims to generate more contextual knowledge and add new academic input into the emerging research area.

In Vietnam HE system, findings on stratification of universities' strategic plans offer systematic responses of institutions to the progressive contextual changes in policies and marketplace - the highlight of the system's transformation over the last 3 decades. Since strategic planning is a useful tool for university management (Bryson, 2004; Keller, 1983) and organizational accountability (Stensaker & Harvey, 2010), university leaderships as well as external stakeholders may find the results of the study a practical reflection of HE system characteristics. These reflections can provide useful evidences on the current HE landscape to both institutional managers as well as policy-makers in their future planning and policy-making. Finally, the thesis serves as reference for those who find its findings significant or doing further research on Vietnamese university strategies.

2 Vietnam Higher Education Background

2.1 Historical Aspects

2.1.1 Inherited Tradition

Fondness for learning and honoring education took their ground as a respectful tradition to all Vietnamese students thousands years back to the country's ancient history. While higher learning origin dated back to 2000 years ago, the Ly Emperor was the one to establish the first institute for higher learning called Quoc Tu Giam (Temple of Literature) for the country in 1076. Vietnamese society at that time was mostly characterized by influences from the North (China) such as Taoism, Buddhism and especially Confucianism, which highly reflected in its education as well. Quoc Tu Giam, accordingly, was formed under heavy influence of classic Chinese education model and provided education only for groups of the bureaucrats, royalty, and noble elites, not for the public.

2.1.2 Western Impacts

Western impacts brought into Vietnam by the French colonialism in the late 19th century introduced rapid and significant changes to the regional society and education landscape. The introduction of Catholicism, together with the extension usage of roman script invented by Alexander De Rohes in 17th century, was among French's important policies to steer up a largely Buddhist country and an education embracing Confucianism. In higher learning area, the French established the first modern university – the School of Medicine and Pharmacy (antecedent of Hanoi University of Medicine) in Hanoi in 1902. Later in the 20s, this institution was merged with some other colleges founded before 1920 to form the University of Indochina, which provided education and trained specialized elites for the entire Indochina region (including Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam at the time). These elites would receive minor degrees - in French's attempts to cultivate a minor paralleling Grandes Ecole's system in their colonies - and be supposed to obtain further education in France. In some aspects, French undeniably succeeded in creating parallel existence in Vietnam higher education landscape: a European-styled scholar system added to the preceded codified Mandarin-styled one, which was still in favor of nationalist resistance to the French colonialism. Yet, there

was a big gap in the desirable paths of development between those of colonizers and independence-minded nationalists (Welch, 2007).

2.1.3 Contemporary System

Contemporary tertiary education did not mark its development until 1954 after the North's anti-French victory in Dien Bien Phu (Đỗ, 2014b). The division of two Vietnams proclaimed different pathways in higher education development. While in the north, several specialized and mono-disciplinary universities and colleges, similar to the Soviet model, were founded to serve a socialist-oriented economy; in the South, a hybrid system of national comprehensive universities and provincial community colleges was in favor. Not until 1975 when the country reunified to socialist orientation, did the former approach become unified for the entire tertiary system. As of the time, the North had 30 public higher education institutions in total comparing to 7 public and 7 private of those in the South (Welch, 2007). Following other socialist models, Vietnamese universities were organized as training colleges under particular social or economic arenas and focused on single area of professions like law, teaching, technology, etc. while research was mostly conducted by separated units like academies or research centers. Accordingly, all those institutions were founded and directly governed by relating ministries or provincial authorities, which was known as line ministry control in Soviet-affiliated countries. Embracing a central-planning economy and society, the state was the only provider for education. Its regulatory responsibilities were provided through Ministry of Education for basic education and Ministry of Higher and Secondary Technical Education for oversight of tertiary education. This inter-ministerial governance, or so-called line management policy has been considered as “overlapping, confusing and waste” (Trines, 2017) and partly caused limited coordination within the system which persisted until nowadays. Besides its tightly-controlled socialist setting, the formation of education system in Vietnam was also under strong impacts of nationalist aspirations. One of those efforts was to extend the usage of modern Vietnamese with roman script as language of instruction (Welch, 2007)

2.1.4 Renovation

Vietnam Higher Education underwent a significant reform in 1993 under the umbrella of national breakthrough agenda in economic renovation “Doi Moi” launched since 1986. In

that context, the importance of the sector's reform was emphasized as crucial firstly for the country's social and economic development and secondly for its own expansion (Pham & Sloper, 1995).

In the situation of economic crisis and the expansion of tertiary demand, government funding for the sector shrank. Universities and colleges could no longer rely on public funding as the only financial resource. In line with the "socialization" - the term in use for socialist orientation in entire public sector, privatization of public higher education and the establishment of "non-public" institutions were allowed. Public institutions were allowed and encouraged to maximize their revenue-generating activities to make their own supplement for the squeezing public funding. Non-public enrolments like side-stream, in-service programs with higher tuition fees and sideline services progressively grew. During early 90s, non-public universities and colleges initially appeared in form of "semi-public", "people-founded" or "private" institutions and have only existed under "private" category since 2014¹. These institutions, used to receive partial public funding based on their historical types, now receive none state funding and relied mostly on students' tuition fees. This sector might grow up modestly at first - one can say, due to government's cautiousness towards education's privatization- but, had added an utmost important shareholder of the entities.

In addition, In line with the country's attempts to integrate into the world's economy, in higher education provision, the Soviet model of small-scaled, specialized colleges founded in the late 1950s was retreated, making room for a unified western-style system of "large, comprehensive, research-oriented universities" (Hayden & Lam, 2010, p. 16). In 1992-1993, nine out of 103 specialized and teaching-oriented colleges were granted university status (Hayden & Lam, 2010). University consolidation was another dominant strategy, reflecting the state's decisiveness in the provision's reform and its immediate result. The establishment of 2 national universities (one in Hanoi capital, the other in Ho Chi Minh city) and 5 key regional universities (in Thai Nguyen, Hue, Da Nang, Can Tho, and Vinh) by merging smaller-scaled specialized universities in 1994-1995 set up the country's urban university model. Consolidation continued in public sector while higher education institutions (HEIs) in

¹ Decision 45/2014/TT-BGDĐT dated 17/12/2014 on transforming people-founded universities into private universities.

private sector grew in number over the next decade. It was in the late 20th century that higher education in Vietnam was officially decreed in two sectors: universities and colleges².

The Government also made early efforts in reshaping its regulatory instrumentalities and agencies. In 1990, The Ministry of General Education and the Ministry of Higher, Technical and Vocational Education was merged to found The Ministry of Education and Training (MOET). Since then, the MOET has been responsible for all levels of education except for Vocational and Technical Training (VET), whose most institutions were under control of the Ministry of Labor, War Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA). Early Education Law was revised and constituted in 1998, placing the legal framework for the transforming entity.

2.2 Progressive Reformation to Present Shape

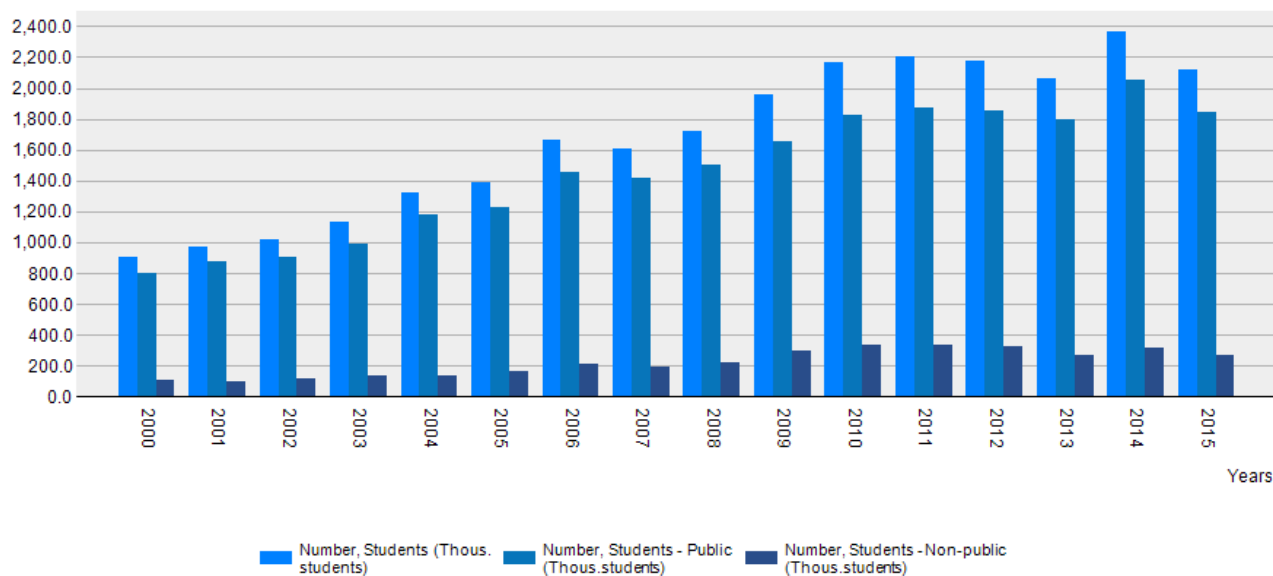
2.2.1 Student and Institution Body

Student enrollment in Vietnamese HE showed big boom over last decades and just stayed stable recently. The enrollment rate jumped from merely 10 percent of relevant age group in 2001 to 25 percent in 2011. The sector noted its peak of student attendance in 2014 at 30.4 percent before this number slightly fell back to 28 percent in 2015 and 2016 (World Bank, n.d.). This stagnation, notably seen in public sector, is likely due to the shift in student enrollment towards non-tertiary VET institutions, which reflects a recent change in students' overview of labor market needs and their choice of career path.

