

Internationalising the curriculum: the implementation experience at the University of Economics Ho Chi Minh City

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ABSTRACT

In the era of globalisation, quality in higher education has not only become a critical requirement for the entire higher education system, but also the basis of enhancement capabilities of each university. In order to meet the high requirements of the labour market and stakeholders, the University of Economics Hochiminh City (UEH) has step by step been internationalising and renovating its entire operational mechanism, specifically in its training programmes and training activities. 27 advanced training programmes of eight core disciplines at the bachelor level and 17 advanced training programmes at the master level have been globally oriented. Programmes have been updated to make them fit for training purposes and to meet the demands of those who want to become highly qualified human resources to be able to work in the local, ASEAN and world labour market.

Curriculum internationalisation is a strategy adopted by many universities in order to prepare their graduates for employment in the global economy and to meet the demand of globalisation of labour. This paper is a case study of the organisational change at the UEH that attempts to implement curriculum internationalisation in the subjects of eight core business disciplines and the economics disciplines.

In this paper, we describe and discuss the initiatives in the curriculum internationalisation process undertaken and the responses of the discipline-based faculties. We identify significant staff and faculty issues during the change process, especially regarding the powerful effect of academic autonomy, and the need for continued resources to support the changes.

Keywords: advanced curriculum; implementation; internationalisation

1 Introduction and background

Vietnam's higher education has been on the path of international integration. Each higher education institution is responsible to find an answer for the question: "How to make sure that our graduates will have satisfying jobs and a better future?" The answer depends on its strategic choices. In Vietnam internationalising curricula is now of priority for the process of higher education internationalisation (MoET 2014).

1.1 Higher education (HE) in Vietnam

In Vietnam, the higher education (HE) system is centralised under the Ministry of Education and Training (MoET). However, one third of the institutions are directly under MoET and two-thirds are under other ministries and provincial People's Committees.

The Vietnamese HE sector has been characterised by tremendous growth. Table 1 below shows the changes in higher education patterns in Vietnam over two time periods, i.e. 1987–1997 and 1997–2014. There was close to a 25 per cent (from 101 to 126) increase in the number of HE institutions including both universities and colleges by 1997, and then again through to June 2014 there was an additional 244 per cent increase (i.e. 126 to 433). Moreover, during that same period, we can also see a significant emergence of non-public universities in the Vietnamese HE sector, suggesting that Vietnamese HE has great market growth potential.

	1987 Total no.	1997 Total no.	2014 Total no.	1987–1997 overall growth in %	1997–2014 overall growth in %
HE institutions	101	126	433	24%	243%
• Of which public	101	111	347	10%	212%
• Of which non-public	0	15	86	–	473%

Source: adapted from MoET (2009) and Nguyen (2014) ideas on Vietnamese higher education sector 1987 – June 2014

Table 1: Vietnamese Public and Non-Public Higher Education (HE) Institutions and their growth

The Vietnam International Education Development (VIED 2014) confirms 214 joint programmes that have been offered in various disciplines and approved by MOET. These have included the delivery of: twinning programs; offshore programs; credit

transfers; representatives for international partners; and, e-learning facilities. Collaborating internationally is an essential way for Vietnamese universities to become world class in their educational offerings.

In 2014, there were 1,662, 665 students studying at universities and colleges. 85 per cent of all students study at public universities and colleges, 15 per cent study at non-public universities and colleges (MOET 2014). In Ho Chi Minh City until 7 April 2015 there are 50 universities, of which 37 are public universities and 13 non-public universities. In all Vietnam, there are currently five academies and 18 national key universities. As planned by the Government 20 research based universities shall be developed until 2020 with more than 75 per cent teaching staff with doctor degree.

Table 2 below shows training size by majors, in terms of economics it takes account of 29.86% of the total, indicating that this major is considered as a significant one and also there is a need for producing high quality human resources to serve the labour market.

Year	2012		2013		2014	
	Total	Rate	Total	Rate	Total	Rate
Training size by majors						
Total	1,813,254	100	1,670,309	100	1,662,665	100
Pedagogy	178,316	9.83%	176,916	10.59%	190,565	11.46%
Art	23,643	1.30%	23,380	1.40%	22,957	1.38%
Social Science	153,806	8.48%	142,504	8.53%	172,682	10.39%
Economics	669,245	36.91%	571,601	34.22%	496,533	29.86%
Law	27,170	1.50%	38,847	2.33%	32,293	1.94%
Natural Science	71,254	3.93%	66,645	3.99%	68,201	4.10%
Industrial Engineering	533,445	29.42%	495,372	29.66%	487,566	29.32%
Agriculture-Forestry-Fishery	36,974	2.04%	36,819	2.20%	48,412	2.91%
Med. Phar.	90,925	5.01%	103,166	6.18%	121,859	7.33%
Service	28,476	1.57%	23,239	1.39%	21,971	1.32%
Source: Nguyen, TG 2014 Education Conference: Vietnam Education Dialogue (VED): A discussion on higher education reforms						

Table 2: Training size by majors

Globalisation has a huge impact on education especially in the HE sector. The world is getting ‘closer’ and more connected with rapid advances and development in technology and communication. In higher education, increased communication – nationally and internationally – helps raising awareness on issues such as quality of the various programmes and their curriculum which makes quality management increasingly crucial to the survival of HE institutions (Bon 2010).