Correspondingly, the total number of students in Vietnamese universities and colleges was more than doubled in the first 10 years of 2000s, reaching over 2 million in 2010 compared to nearly 1 million in 2000. By May 2016, Vietnam had had 2,3 million students attending higher education with approximately 80 percent attaining universities and 20 percent in colleges.

² Decree no. 43/2000/ND-CP dated 30/08/2000 by the government on detailed provisions and guiding implementation of the Higher Education Law 1998.

Figure 1 Growth in total number of Vietnamese tertiary student



During the same period, universities slightly outgrew colleges in number. Yet this is worth noting that many of public universities were actually a result of so-called ongoing “institutional drift” - colleges were upgraded into universities. In addition, many universities in Vietnam offer college programs.

In September 2016, Vietnamese government made an important transfer between HE and VET sectors. Accordingly, more than 500 colleges and professional schools running under the MOET supervision, except for teacher training institutes, were moved to VET sector, under the MOLISA responsibility³. This made HE in Vietnam, by the end of 2018, officially include 235 universities with 170 public, 60 private and 5 foreign-owned institutes. Besides, there were 37 research institutes approved to provide PhD training programs by the MOET. There are 19 “key universities and institutes” scattering along the country but mostly gathering in Hanoi (the capital in the North) and Ho Chi Minh city (in the South). These institutions include 2 national, 5 regional universities and 12 other universities and institutes

³ Article 9, Resolution 76/NQ-CP dated 03/09/2016 by the government in the August Governmental Meeting on the transfer of state management in colleges and professional post-secondary schools from MOET to MOLISA.

with research-intensive orientation and responsibility of providing high quality workforce in nation's crucial arenas.

Table 1 Institutions and Student growth in Vietnam since 2000

		2000-2001	2004-2005	2009-2010	2014-2015	2016-2017*	2017-2018*
Total institutions		178	230	403	436		
Universities	Total	74	93	173	219	235	235
	Public	57	71	127	159	170	170
	Non-Public	17	22	46	60	65	65
Colleges	Total	104	137	230	217		
	Public	99	130	199	189		
	Non-Public	5	7	31	28		
Total Students		918,228	1,319,754	1,935,739	2,363,942		
University students	Total	731,505	1,046,291	1,358,861	1,824,328	1,767,879	1,707,025
	Public	642,041	933,352	1,185,253	1,596,754	1,523,904	1,439,495
	Non-Public	89,464	112,939	173,608	227,574	243,975	267,530
College students	Total	186,723	273,463	576,878	539,614		
	Public	171,922	248,642	471,113	453,568		
	Non-Public	14,801	24,821	105,765	86,046		

Note : * Colleges were moved to VET sector since 2016

2.2.2 Private Sector

There has been a remarkable increase in number of institutions in private sector. The first non-public institution was Thang Long University, established in Hanoi in 1988 as a “people-founded” university. Even though the university totally depended itself financially on students’ tuition fees, all of its activities was under strict oversight of the MOET as other public institutions. After the government opened the market for “for-profit” private shareholders in 2005, this sector outgrew in number, reaching 88 HEIs as of 2015. Unlike the reformation of the public sector, private universities and colleges were mostly newly-established. They highly focused their programs on areas that were on high demand on the labor market but not yet fulfilled by opponent public universities such as business, service, foreign languages and information technology (IT). Yet the massive growth of this sector came along with controversial issues relating, but not limited, to over-enrollment,

understaffing and teaching quality. Nowadays, after 2 decades dealing with internal quality issues and external cautions, private sector took account for approximately 15% of student number in 2012 before slightly declined to 13% in 2015. Even though this number shows a significant distance from government target of 40% of enrollment for the sector by 2020, private universities are proving themselves as an important body in providing skilled labor force for the market. Some active institutions, among those can be named: Hoa Sen University and FPT University, have gained high domestic trust and reputation. Regarding internationalization of higher education in Vietnam, these private institutions could have been seen as an active force. It was likely to be an effective solution for them to deal with unfavored governance schemes and their unbalanced domestic status comparing to public provision. These aspects of private sector will be discussed alongside with public one in later themes.

2.2.3 State Governance and Institutional Autonomy: towards a Neo-liberal System

At the national level, higher education in Vietnam is still centralized. MOET is the main government instrumentality and responsible for both policy and strategy development for the whole sector. It also provides the regulatory framework for new institution establishment, student enrollment quotas, qualification, instruction management, quality insurance and accreditation (Đỗ, 2014a). Other ministries, including Ministry of Finance (MOF), Ministry of Planning and Investment (MOPI), Ministry of Home Affairs (MOHA), Ministry of Science and Technology (MOST) take different roles in financing and collaborating for the sector's development, especially in shaping national policies and development plans.

In 2006, MOET's Higher Education Reform Agenda 2006-2020 (HERA) was enacted, demonstrating the government's determination to renew the sector's governance in the context of a fast-transforming entity. Paralleling with a wide range of ambitious goals towards a comprehensive and sustainable system in 2020, HERA shows the government's intention in building a more flexible and responsive arena. The main ideas center around firstly, decentralization and granting more autonomy for institutions, secondly, efforts to eliminate the line management and lastly, building proper accreditation and quality insurance systems to boost universities' responsiveness. The revision of Education Law in 2005 and the first official Higher Educational Law 2012 went a step further in reforming the provision. In

terms of HEIs internal governance, the role of governing councils was legitimized and strongly highlighted as highest governing body, responsible for all aspects of institutions' activities from strategy development to supervision of policies' implementation and internal decisions, and finally insurance of institution's democracy. Additionally, institutions are granted greater autonomy than before. Notably, since 2012, HEIs have been allowed to decide their own curriculum, instruction system, self-assessment and establishment of new degree programs which used to be assessed by MOET (Article 33,34,36, Higher Education Law 2012).

Despite all prominent policies, real changes took place slowly. Take the line management elimination for example. Even though there were huge emphasizes and efforts from the government to bring all higher education institutions under the governance of MOET, Vietnam was considered much slower and less effective than other countries such as China and Hungary in the same move (T. T. Tran, 2014), making the governance system quite intercrossed and complicated. Recently, the responsibilities for higher education were still shared among several governmental bodies. Except for the 2 national universities that report directly to The Cabinet, 54 public universities and colleges, including all 'key universities'⁴, were governed by MOET while the remaining 250 others are under control of different ministries and provincial authorities (Dao, 2015) . This means that any higher education policies will have to face the challenge of the diversity in its own governance, accordingly, leading to potentially different interpretation and implementation.

The state centralized management also has several impacts on real autonomy of institutions. While Vietnamese government explicitly tend to build an state-owned higher education system with governing councils as the highest governing body and representatives of ownership in all institutions, the fact is that the governing council model are slowly adopted, even in pilot self-financed institutions with much greater autonomy⁵. According to MOET statistics, there had been only 58 governing councils established out of 169 public universities by the end of 2017. In these institutions, how much freedom and autonomy that the governing councils can act upon is still nominal (Đỗ, 2014a). In fact, the governmental and line ministries still hold utmost power in many aspects of institutional management. For

⁴ Regulation 26/2014/QĐ-TTg dated 26/03/2014 by the Prime Minister on Regulations on organization and activities of national universities and periphery universities

⁵ Resolution 77/NQ-CP dated 24/10/2014 on piloting new management mechanism of self-financing in public HEIs period 2014-2017

instance, management ministries appoint universities' key personnel and allocate state funding while MOET decide student admission quota and program establishment. To give governing council – a new internal democratic power legacy – a real power seat, the centralized governance and line management should be retreated and eliminated as stipulated in many pieces of legislation.

In private sector, universities and colleges operate as for-profit corporates even though some claim to be non-profit institutions. The governance power centers on the board as in other private entities. In general, they attract none state funding and depend entirely on tuition revenues. The only support they get from the government is tax incentives and land access with lower cost (Đỗ, 2014a; Hayden & Dao, 2010; Hayden & Lam, 2010). Despite their greater autonomy regarding internal governance, government still impose tight control on certain aspects, notably admission quotas and entry minimum cut-off point as towards public counterparts. These policies on the one hand ensure the quality of the system as a whole but on the other hand limit the access and long-term development of private institutions.

Yet once private institutions are allowed to operate, there are minimal mechanism for state to supervise their activities and assure minimum quality of their products. Private institutions, in the context of expanding demand for tertiary degrees, tend to become “degree mills” in the lack of proper governmental oversight (Đỗ, 2014b, 2014a). To address this issue, alongside with the governance transforming in public sector, an effective accountability mechanism needs to be employed.

2.2.4 Quality Insurance and Quality Improvement

In the context of developing a more neo-liberal governance system in a fast-growing entity, greater accountability become essential more than ever to ensure institution's quality, performances and their proper use of resources both in public and private sectors. Among different approaches towards accountability, quality accreditation was firstly introduced in 2004 and formally set up in Vietnamese system in 2009.