The role of the HE sector in Vietnam’s economic development is of paramount importance and understandably the value of the sector in shaping the future of Vietnam is continually being reinforced. Vietnam’s educational sector, especially in HE, has in recent years opened up to the international market. This was the result of Vietnam joining of the WTO and other international obligations. This resulted in increased competition with foreign universities operating in Vietnam. Contemporary Vietnam is in dire need of well qualified and trained graduates – graduates who can apply the latest knowledge and theory to practice.

1.2 University of Economics Ho Chi Minh City

The University of Economics Ho Chi Minh City (UEH) was established in 1976, and it has been ranked as one of the 18 key public universities in Vietnam. UEH is a multi-disciplinary university with various levels and modes of education at three levels (undergraduate, master, and Ph.D.). According to the Decision No: 2377/QĐ-TTg from the Prime Minister regarding “Approval for piloting Proposal of changing operation mechanism in the University of Economics Ho Chi Minh City for the period of 2014–2017”, UEH is the first university among the ten universities to be approved by the Prime Minister for piloting autonomous higher education institution in Vietnam.

UEH is recruiting the top 20 percent of students mainly from the South of Vietnam. There are approximately 45,000 students currently enrolled at UEH both in part-time and full-time programmes. Overall, UEH currently has 600 associates for teaching, including 50 professors and associate professors, and 160 Ph.Ds.

UEH offers a wide range of qualified academic programmes in economics and business administration. Furthermore, the university is steered to become a research based university. Over the years, UEH has built a global network for staff exchange, student exchange, and international conferences. Currently, the university is connected to over 70 different universities in the world. There are 15 international joint programmes for all teaching levels from undergraduate,

master and Ph.D. with other institutions in the US, Netherlands, France, Australia, and New Zealand.

UEH established a multi-disciplinary structure in economics and business administration including nine majors: development economics, business administration, international business & marketing, tourism and travel management, finance and banking, accounting & auditing, management of information system, business law, and public management.

To share UEH's expertise and extensive resources, academics and specialists are available for consultancy services to external organisations and public sectors including industry, government agencies and educational institutions. UEH can rely on excellent, specialized academic associates and a large number of highly skilled professors and lecturers not only in the field of economics.

Currently, UEH is entering the next phase of intensive growth of its research activities and by that ensures that research excellence extends to all faculties. UEH has staff expertise in research and teaching in a range of discipline areas, as mentioned above. It aims at being ranked among the top research based universities in Southeast Asia as it seeks to expand national and international recognition in specific research areas. The UEH nurtures a distinctive, high-impact research culture, committed to enhance the region's cultural, economic and educational development. By this, it responds to contemporary challenges in the Mekong Delta and nationwide. In the transition from a state-driven to a market-oriented system especially in a developing economy such as Vietnam, the internationalisation of higher education helps to update curricula, create a highly-skilled workforce with an international vision in response to the industry's demands for socio-economic development and global integration and speed up reforms. Thus, we imagine the integration of international approaches to be helping and improving our wisdom in dealing with the new challenges of university governance.

1.3 The need for internationalising curricula

In transition economies, training programmes have been typically revised many times. However, due to ad hoc-reforms and repeated piece-meal changes, there are numerous shortcomings. The same is true for UEH. The programmes have not been globally integrated into the programme system of higher educational institutions of other countries. There were repeated courses at undergraduate, master and doctor levels with very limited international foundational textbooks.

Consequently, there was a risk of duplication of content. It was therefore imperative to design globally oriented curricula, and to revise and to keep the programmes fit for the purpose of producing graduates to meet the demand of the international labour market.

Since 2012 the need for internationalising curricula has been recognised for student and staff exchange on the path of international integration. The curriculum has been internationalised on the originality of the curriculum chosen from the top 100 universities for the programmes at the master level and from the top 200 universities for the programmes at undergraduate level. The leading ideas from the top management of UEH in regard to learning and teaching are that the course content is globally oriented with foreign original textbooks and case studies from the context of Vietnam.

As aforementioned, UEH needs a focus and priority on the process of curriculum internationalisation. UEH can highlight some considerable strength:

- UEH is one of 18 key universities in Vietnam and a prestigious university in terms of economics and business administration.
- UEH is committed to implement its goals (mission) and objectives (vision) via a quality-oriented policy.
- The university has the autonomy/self-responsibility for implementing its strategy into a sustainable development.
- There is a strong network with the business community.
- The academic staff is highly competent.
- UEH has a sufficient number of support staff for educational qualification and trainings. They are also highly qualified.
- A quality culture is the key motive of quality assurance activities.

At the same time several specific development requirements have become apparent:

- University facilities need to be improved.
- The information system, research database, studying software and stimulation system (i.e. financial market and marketing) have not been developed in a systematic way.

Two key characteristics of UEH present the source of the curriculum internationalisation problem addressed by this project. These are:

- The range and mix of programmes and the teaching modes need more attention;
- The level of English competency of the teaching staff needs to be improved.

The final result was that by the 2014/15 academic year, UEH was characterised by the following in regard to curriculum internationalisation:

- 23 advanced programmes of 8 core disciplines at the undergraduate level have been approved by the Academic Board of UEH;
- 16 advanced programmes of 8 core disciplines at the master level have been approved by the Academic Board of UEH and implemented by the faculties;
- Faculty teaching has been spread throughout the whole calendar year to prepare for the year of 2016;
- The facilities have been upgraded; additional textbooks and supplementary materials were purchased and an appropriate database was developed.

However, in order to gradually enter into the international academic and scientific network, we consider cooperation with foreign universities to be especially important. There have existed staff and faculty issues requiring consideration in the change that accompanies curriculum development regarding the effect of academic autonomy and the need for continued resources to support the changes.

This paper arises from adopting this problem and its resolution as the Project Action Plan for the DIES International Deans' Course for Asia (IDC III) held between June 2014–February 2015 in Osnabrück and Berlin (Germany), at the National University of Malaysia (Malaysia) and at Gadjah Mada University (Indonesia).

2 Brief Literature Review

Knight (2008) describes internationalisation as an integrated process in the global world with the purpose to expand the aims, functions and distribution in higher education. To ensure the success of internationalization, the initial step is to consider the roles of administrators, faculty and staff – those who participate in the 'international game' as Choudaha & Contreras (2014) stated people as administrators, faculty and staff, their ideas and locations are considered central to the organizations.

Running international joint programmes is an essential and innovative way for internationalising higher education in Vietnam by the shortest path. Since 1998, joint programmes have undergone extensive development and have become very popular in Vietnam. Presently, there are 246 joint-programmes, involving some 76 Vietnamese universities and colleges and 120 overseas partners, approved by the MoET-Vietnam International Education Development (VIED) (VIED-MoET 2014). These approvals have been granted between April 2000 and March 2014. The fields of study of the approved courses range from business administration to journalism to rural sociology. Most of the programmes are in business- and economics-related fields such as accounting, banking, business administration, finance, information technology, and marketing. The top six countries in terms of numbers of approved programmes include France, Australia, England, USA and Taiwan and Singapore.

The tendency in the literature on curriculum internationalisation, as a response to globalisation, has been to emphasize the attributes for graduates to operate internationally (Francis, 1993; IDP Education Australia, 1995; Whalley, 1997). These have been overviewed by Edwards et al. (2003), where it is argued that the literature provides limited guidance on curriculum internationalisation. Crosling, Edwards and Schroder (2008) view the variety of teaching strategies and methods which are applied at various levels of internationalisation as of developing ‘international awareness’ through encouraging reflective approaches, of ‘international competence’ demonstrating the change in students’ perspectives and of ‘international expertise’ through foreign language study and exchange programmes.

3 Significance of curriculum internationalisation at UEH

Internationalisation is core to the value of UEH. In regard to curriculum internationalisation UEH has provided students with global perspectives of their discipline and a broader knowledge base for their future careers. Students can also be helped to develop a set of values and skills to operate in diverse cultural environments. These are done as

- Setting the standards in training to ensure the quality of the programmes to meet international standards;
- The programmes at undergraduate, master and doctorate levels have been developed in a systematic way to ensure the articulation of these programmes in line with well-known universities regionally and globally.

Methods

Diagnosis helps to generate information that offers (i) better understanding of the situation, (ii) opportunities to tailored interventions or solutions, (iii) a plan of action through which the solutions or suggestions are implemented.

A qualitative approach provides richer detail for exploring viewpoints in real context at the initial stage of research; it enables us to gain a better initial understanding of the problem and to identify phenomena, attitudes and influences (Healy and Perry, 2000; Maxwell, 1996; Schramm-Nielsen 2001); and

It helps to examine the facts to see what theory is suggested by this set of “all the relevant facts” (Wengraf 2001).

The methods adopted for curriculum internationalisation at UEH therefore were as follows:

- Carry out an organisational diagnosis (the information sought and the data collection approach are described below);
- Situation analysis and needs analysis for strategic choices;
- Carry out interviews and focus group meetings with the President, Vice Presidents, deans and heads of departments with the consensus and commitment of the Board of Presidents and Academic Board;
- Process the data and arrive at a set of plans for action;
- Develop the key tasks into a project action plan.