At present, there are 4 accreditation centers that conducting accreditation for all HEIs and VETIs: the Center for Education Accreditation – VNU-Hanoi, the Center for Education Accreditation – VNU-HCMC, the Center for Education Accreditation – Da Nang University,

and the Center for Education Accreditation of the Association of Vietnam Universities and Colleges. The regulatory guidelines are set and implemented by General Department of Education Testing and Accreditation (GDETA), an external agency of MOET. Assessment criteria focus on institution's mission statement and its resource capacities, personnel and curriculum to realize this mission and prepare graduates for employment, research, knowledge transfer, and international collaborations in compliance with the country's socio-economic development⁶.

Even though standard-based accreditation has inevitable limit in promoting institutional diversity and improving quality (Bogue & Hall, 2003; Đỗ, 2014b), it provides essential departing points for ensuring a minimum quality standard in accredited institutions to the state, public and other shareholders. Besides, it offers a supportive institutional self-governing tool to institutions' board and rectors who are traditionally experts in their academic fields more than institutional management. These are probably the underlined motivation for institutions to enthusiastically support and immediately activate such a policy as accreditation guideline. By GDETA statistics as of April 2018, after only 2 years of re-operation of accreditation agencies, there had been total of 250 universities and colleges finishing internal evaluation, in which 80 universities and 2 colleges were accredited out of 113 assessed institutions.

Apart from the national quality assurance system, Vietnam institutions have been actively involved in regional and international quality assurance networks such as International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE), ASEAN University Network - Quality Assurance (AUN-QA), Asia Pacific Quality Network (APQN). According to Nguyen, Ta, and Nguyen (2017), by 2018, Vietnam had had 6 institutions accredited by High Council for Evaluation of Research and Higher Education (HCERES) and AUN-QA. While program accreditation under national standard is still new and unpopular, partly due to the limited capacities of accreditation agencies and the priorities of whole institutional assessment, many Vietnamese advanced and high quality programs have been assessed and accredited by international agencies. Specifically, as of 112 accredited programs by 2018, only 8 accreditations were made by domestic agencies while 104 others were made by international counterparts. Participating in these regional and international networks as

⁶ Decision 65 /2007/QĐ-BGDĐT dated 1/11/2007 on Regulations on Standards and Criteria for Quality Assessment of Higher Education Institutions.

well as their projects and activities, not only has Vietnam's higher education quality assurance gained valuable experience for its own system, but it has also proved to be integrating with international trend.

As Đỗ (2014b) noted, it is necessary to mention other attempts from the government to foster institutional accountabilities and assure their minimum quality. MOET made several requirements on institutions disclosing different measures in terms of their quality standards and indicators, staffing and finance etc. to make them more transparent and accountable in 2009 and 2010. As such, "there disclosures", "there transparencies"⁷ and "learning outcomes" were among positive acts. Determination on quality improvements was demonstrated in the government's tough decision towards discrepancies in institution quality. Specifically, 23 universities had their enrollment quotas cut off from 10 to 100 percent due to inadequate staffing and facility condition; 57 PhD training licenses were withdrawn from 17 institutions⁸ and 161 MA programs were under suspension⁹.

All of these efforts have begun to pay off. For a long time, the most cited quality issues in Vietnamese higher education system has been the teaching staff's qualifications and the absence of research culture in universities (Đỗ, 2014b; L. T. Tran, 2014). Improvement is certainly coming in both areas, even at different pace.

Addressing staffing standard in universities, it is quite common to see masters, or even bachelors giving lectures at universities. This situation occurs due to the severe shortage in teaching staffs at doctorate level and even much less professor title. Plus, many of these PhD holders and professors getting their degrees from the old Soviet system, are now taking up higher managing positions or reaching retirement. Thus, an ambitious program of reaching "23,000 doctorates in 2020" was launched by the government in efforts to increase the number of PhD holders in universities. Even though that number is still not enough to compensate for the present shortage, the progress is positive. In 2017, teaching staff with PhD and Master degrees rise 21.4% and 6.6% respectively compared to the previous year, making up more than 16500 PhD and 43000 Masters out of 73000 lectures in universities - according to MOET (MOET, 2017b).

⁷ Circular 09/2009/TT-BGDĐT on Regulations on Transparencies of Education Institutions in the National Education System.

⁸ Decision 533 dated 06/02/2013, on the withdrawal of licenses to provide training at doctorate level.

⁹ Official Letter 8985/BGDĐT-GDĐH dated 28/12/2012 on the suspension of substandard master's programs.

Research in Vietnam has been mainly conducted in research institutes – a remnant of Soviet structure – and only a few universities, which has consequences on students' learning and their abilities to generate new knowledge. The issue has been tackled in government's resolution 29-NQ/TW¹⁰ and gained solid achievement so far. Research culture is now spreading in almost all universities with progressive forming of the research groups. By the end of 2017, there had been 945 research groups in total with an average of 7 groups per university. Requirements of having annual scientific articles published on international journals were also added for PhD holders and candidates for professorship, step by step catching up with international standard on staff quality.

Last but not least, the last 2 years witnessed a whopping rise in number and quality of Vietnamese articles on international journals as such on ISI or Scopus journals. Before 2016, international publication from Vietnam had been ragging and modest. For the whole period of 5 years from 2011-2015, Vietnam had only 10,034 articles in total. Yet in two years of 2016 and 2017, the country had more than 15,000 articles. Surprisingly, 60% of those were from university lectures, not just researchers in research institutes (MOET, n.d.). Another statistic from 30 leading universities alone showed more than 10,000 publications in 1,5 year from 2017 to June 2018, showing significant improvement in Vietnam Higer Education .

¹⁰ Resolution 29-NQ/TW dated 4/11/2013 on the Fundamental and Comprehensive Reform of Education and Training, meeting the demands of Industrialization and Modernization Career in the Context of Socialist-Oriented Market Economy and International Integration.

3 Frameworks for Analysis

3.1 The Emergence of Strategic plans in Higher Education

Strategic planning has become a ubiquitous management process in higher education. It has been the result of dramatic changes in the environmental conditions which universities operate within decades. Those changes include the growing political expectations and requirements towards higher education institutions as public organizations (Fumasoli, Pinheiro, & Stensaker, 2015), the delegation of power from the state to universities leadership (Stensaker et al., 2018) which have been prominent in HE over all the world, and the emergence of management of universities in the business manner (Guyen, 2011). These developments have led to an increase in the prominence of strategic planning in higher education and transformed institutions into modern and strategic organizations (Keller, 1983; Krücken & Meier, 2006).

Strategic plans, on the other hands, are where the tangible outputs from the planning process are materialized (Fumasoli et al., 2015). These plans include the identification of university unique characteristics, as well as future aims and long-termed objectives of the organization. Typically, contemporary plans also provide metrics on how to achieve the established goals (Morphew, Fumasoli, & Stensaker, 2016) through explicit action lines and priorities in resource allocation (Guyen, 2011). By setting a framework for institutions to handle changes and shape the boundaries of their action lines (see more on Fumasoli et al., 2015), strategic plans can provide institutions with a useful management tool to adapt to the changing environment.

However, while strategic plans involve the entire internal community of institutions from administrators to academics, the attention on audiences is growing towards external stakeholders and constituencies (Morphew et al., 2016). For example, purposes of strategic plans were noted to be in line with the expanding marketing moves for better student recruitment in HE. Besides, the utility of strategic plans in HE sector can be seen as efforts to ensure the institutional “long-termed validity and effectiveness”, at the same time, remain the “mission mystique” which ostensibly links to the institutional functions and

identities (Fumasoli et al., 2015, p. 1030). In this respect, for universities, strategic plans play important accountability functions, especially because universities have less control over output and results compared to other public organizations (Clark (1983) in Fumasoli et al. (2015)). Therefore, strategic plans are increasingly in use to make universities modern and responsible public organizations (Stensaker & Harvey, 2010). In other words, strategic plans are of means to strengthen institutional legitimacy (Stensaker et al., 2018) in the context of increasing external pressure for accountability.

3.2 Growing expectations on University Missions

Universities are facing non-precedented pressures and growing expectations towards their values and functions. First of all, since the massification of HE worldwide, universities are required to commodate a growing and diversified student body than never before. Privatization and commercialization, on one hand, transform the institutional body and values by adding for-profit stakeholders, changing many universities' operation into a corporate model. This also results in the introduction of diverse managing mechanism in HE, notably, the emergence of new public management, the rising importance of accountability activities, the active engagement in institutional profiling. In another hand, external pressure is also competing against traditional values of higher education, shifting their long-time 'public good' value into 'private benefits' (Chan, 2016). There are on-going debates on if higher education should be seen as "education as an end in itself", a channel for societal contributions or a mean for the workforce preparation (Chan, 2016; Fumasoli, Pinheiro, & Stensaker, 2015, p. 1031). Nonetheless, universities can no longer perform their functions without being relevant to society and the economy. For instance, as producing new knowledge is among one of the main functions of universities, they are nowadays expected to do it with social and economic perspective s in mind. In reviewing contemporary conceptual frameworks in which universities' functions have been re-defined, Gibbons (1994) 'new production of knowledge' emphasizes the rise of 'problem-solving research'. In their Mode 2 of knowledge production, social and economic problems are visioned as main drivers for new researches (Laredo, 2007). Besides, what universities are expected to produce beyond their graduates and publications are indicated by a range of activities, identified as part of the 'third mission': revenues from technology transfer, contracts, patenting, spin-off firms, etc (Schoen et al., 2006). Above all, universities and colleges are generally required to

“contribute to the socioeconomic development in the context of a knowledge economy” (Fumasoli et al., 2015).

3.2.1 Competing Aspects in Universities’ Functions and Goals

Many research has underlined the contradictory but interwoven public and private functions of universities. As (Chan, 2016) noted, originally, universities were supposed to provide education for advanced knowledge through research and prepare the lives of public servants for the society. In the meanwhile, today’s universities are expected to produce graduates with knowledge, skills, and responsibilities to meet the labor forces’ requirement and, competencies to join the knowledge economy. However, in another aspect, the requirements of what skills universities should prepare for their students not only include “discipline-specific skills” (e.g., knowledge, attribute) for application in the future workplace, but also emphasize the importance of general skills (e.g., critical thinking skills, communication skills, problem-solving skills, social skills, and intrapersonal skills), which are strongly linked to the social benefits of higher education (Chan, 2016).

The growing third mission activities and services provided by universities are often outlined along societal and economic dimensions of institutional functions. Schoen's (2006) proposal gathers such activities of HEIs in relations with industry into four economic dimensions: contracts with industry, knowledge transfer through patenting and spin-off firms and providing human capital (including Ph.D researchers) for the economic sector. Similarly, relations with the public embed in four societal dimensions: foster public understanding of science, expertise to national authorities through contracts with public bodies and participation with policymaking, and involvement in the social and cultural life of regions where universities locate.

However, the boundaries between public and private goals are progressively getting blurred and difficult to distinguish (Marginson, 2011). These two dimensions, instead, might be “hybrid combinations” that blend the two types of categories (Morphew, Fumasoli, & Stensaker, 2016). As consequences, institutions worldwide engage in pursuing multiple and competing goals to enhance students and staff recruitment, as well as to prove their values in such contemporary society. Examples can be found as goals for democratic equality (producing responsible citizens to enhance democracy and better society), social efficiency

(providing appropriate workforce for economic demands) and social mobility (increasing individual's earnings and social status) proposed by Labaree (1997).

3.2.2 Global forces in University Reform

Today's universities operate not only based upon the geographical territory and the national frameworks which they are embedded within. There are massive forces that are steering universities' goals and activities on their daily basis. These are global forces of the knowledge economy and global academic networks that force universities to engage in global scholarship and science, especially the international battle for rankings and reputations.

As Altbach & Knight (2007, p. 291) defined, "globalization is the context of economic and academic trends that are part of the reality of the 21st century". It creates "a single world market" and common share of knowledge worldwide (Hazelkorn, 2011, p. 16). In that global economy, science, technology, and knowledge play decisive roles in enhancing social, economic and political power on the global scale. Knowledge has no longer been the sole result of academic curiosity but become "new factor of production" and able to be converted into economic products and boost economic growth (Hazelkorn, 2011). In other words, the global economy is increasingly rolling towards a knowledge economy, in which productions and services are based on intellectual capabilities more than traditional inputs such as natural resources or human physical effort (Hazelkorn, 2011; Powell & Snellman, 2004).

Universities, consequently, has been transformed into a key instrument for economic development, not only in the national border but on a global scale. Therefore, nations and HEIs worldwide are increasingly engaged in global competitions (developed systems) or international integration (developing systems) for knowledge production.

One of the consequences for such engagement is the global discourse on excellence, which has led to a battle for international rankings and reputation. The fashion of international rankings of universities has become one of the main drivers for global institutions' reform (Laredo, 2007). Because academic research is the source of knowledge, global rankings and institutional engagement in rankings are seen as of critical indicators for not only the status competition among established institutions (Marginson & van der Wende, 2007) but also, for external legitimacy on quality of institutions (Stensaker et al., 2018).

3.3 Analytical framework

The discussion on growing tensions towards modern universities missions and functions centers around four dimensions of societal and economic, local and global. These dimensions reflect different aspects of the outer world which universities are embedded in and articulating their missions or functions within. They also propose different tensions and force institutions to shape their strategic choices in missions and positioning.

In the scope of understanding university development strategies, a conceptual framework for universities' planning in strategic positioning and profiling can be built up based on these four dimensions.

Economic dimensions refer to institutions' "private good" which addressing linkage with the industry, efforts to fulfill labor market requirement as well as activities involving in financial purposes such as applied researches, technology transfer, spin-off and patenting. In the other end, *Societal dimensions* focus on the "public" side of universities which is demonstrated by the relationship with society, its culture, and governments. Commitment to community service, engagement in improving public understanding and application of knowledge as well as citizen's lives are all considered as societal aspects.

Local dimensions refer to the geographical territory and frameworks that universities function within. The local aspect frame the city, region or nation border and local stakeholders or other actors that collaborate with universities. Old institutionalism underlines institutions' location and their relationship with the surroundings as most influencing proxies in creating their unique values, norms and status (Stensaker et al., 2018). *Global dimensions*, vice versa, draw attention to constituents that go beyond countries' borders and local stakeholders. The growing influence of international ranking and pressure for internationalization are main and unavoidable tensions from this aspect. The global narratives characterize institution ambitions towards excellence, "world class" university, achieving higher ranking positions as a strategy of legitimacy (Stensaker et al., 2018).

Instead of being four plain and separate angels, these aspects integrate by pairs to pairs as vertical (social/economic) and horizontal (local/global) dimensions building up 4 different activity zones that universities strategies can maneuver. It is also worth noting the blurring

borders of values of each pair in HE reality. Institution's relationship with the industry or the government doesn't occur in clear-cut and straightforward paths of producing, relatively, private good and public good as before. While many private universities now produce knowledge of public goods, public-funded universities' strategies show their engagement in privatized missions (Morphew, Fumasoli, & Stensaker, 2018). Similarly, governments tend to source out projects as "plain users" (Laredo, 2007) while individual and private-based organizations invest in producing social and cultural knowledge. Strategies addressing local and global aspects are neither rival or excluded. As such, each pair of values demonstrated by an axis whose ends are marked with each value. The line between them and space towards each end indicates the extent to which universities choose to address the issue. In other words, universities' strategies to address the relationship with the outer world position themselves closer or further to these four dimensions at different extents.

As such, main characteristics and indicators for four integrated aspects (Global Economic, Global Societal, Local Economic and Local society) can be informed as below:

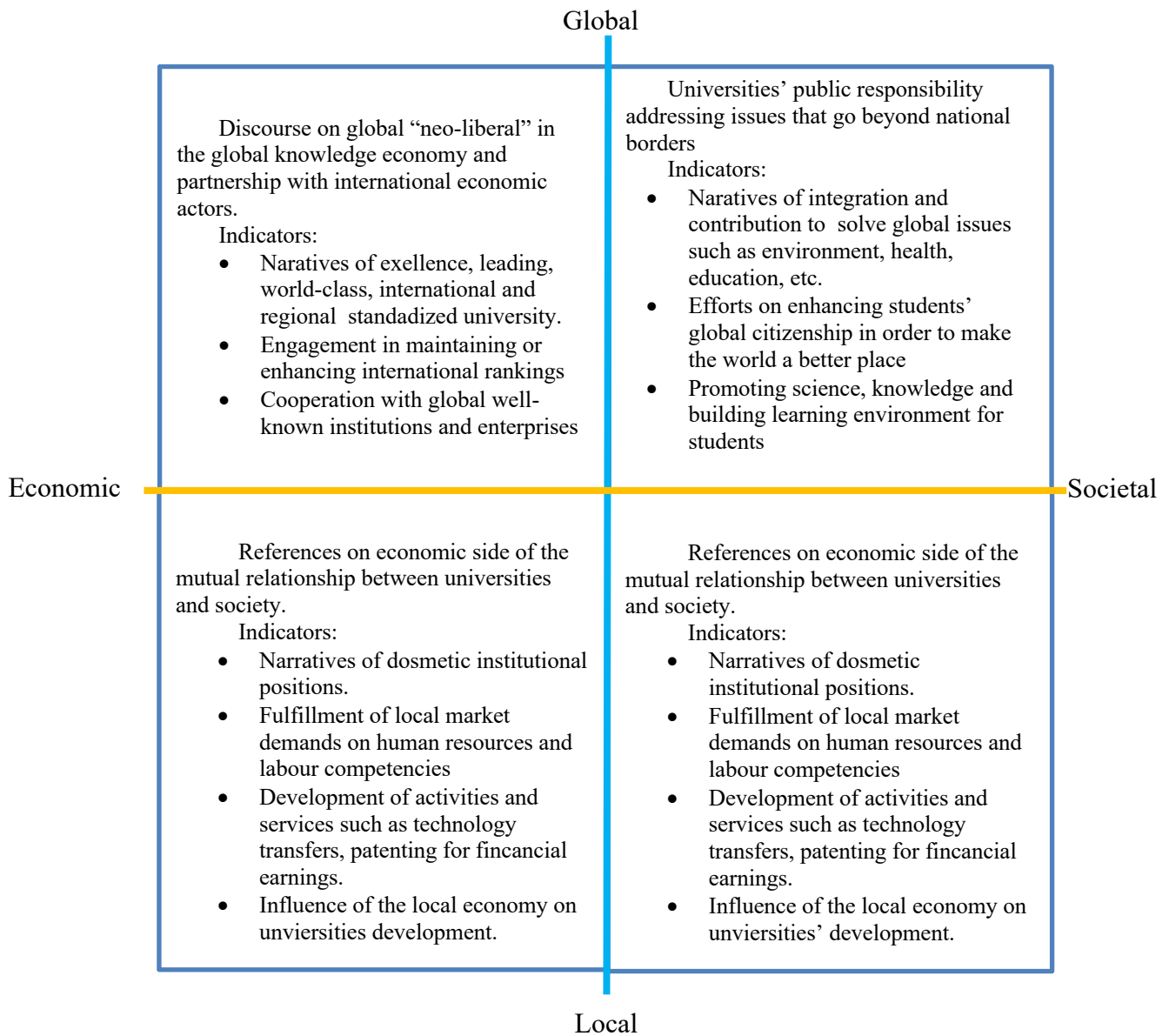


Figure 2 Four dimensions for understanding universities' strategic plans

4 Methodology

4.1 Research Design

The research seeks for understanding *how* universities in Vietnam are positioning themselves within the higher education sector and towards external stakeholders. The open-ended inquiry of how and why questions underpins the qualitative as research strategy for its values of story-telling with “in-depth understanding of the issue in contexts” (Patton, 2002, p.19) and its epistemological position in which understanding of phenomena is gained through participants’ interpretations (Bryman, 2012).