Information needed The following steps were considered necessary for developing an advanced curriculum; (i) scanning the internal and external environment of the university to assess the needs of internationalising the curriculum; (ii) planning strategies for curriculum internationalisation; (iii) conceptualising the framework of the curriculum and developing the programme learning outcomes and course learning outcomes as well as key pedagogical approaches; and (iv) making use of the results from the in-depth interviews with the Board of Presidents and the feedback of stakeholders (representatives from the industry, other universities, other departments, prospective students and professional associations)

Data Collection The qualitative data is collected from the in-depth interviews with the Board of Presidents. Additionally the meetings with the Academic Board members as president, vice presidents, deans and heads of departments directly involved in the curriculum internationalisation strategy development and the workshops

with the heads/vice heads in charge of the curriculum development process were organised at UEH. They have all participated extensively in the development of the curriculum internationalisation strategy at institutional and faculty level providing different ideas at different levels of management within the organisation. The data collected from the meetings and workshops provided useful inside knowledge on the strategic and operational level. In addition, we noted the minutes of the meetings and workshops to increasing the accuracy of data collection. Data was also collected from the feedback of stakeholders (representatives from the industry, other universities, other departments, prospective students and professional associations).

4 Findings

This case study of the University of Economics Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam (UEH) attempts to internationalise the curriculum in the 8 core business and economics disciplines. The implementation of curricula change implies both an opportunity and a challenge. The increase in the number of international students and joint programmes at UEH provide the opportunity for student and staff exchange. This has been proved that International School of Business (ISB-UEH) has offered the training programmes articulated by the international partners delivered in English from undergraduate, master to doctorate level and the other schools at UEH in the development process are to increase gradually the number of subjects included in the programmes delivered in English. The teaching staff as the difference in cultures, languages and approaches to the problems proved a challenge to the leadership of the deans and vice deans in the process of managing change in a university. In addition, academic staff at UEH has faced increased workloads and pressure to conduct research and teaching, limiting their commitment to curricula matters.

From the results of the project, we conclude that although the curriculum internationalisation project reflected positive aspects of organisational change careful planning, resources and the involvement and support of academic staff are critical. However, staff resistance to participate in the programme may be seen as display of academic autonomy.

The key issues in managing university change that emerge from results the process of curriculum internationalisation are; (i) People respond positively to change when they understand why it is required; they can cope with it; and they

have ‘ownership’ of the change process; (ii) Senior management must be seen as committed to the change, through leadership and the provision of resources; (iii) Academics value autonomy on curricula matters, especially with individual subjects; and (iv) Academics find it hard to balance with increased administrative and teaching workloads and being under pressure to do more research.

The meetings and workshops brought together deans, vice deans and divisional head to understand the need for change and updating their subject, thereby participating in and managing the change. However, the autonomy issue requires consideration during the curriculum internationalisation process. Several academics argued strongly that academics themselves should decide how ‘international’ their subjects should be.

The individual subject heads tried to internationalise the curriculum and developed flexible learning materials. However, apart from the initial workshops, the involvement of other academic staff was limited due to their high workload and the pressure to research and publish.

Apart from the discussion above, the idea behind this type of project is that, to be successful in terms of ‘international awareness’, more widespread adoption across the university can be achieved with the commitment of the Board of presidents in continuing financial investment and the involvement of individual academics. From the perspectives of the departmental heads and vice heads and coursework divisional heads their attitudes were quite positive and in regard to the course curricula developments and efforts to build team relations among the faculties as well. However, the coursework divisional heads were concerned about some of their colleagues’ lack of involvement that we have explained earlier. Incentives considering for these involvement may overcome such issues in the future.

5 Conclusion

Because of the challenges raised by globalisation, the importance of international skills and knowledge is widely accepted. Hence, universities have revised their aims and objectives to incorporate international skills and knowledge as core graduate attributes. However, little work has been done to translate this new priority into curriculum documents and teaching practice. This paper has reflected on and described UEH’s attempts to introduce curriculum internationalisation and the development of flexible learning materials that facilitate it. In doing so, guidance

has been provided for others as they engage in curriculum internationalisation. The project was concerned with nine core subjects for which curriculum internationalisation was the primary objective (economics and management). Results showed that students appreciate the effort and that their learning opportunities were enhanced.

Academic staff closely involved with the subjects was also generally positive but unlike others the course divisional heads were unwilling to commit much of their time. With regard to curriculum change, it has been observed that involving large numbers of staff and students in the process is difficult and challenging. It confronts the same constraints of those introducing change in any large, complex organisation and, therefore, such a project has to be carefully planned, well-resourced and requires the involvement and support of the academic staff.

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