Under qualitative track, a comparative design actually takes the form of multiple-case study. This design carries main concerns of case study for “complexity and particular nature of the case in question” but allows better position to improve theory building by multiple cases (Bryman, 2012, p.66). Those cases of shared backgrounds are organized into two groups, which allows organizational characteristics of each group to be explored. Later, by cross-comparing among these groups, on one hand, findings on shared characteristics in their ways of self-positioning are enhanced. On the other hand, different relevant aspects and items are revealed, expanding more comprehensive measurements and contributing to broader understanding of whole sector’s spectrum.

4.2 Sampling

4.2.1 Accredited Universities as Background for Sampling

To assure a solid foundation for comparison, all universities whose strategic plans are investigated and their strategic plans as data for analysis firstly share common backgrounds. Collected strategic plans are those of the most recent, usually for a period of 5 years and issued within 2015-2017. Regarding participant universities, Vietnam offers a wide range of diversity from institutional bodies, specializations, research or teaching orientation to forms of governance and ownership. While official frameworks for a national ranking and unified

trajectory were formed in 2015¹¹, none of such official ranking has been generated yet. In this context, accreditation activities reflect the system's first efforts to unify basic quality requirements to enhance quality assurance. Therefore, accredited universities offer appropriate common background for the sample pool of the study. However, it is noteworthy that accreditation is a current and on-going process in Vietnam. Even though the process was introduced back in 2005 by the MOET, by March 2019, due to the shortcoming in staffing and capacities of national accreditation agencies, there had been only 117 universities receiving external evaluations and recognized as accredited out of 218 institutions who submitted their internal evaluations and waiting for accreditation. This reality suggests that those universities who have not been accredited shouldn't be those who are not qualified within the national standard. Nonetheless, accreditation give a common stage for quality assurance among sample institutions whose strategic plans are under this study. Besides the national accreditation framework, several Vietnam universities have approached and got accreditation by international agencies such as AUN-QA and HCERES. Despite the difference in their criteria for accreditation, universities which are active in accreditation process show their enthusiasm in fostering accountability and tend to publish more information on constructing their profiles as well as relating transparencies in their governance and resource allocation.

4.2.2 The Sampled Groups: Research Universities and Applied Universities

The comparative study is constructed to analyze patterns within different groups of accredited universities according to their stratification orientation as research university or university of application.

Vietnam Complementary Higher Education Law 2018, article 7, clearly states: "universities and higher education institutions, based on their capacities and society's demands of development, identify their development objectives and orientation as a) universities with research orientation and b) university with application orientation". This indicates that the two directions of being research- or application- oriented inform particular divergences in institutional strategies of development. Besides, even though it is stated by law that

¹¹ Decree 73/2015/ND-CP dated 08/09/2015 on Regulations on Frameworks for University Stratification and Ranking.

universities' research-orientation is recognized by government's specific regulations upon their training and research results, none of such regulations have officially been announced afterwards. Therefore, samples of two groups of universities are mainly gathered based on their own statements of orientations to become research or application universities, as well as former discourses on universities' capacities and classification.

In practice, universities with research orientation account for less than 10% of total HEIs in Vietnam at the present. The first group among those are 'key universities'- a recognition of the government's national, regional universities and leading universities in crucial socio-economic arenas. Despite the fact that non-official legislative criteria of being a key university has been noted, those are among the most comprehensive institutions with the biggest research and development capacities. As mentioned before, national and regional universities (Thai Nguyen University, Hue University, Da Nang University) are university 'corporates' which include many peripheral universities. At the same time, key universities receive government's guarantee for special privilege in public investment for institution and research developing as well as boosting their potential for international integration. In governance, these are also among the first to operate pilot project in renewing their governance mechanism to total 'self – financing', which allows institution leadership much greater autonomy in deciding its financial matters, human resources, infra-structure establishment as well as domains of learning. Furthermore, another characteristic of research-oriented universities is that they have gained certain success and prestige in the country and beyond. In details, they include all 7 universities which had their names in the Top 500 Asian Universities and Top 1000 World Universities – According to QS Rankings ("QS University Rankings," 2018). In short, it is not exaggerating to say research-oriented universities are the elite universities of Vietnam. In this research, samples of research-oriented group include 7 universities.

The other group includes 5 universities with application orientation. Most of them are universities with smaller scopes of specializations and capacities. They also tend to put more focus on training even though research activities are encouraged and developed by some institutions. Universities' ownership is merged between public and private universities.

Additional dimensions of the sample group addressing researcher's efforts to moderate several aspects that contribute to the diversity of Vietnamese institutions. Geographically,

universities in the study spreads from North to South, from big urban cities to more rural ones. Universities have different specialization as well as institutional profiles: college upgrader (former college), peripheral universities, technological institutions and comprehensive research universities. They also offer a mix of governance mechanism and ownership: private universities or public ones with different ministry affiliation. More details on characteristics of universities in the final sample groups are displayed in Table 2:

Table 2 Characteristics of Sample Universities

No.	Institutional Names	Types	Location	Students (students) *	Graduates students (students) *	Revenue (million USD) **	Public funding (% of revenues)	Tuition fees (% of revenues)
1	Vietnam National University - Ha Noi	National	Ha Noi	30213	7191	66116	52.1	25.5
2	University of Social Sciences and Humanities – Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City	Peripheral	Ho Chi Minh city	13301 (2016)	2059	9650.1 (2015)	28.9	57.1
3	Can Tho University	Regional	Can Tho	45835	2363	31.8	34.6	45.9
4	Vietnam National University of Agriculture	Institution	Ha Noi	25561	1856	N/A	N/A	N/A
5	University of Economics Ho Chi Minh City	Public	Ho Chi Minh city	21986	4979	28.7 (2015)	1.3	88.2
6	Thai Nguyen University of Education – Thai Nguyen University	Peripheral	Thai Nguyen	5965	901	6.7	47.8	23.9
7	Ton Duc Thang University	Public	Ho Chi Minh city	21970 (2017)	1342	24136	0	90
8	Hong Duc University	Public	Thanh Hoa	5926	0	6.4	69.9	23.3
9	University of Finance and Marketing	Public	Ho Chi Minh city	13531 (2015)	1894	6.6 (2013)	0	98
10	Nguyen Tat Thanh University	Private	Ho Chi Minh city	18514	10	25	0	97.6
11	Pacific University (Binh Duong University)	Private	Binh Duong	3965 (2016)	499	N/A	N/A	N/A
12	Duy Tan University	Private	Da Nang	18710	648	77.6	0	96.8

Source: University websites and Reports, National statistical offices.

Notes: No 1-7: Research universities, No 8-12: Universities of Application

(*) Statistics as of 2018 if not specified, (**) Statistics as of 2017 if not specified. Change rate on xe.com 8.12.2018

4.3 Data and analysis

4.3.1 Data

The main data for analysis in this research are universities' strategic plans for development. Strategic plans are the most recent and designed for 5 year period of 2016-2020, except for 2 strategic plans of Thai Nguyen University of Education (2017-2022) and Ton Duc Thang University (2014-2019). These strategic plans are all collected directly from university websites without contacting universities for confirmation.

Strategic plans are places where universities articulate and present important decisions for the institutions' future. The audiences include not only internal community but also external stakeholders. In other words, universities address different tensions as well as handle different relationships with the outer world in their plans. More significantly, these plans reveal universities' navigation in development and vision for institutional position. Thus, strategic plans give the most proper data for understanding their strategies in positioning and profiling.

In some cases when strategic plans are not accessible, institutional discourses on their ambitions (mission, vision, values) and detailed objectives for future development (posted on their websites) are utilized. Even though the plans are often presented directly as "Strategies for development", these plans (and other documents in use) are quite different in terms of length and format among the studied groups of universities. Plans can be a few to several page long. Most of the official strategic plans from public universities have quite similar format of an official institution's policy document with same cover layouts and content framework. Some others articulate their strategies and future objectives more directly. Some includes pictures, tables with descriptive statistics; others do not. English version is fully available for most cases and partially for 3 cases of University of Social Science and Humanity – Ho Chi Minh city, Thai Nguyen University of Education, and Hong Duc University. For parts of the plans that are only available in Vietnamese, it is the researcher's attempts to translate them into English for presentation in this research. Attempts are also made to compare different versions of strategic plans (in English and Vietnamese). Once

there are differences, official data composes of the newest content or the merger of the two versions.

4.3.2 Analysis

The data from strategic plans are analyzed using qualitative thematic content analysis – “form of pattern recognition with emerging themes becoming the categories for analysis” (Bowen, 2009, p. 32). Similar methods have been used in several research on changing universities’ strategies (Fumasoli & Lepori, 2011; Stensaker et al., 2018) and their missions on profiling (Morphew et al., 2018; Morphew & Hartley, 2006).

University discourses in the plans were firstly categorized under 4 different dimensions and secondly in separte indicators generated from Laredo (2007) as stated in Analytical Framework. Lastly, convergence and divergence tendency of evidences in each indicator group were taken into analysis and inform findings.

4.4 Reliability and Validity

Document analysis techniques offer this thesis its low-cost and long-term availabilities of documents and its high applicability to qualitative case study to help find stratifications in universities’ strategies. In the limit of a single-authored master’s thesis, reliability and validity of data and data interpretation might be vulnerable. In this research, efforts were made to optimize data validity by collating bilingual versions of strategic plans and comparing information with other university papers (3 transperencies paper, reports) and national database. Besides, to reduce bias and enhance reliability in interpretation of document content, the first and second phases of analysis were conducted 2 times each by the writer, in two different weeks.

5 Presentation and Analysis of Findings

5.1 Global Economic Dimension

In the two sample groups of universities, there is strong tendency to emphasize neo-liberal discourses and global narratives of excellence, concerning institutional ambitions to gain more reputation on global scale. Within the plans, references on inspiration of belonging to the best universities both on regional and global scale are consistently and prominently articulated.

Despite the recent discourses on Vietnamese universities' milestones of putting their footprints in an international ranking for the first time, Vietnamese universities hadn't gained a lot of achievements beyond their national context by the time most of the plans were designed. Thus, not much expectation was set to see sample universities cite their rankings. Instead, rankings are used as an inspiring barometer of institutional success and, in some cases, as explicit goals in universities' visions and objectives. Ton Duc Thang University (TDTU) stands out for stating its plans for explicit regional and global positions in a long-term but detailed time frame. The university's visions and long-term goals say:

“To become a leading research university in Vietnam and in TOP 60 best universities in Asia in 3 decades (2007-2037); TOP 500 research universities of the world by 2037, to become a world-class research university in 2087 by Successfully implement the education accreditation and the University's ranking with categories published by AUN and HCERES”(3)

Likewise, Vietnam National University – Ha Noi (VNU-HN) vision highlights a more generic ambition to getting the global top position:

“VNU-HN is expected to be one of the leading interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary research universities in the world, which can contribute significantly to the national industrialization and modernization”(16)

Other research-oriented universities, tends to utilize generic statements of ambitions to express their expectations to become top or leading universities, more prominently, at the regional level of Asia. For instance, University of Social Science and Humanity (USSH) aims to be “one of the leading international research institutions in social sciences and humanities in Asia.” Meanwhile, Can Tho University outlines its vision to be “recognized as one of the

top universities in Asia-Pacific in training and research in 2022”. In addition, Vietnam National University of Agriculture (VNUA) refers to its strive to “be ... a national and regional center of excellence for creative innovation”.

While research universities share aims to be on the top list universities beyond their national border, in another aspect, shared practices among all sample universities on global ambitions feature as “approaching” or “integrating into regional and international standard”.

Concerning research universities, VUN-HN set its tasks to “establish and develop undergraduate and graduate programs to meet international standards, which ultimately transforms VNU-HN into a research university center, reaching international standards”.

University of Economics -Ho Chi Minh city (UEH) states its vision by 2020 to “become a research, training and consultation centre ... on par with other prestigious higher education institutions in Asia”. Several similar discourses are found in statements of universities of application. For example, University of Finance and Marketing (UFM) visions itself in 2030 to be “an advanced ASEAN university”; Hong Duc University strives to become a “trusted destination for training, science research and technological transfer which would keep pace with other prestigious universities in Vietnam and ASEAN” in its vision for 2015; or Nguyen Tat Thanh University (NTTU) sets its core value as “integration (with national, regional and worldwide standards)”.

Preparing graduates with adequate competencies needed for the newly-emerging global economy is another common theme in universities’ global economic aspect. While UEH aims to “provide the best higher education and research environment with the highest standards of professionalism” to their students and ensure their “graduates will be fully capable of competing and adapting to the global economy”, Duy Tan University sets its educational targets to “produce graduates with high adaptability to any labor markets, ..., with high competencies in an active and fast-changing new world”.

However, again, when it comes to specific approaches on gaining international trusts and positions, there are distinctive differences among universities’ stages of readiness as well as operationalization of their initiatives with(out) measurable progress. This difference can be seen through some institutional strategies to prepare their staffs for internationalization.

While Duy Tan University gives general statement to “build staffs with capacities to collaborate and cooperate with international actors”, research universities like USSH and

Ton Duc Thang University aim specifically to improve their staffs and students' capacities, using English proficiency as a medium. As such, USSH has built an official framework for enhancing staffs' English proficiency and impose different regulations on specific staff positions for the purpose of improving institutional capacities for international cooperation. Ton Duc Thang University, similarly, has organized "qualifying courses on English language, skills on writing/formulation, bidding, management, monitoring and evaluation of projects for its staff". Consequently, observation in specific goals for internationalization shows common practices for mainly research-oriented universities. University of Finance and Marketing is the only sample member in application group that attain the internationalization discourse together with its research-oriented counterparts. With this, one can argue that universities of application tend to keep their focus within local and national demands.

In details, research universities show more deliverable aspirations for quality enhancement and self-improvement. Their prominent practices underline the impacts of international standards, especially international accreditation and institutions' strategies in implementating them at the program level. VUN-HN has strategically promoted their advanced and high quality programs to meet "regional and international standards" as well as "improve the recognition of degrees, credits awarded by VUN-HN on ASEAN and global scale". USSH also plans to improve the quality of all training programs to meet CDIO model¹² (Conceive – Design – Implement – Operate), with some get AUN-QA accreditation. Ton Duc Thang University even shows more decisiveness in gaining international accreditation for their educational degrees: "All of the TDTU's degrees must be approved and accredited by international organizations". Similar reference is found in the plan of University of Finance and Marketing with more concrete and more humble targets:

"Til 2020, the university gets national accreditation by MOET, having at least 2 programs get AUN-QA. Until 2025, at least 6 programs and at least 50% of all programs in 2030 get AUN-QA accreditation"(2)

Besides, there are divergences in motives for internationalization and establishing partnerships with world-renowned international institutions. For instance, with the purpose to enhance the university's "presence, interaction and reputation", Ton Duc Thang university targets expanding cooperation programs with international universities which are in the

¹² An outcome-based educational model developed by Massachusetts Institutes of Technology and widely applied in diverse higher education programs.

world's TOP 500. VNUA aims to maximize international supports for the strategic development of the University.

Research university's specific objectives for internationalization center around three main flows: Students and staffs mobility, cooperation in teaching programs and most recent discourse on research and related activities.

Many evidences on attracting international experts and students are found in the plans of research universities, VUN-HN plans to attract "excellent staffs and students to study at work", while Ton Duc Thang University aims to "expand the number of foreign experts as well as students; request the participation of foreign lecturers in all faculties; enroll more international students". These universities, at the same time, give concrete and measurable targets to the flows of students and staffs mobility.

Similarly, regarding teaching programs, Ton Duc Thang University makes it a consistent choice for specific groups of partner institutions for their sandwich model of graduate programs at Top 700+. VNUA plans to "design and realize training courses delivered in English as a medium of instruction by adopting up-to-date curricula taught at international universities". UFM gives priorities to collaboration in both training programs and student exchanges in its plan. While all universities boost cooperation in the direction of importing, VUN-HN is the only institution to show ambition to exchange and export its high quality and advanced educational programs.

Compared to staff, students and program exchanges, international cooperation strategies of sample universities give much greater initiatives and priorities in cooperation for research agendas and research-related services. Their platforms for collaboration, in general, prioritize a variety of activities: (1) research agendas in STEM (Science-Technologies - Engineering - Math) (Thai Nguyen University of Education), inter- and cross- disciplinary researches (VUNA, USSH, TDTU); (2) technology transfer activities (VNUA, TDTU), as well as (3) participating international conferences, research networks, consortia (TDTU, VUN-HN, USSH). As implementing global regulations on research, all sample research universities articulate and tend to increase the requirements for international publications among their staffs. UFM contributes to the same evidences with numerable targets: "The percentage of teaching staffs that have domestic and international publications, technology transfer,

research results that are brought into application in 2020 is above 50%, in 2015 is above 70% and 2030 is 90%”. Economic sides of international research activities are of different interest among sample universities. USSH aims to “design and conduct more international research projects” to improve universities’ position on “negotiating and competing for financial benefits with partners and counterparts”. Meanwhile, VUNA shows interest in efficient commercialization the research findings.

5.2 Local Economic Dimension

Sample universities show strong local economic relevance through engagement in narratives on domestic statuses and connections with local market and economy.

Observation shows much more active participation of research universities on discourses of universities’ national prestige, however, with divergence in the way they address the topic. Even though many universities in the sample groups pose utmost national reputation and social trust - proved by their top-notch selectivity rate in the day of old regulation when every high school student took the same university entry exam- surprisingly, there are little evidences found from universities showing their engagement in confirming or satisfaction with their current statuses. Exceptions are Thai Nguyen University of Education (TNUE) to say it has become “the greatest center of education and educational research in the Northern mountainous area” and VNU-HN to state itself as playing ”the role of a pioneer” in the process of reforming the Vietnam’s higher education sector. Instead, aligning with their ambitions in enhancing global recognition, more universities express generic visions to “*become* leading institutions” within the national border. For example, Can Tho University aims to be “one of the leading higher education institutions in Vietnam” or USSH expects to become “the leader in building a liberal academic environment in terms of social sciences and humanities”. Besides, VNUA shows its dedication to be the “center of excellence” in the fields of agriculture and rural development in Vietnam. UEH, on the other hand, expresses its dedication to maintain its quality and status through fostering excellence in both trainings and application of research:

“ The University of Economics Ho Chi Minh City (UEH) is dedicated to excellence both in offering students a broad range of high-quality academic programs in Economics Science, Business, Management, Law; and applying the results of scientific research directly into real-world situations” (3)

Universities of application rarely participate in discourse of national status. Exceptions include UFM's statement of becoming "a high-quality institution of the nation" and Hong Duc university's objectives of enhancing program quality to "catch up with the standard of more advanced universities in the Middle region".

Another aspect - *relation with the local market and economy* - is of the most common priority shared within the sample universities. Serving "the country's socio-economic development" or "the modernization and industrialization career of the nation" is the most stated and emphasized mission in all universities' plans. For example, VUN-HN's declares to "contribute significantly to the national industrialization and modernization"; Nguyen Tat Thanh University aims to become an applied, practical, multidisciplinary, and multi-level university that aligns with "local and national development needs". VUNA puts it even more clearly in their general objectives for development:

"Constantly innovative and improving upon the quality of education, scientific research and transfer of technology to create quality products that meet the requirements of economic development - local economic development and the country in the period of industrialization, modernization and international integration"(2)

To articulate those missions of serving the country's development, first and foremost objective of universities' education is to provide high quality *human resources* for the economy alongside with the arena that universities are specialized in, such as "to provide high-quality human resources ... on social sciences and humanities"(USSH), "to train and supply high quality manpower; ... in agriculture and rural development" (VUNA) or to "train practical engineers, bachelors in... economics, culture, science and technology, foreign languages, and information technology, in order to contribute to meeting the demand for human resources for an open – market economy" (Pacific University).

Sample universities in both research-oriented and application-oriented groups tend to state their services to more general and wider market demands of the nation than the local or regional ones. Exceptions are regional and provincial universities. They emphasize their roles towards the socio-economic development of the regions which their establishment and purposes are tightened to, such as: Can Tho University to the development of Mekong Delta region, Thai Nguyen University of Education to the educational career and socio-economic development of Northern Mountainous areas, and Hong Duc University to Thanh Hoa province's economy.

Besides, many universities show tendency to blend economic relevance with student learning experience. Accordingly, educational programs, more likely in applied universities, are adjusted in compliance with labor market demands, making students' market *competencies* and *employability* important outputs. References are found in Nguyen Tat Thanh University's goal to "create an active and practical learning environment for students... and find jobs right after graduation" and Hong Duc University's emphasis on understanding and matching the needs of learners and society. Thai Nguyen University of Education also set target to "provide learners with the best education and research environment... and make sure that after graduation students have the capacity to compete and adapt to the developed education".

In contrast, there is a distinctive tendency of research university to involve *interdisciplinary research* and *third mission activities* such as technology transfer in addressing the local economy. For instance, USSH outlines its strategies to "promote and connect basic researches, applied researches and interdisciplinary researches to produce results that are meaningful and practical for industrialization and modernization career of the South and the country"(22). Similarly, VUN-HN aims at producing "an advanced science and technology with more technology transfers, innovations, patents to offer useful solutions; developing both core and cross-disciplinary technology". EUH and Can Tho University both promote "transferring results of scientific research to other organizations and corporates" to serve the regional and national socio-economic development in general. Besides, USSH takes into account the economic sides of research and transferring knowledge activities in turning back to serve their own research activities:

" Upgrade facilities for research activities with domestic and international projects. Focus more on transferring research results to increase research funding as well as enhancing application capacity of researches in social science and humanity area."

5.3 Global Societal Dimension

Service to the society is one among the long traditions of universities. Yet, there are some evidences on universities' ambitions of articulating such public services at the global stage offered in sampled groups of universities. On a large scale, these ambitions are expressed by addressing certain contemporary global challenges and more prominently, by underlining the importance of developing universal moral characteristics in their graduates.

Such references on contributing to solve global issues are found in some research-oriented universities' strategies, both in the form of short clauses or phrases, embedded within discourses on other aspects or as a separate expectation. For instance, VUN-HN states its objectives of conducting research as “ Interdisciplinary researches produce knowledge and informative scientific critics, contributing to solve contemporary global challenges and serving the country development”. In the meantime, Ton Duc Thang university expresses its extended mission to “contribute more to the world’s peace and civilization” and underscores this mission with its motto “Light from here shall illuminate the entire universe”. In application group of universities, against common assumptions, Pacific University, a private university bulleting its training towards pragmatic market demands on economics, technologies and services, expresses remarkable consideration on the role of labour force to the global sustainable development and navigates its aims to building up an ecological economy. As stated in Pacific university’s philosophic platform for development:

“Humans are born to survive and grow. Therefore, building the ecological economy is both the objective and the content. That is to say, it is the creative labor force of men for survival and sustainable development of the world. Every man must strive for self-survival, for the survival of their fellow human beings, for the sustainable development of the world by way of labor and creativity – that is morality.” (1)

Similarly, embedding morality and sense of responsibilities in graduates appears as a common practice shared among universities in both groups of research and application. Some integrated evidences are given in research universities' strategies as of “prepare graduates with sufficient knowledge and skills to be able to perform their work effeciently, to formulate their leadership and to adapt themselves to changes” (Nguyen Tat Thanh University) or “the educational programs are geared for producing graduates with a good sense of morality, knowledge ability and skillfulness” (VNUA). Nguyen Tat Thanh University, as an application-oriented university underscores the values of “ responsibility” at all level “for self, family, community, society, and the world” to its graduates. In this aspect, USSH, in compliance with its disciplinary profile of a national research university in social sciences and humanities, stands out when focusing its educational philosophy on all universal moral values of “Whole person – Liberal – Multicultural Education”.

However, even though the generic statement narratives are indentified in almost all universities, there are distinctive differences between research-oriented universities and application-oriented universities in the operationalization of these missions. Specifically,

research universities are more accountable than applied university in explicitly stating indicators for achievements of the process. One among the nominant examples is USSH strategic plan, which is attached with detailed measurements of actionable targets for the aims of societal development. Another example is the commitment of Ton Duc Thang University to sustainable development exemplified by its success in building its own sustainable and environmentally friendly campus. The university was ranked in the Top 200 sustainable universities in the world by UI Greenmetric World University Rankings for its commitment to greening of their campus and putting in place environmentally friendly policies that support sustainability for a wide range of criteria addressing green space, setting and infrastructure, energy and climate change, water use, waste treatment, transport and education.

Another frequent theme in this global societal aspect places emphasis on educational dimension of university, including the focus in enhancing student experience within the insitutional academic environment and the rise of student-centred learning. Both University of Finance and Marketing and University of Social Science and Humanity show high priorities in “promoting academic autonomy” (UFM) and “building liberal academic enviroment” (USSH) in enhancing students experiences. Hong Duc University takes “learners as the central that motivates all institutional activities”. Many other universities include similar “learner-centred” discourses in their plans and goals, including VUNA whose first goal of education is for “renovating training methods towards developing motivation and skills for self-study/ self-learning and group working of learners”. Similarly, Pacific university both promotes self-training and shifts its teaching method into a "mutual study" process in which “teachers and students study mutually and use the democratic process in the classroom in order to promote the initiative and creativity of students so that students can assert themselves. Higher aspirations of the university are that students will be able to evaluate themselves correctly” (2). Some universities like Thai Nguyen University of Education highlight these competencies of “self- learning and conducting research” together with other abilities such as “creativity, ability to solve pragmatic as well as theoretical educational problems” to support “self-adapting and life long learning” of students.

At the same time, research-oriented universities show more tendency on placing strategies to promote generic values of knowledge and science as well as research. Exemplars are found in University of Economics Ho Chi Minh City and VUN-HN in their statements to “promote

academic research”(UEH) and “promote advanced science, technology, renovation and knowledge transference”(VUN-HN).

5.4 Local Societal Dimension

Local societal dimension highlights public services within national borders and the legal frameworks that universities are embedded in. The most prominent indicator of local societal aspects are references on moral obligation linked with national welfare state needs through both institutional work and graduates’ future contribution. Sampled universities show high engagement in enhancing the national welfare states specifically alongside with their specialization. VNU-HN highlights its strategies in social science education as below:

“Social sciences and humanities provide scientific backgrounds, predictive knowledge, critical rationales for policy-making in national development and defence career; actively involves in reserve and promote nation’s traditional values cultural heritages; facilitate international integration in compliance with characteristics and advantages of each faculties, of the university and the country” (8)

Similarly, USSH - a peripheral university of VNU-HCM explicitly states one of its mission is to “have strategic contributions to the cultural and socio-economic development of the country” and “provide scientific backgrounds for policy-making and social welfares”. University of Finance and Marketing also states its role in “participating in building strategies and policies in the nation’s finance”.

Besides, integrated rhetoric discourses on contributing to the general sustainable growth of society are found in many other universities in both research – and application- oriented groups such as the overall goal of Ton Duc Thang University for “accomplishment in personal development and society’s sustainable growth and stability” (2). Nguyen Tat Thanh University underlines its engagement in “contributing to the economic, societal, cultural and environmental development of Ho Chi Minh City and Vietnam” in its mission and again in its goals “The University also nurtures a sense of societal responsibility in students so they can utilize their potential, adapt to the change contributes to Ho Chi Minh City’s and Vietnam’s economy, social stability, sustainable development”. Regional societal issues are addressed by Can Tho university’s commitment in “solving problems related to science, technology, economics, culture and society in the region”. Pacific University, on the other

hand, expresses its ambition through the graduates' awareness and their oath of "Self-perfecting life itself, tirelessly striving for ... an equitable, democratic and civilized society for the prosperity of the Socialist Vietnam". Thai Nguyen University of Education also set priorities in developing "political nature and sense of morality" for its graduates.

Contradictory to expectations towards public-institution dominant groups, inclusiveness and diversity of student body is rarely targeted as strategies in the two sampled groups of institutions. Thai Nguyen University of Education is the exception when features students of minority community in building graduates' competencies: "ensuring graduates, especially those from minority group, with solid intellectual and professional backgrounds, adequate competitiveness and ability to adapt to educational changes in Vietnam and ASEAN context". This reflects its special location in the northern highland region and its role towards the local society, which largely includes people of highland minority groups.

Another interpretation of local level here is the institutional level. Building institutional societal aspects is strongly linked to the strategies of developing or completing cultural and academic working environment. Mostly all universities underscore the task of establishing cultural working environment as an importance strategy, from Duy Tan university's goal to "become a cultural centre integrating modern and humanity characteristic" to USSH's objective to "achieve breakthroughs...in the building of university culture" or more explicitly stated in the 6th objective of Pacific University to "complete the cultural environment of the university" by building "a healthy and pure educational environment in which everyone unites together, respects creative labor". Besides, divergencies can be found in university of Economics Ho Chi Minh City targets of placing its institutional societal dimension in developing "responsible and ethical staff and faculty" (UEH, 2).

6 Discussion, Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1 Discussion

The aim of the study is to understand how universities handle different expectations and growing tensions from the external world . Hence, their strategies for development have been studied and analyzed under 4 integrated dimensions of local economic, global economic, local societal and global societal. The findings from the sampled groups of universities show different tendencies and the extent to which universities address the four dimensions. These tendencies and extent will be discussed in answering questions in the scope of the research.

6.1.1 Are universities' strategies a reflection of HE system characteristics?

The findings on universities' strategies reveal strong compliance with the contemporary characteristics of a progressively expanding and transforming HE system in Vietnam.

Discourses on university strategies show significant engagement in self-building institutional capacities centering around 3 main aspects: (1) expanding infrastructure and outputs (2) enhancing governance, and (3) building quality and academic culture. Strategies articulated around these ambitions of self-improvement, in addition, are outlined alongside at their orientation of research or application. Accordingly, while research universities set detailed goals for building up facilities, infrastructure for research activities and enhancing supporting staff' s capacities, professional universities navigate their targets in building new branches and upgrading teaching programs. Universities are taking steps to make up for the expanding enrollment over the last decade as well as preparing for the newly -emerging and coming tasks.

On another hand, the other two aspects of governance and quality are quite integrated. Public universities' strategies in the sample plans show great awareness of their growing granted autonomy and the importance of self-developing to perform better in governance. Building quality culture reflects the culture of autonomous, accountable and responsive institutions. Universities emphasize the importance of these emerging culture in every of its internal

member (administrator, researcher -lecturer, staffing and student) to clearly understand their roles and fulfill their tasks with quality mindset. Therefore, they can be active contributors to the mission and development of institutions in particular, and, in general, to exercise democracy, assure quality, efficiency and productivity of the whole HE sector.

6.1.2 How are universities balancing economic and societal responsibilities in their strategies?

As the findings show, there is quite an imbalance in the way universities strategies tackle different responsibilities. Accordingly, objectives serving economic actors dominate those of societal actors to a great extent in both groups of research university and professional university.

In compliance with government's emphasis the important role of Higher Education in the national human resource development strategies 2011-2020, universities' discourses on economic responsibilities reflect tight bindings to its local and national contexts – a heritage of the old Soviet model of a highly-centralized HE system with small and specialized institutions. All universities, hence, put the mission to serve the career of industrialization and modernization of the nation as their first priority. Various approaches have been exploited but all link to the market's demands for the labor forces, plus, their adequate competencies for an open and active market.

Vice versa, contradictory to assumptions toward a system with strong dominance of public institutions, public services are less of priorities in sampled plans. Sampled universities shows tendency to outline strategies toward public responsibilities in connection with institutional specific identities and status' visions, indicating certain engagement in addressing global issues and promoting universal academic values.

6.1.3 How influenced are HEIs with globalization?

At the system level, globalization has been the main drive for changes for decades in Vietnam. Even though the nation's effort to establish 'World-class' universities in Vietnam in a decade couldn't be seen as a success, it does, instead, reflect the government's ambitions and enthusiastic plans for investment in Higher Education sector. Recently, such

controversial efforts have turned into new understandings, and consequently, massive progresses in totally transforming and internationalizing HE sector. Intention to establish a few “World-class” universities has been turned to policies on building a comprehensive HE system with international standard. Planning and optimizing different groups of HE (provincial universities and colleges, private university networks, open universities with distance learning) have been seen as a more potential approach. Especially, stratifying HEIs into research- and professional-oriented universities helps institutions to foster capacity and boost connection within each group to target focused tasks in such effort to integrate to global standards.

The findings present Vietnam universities’ strive to balance the expectations of their external stakeholders (local relevance) and more recently, the global narratives of excellence shared among international academic communities. In other words, university strategies show efforts to think global - act local when they highlight the ties with the local context they are embedded within and, at the same time, gear their development to integrate with international standards.

Accordingly, universities’ strategies for internationalization inform great extent of influence that globalization has made to the emergence of Vietnam institutional development. In all the plans of sample universities, internationalization keeps its occurrence to the cooperation for student exchange and a variety of training programs (VUN-HN stands out to express the ambition to exchange its best programs to other HE systems). Besides, priorities for accreditation awarded by international quality assurance agencies such as HECRES (for technical and technology majors and institutions), and AUN-QA (social science and comprehensive universities) appear to be mainstream activities for institutions in approaching international quality/standard. However, it is noteworthy that universities’ plans display different levels of specification and decisiveness in such targets of international accreditation.

Above all, the emergence of research and research-related activities is the most systematic influence of global dimensions on Vietnamese universities’ development. After decades of taking education and training as the main mission, recent plans from universities show strong engagement in developing research capacity in universities, which informs a dramatic change in the role of the Vietnamese university. For example, sample universities shows ambitions to turn themselves into hubs for knowledge production and innovation through conducting

research and enhancing connection with external actors. In addition, research universities are at the core of global academic networks (Altbach, 2013). In Vietnam, these institutions share values, missions of the global community and offer the main channel for academia to contribute to international science and scholarship. Research developed in universities offer the key access for Vietnamese institutions to the global discourse of quality and reputation through rankings. Whereas discussions from Vietnamese HEIs on global rankings tend to be framed around the rhetoric of global standards, the same discourse for regional (Asian, ASEAN level) rankings are far more actively engaged and presented.

6.2 Conclusion

The research studies Vietnamese university's strategic plans to see how they position themselves in the HE recent context. Based on the analysis, I can conclude that Vietnam universities show different tendencies in tackling challenges and tensions from the outer world which were represented in four interconnected dimensions of local/global, societal/economic in this study. Patterns of tendencies highly varies among the two categories of universities' stratification: research -oriented and profession – oriented, especially over economic responsibilities. Whereas research universities reflect aspiration from discourses on gaining regional/global status and reputation, professional universities show engagement in approaching regional and international standards. Within the national context, while professional universities stay focus on educational side of the relationship with the society, research universities prioritize research activities as medium for making new connections with external actors and leading the transformation of higher education roles in society. Societal responsibilities, which, in general, receive less attention of universities, are addressed with more integrated approaches from both university groups. Moreover, the findings support the blurring borders between public and private dimensions in university role noted by many scholars (Labaree, 1997; Marginson, 2011; Morpew et al., 2018) in global HE contexts.

While local relevance are revealed mostly in economic aspects of universities' strategies, globalization and approaches for internationalization continue to be of great emphasis in their plans.

6.3 Recommendations for further research

In the capacity of a master thesis, the research focuses on strategic plans of Vietnamese universities for 2015-2020 period. A new wave of strategic plans will be presented soon. In a context of fast-developing HE entity, a similar study on universities' strategies for development in the next period will give the newest insights in Vietnamese universities' landscape. Or else, a comparative studies in the strategic plans of certain universities over the two period, similar to on European universities, will provide significant information on how Vietnamese HEIs change their plans for development and discourse on legitimacy. Besides, studies on strategic plans of different university focus groups such as research universities, public/ private universities can be made to test against different current assumptions on their development and reinforce strategies within those groups of universities. Finally, with more transparency in data relating to universities' strategies, strategies for development of Vietnamese universities now can be studied in comparison with other HE contexts, such as countries in Asian region (which have closer development level and integration issues), European countries (which share similarity in progressive transformation of public sectors) or American countries (whose strong neo-liberal HE model that Vietnam is heading toward). These kind of international comparison at any level will, I believe, give Vietnam a step further in integrating into global HE system. More practically, international comparative research on strategies provide both Vietnamese institutions and policy-makers with precious experience and crucial input for future development and policy-borrowing.

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