Emerging Scholars Research Summary

The Influence of Institutional Autonomy Policy on Internationalization of Higher Education: A Case Study in Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I explore the enactment of institutional autonomy policy as a reform strategy to support the internationalization of higher education in Vietnam. The autonomy policy signifies the transfer of decision-making authority from the ministries to public universities so that university leaders can decide on matters of teaching, research, finance, personnel, and international cooperation. I draw on neo-institutionalism to gain insights on the enactment of autonomy policy and use thematic analysis to analyze data which include documents and interviews with senior leaders at one Vietnamese university. The findings indicate that while the autonomy policy has facilitated internationalization agendas with significant outcomes for teaching and research, the policy has been enacted through the interactions of Vietnam's political features and foreign values. The paper contributes to the understanding of higher education reform in centralized contexts of Vietnam and other post-Soviet countries in response to the influences of the globalized knowledge economy.

Keywords: internationalization, institutional autonomy, neo-institutionalism, post-Soviet countries, higher education reform, centralized context

INTRODUCTION

Resembling many Asian countries, Vietnam has associated internationalization of higher education with the country's competitiveness and status in the global knowledge economy (Zhang, 2020). Yet, internationalization in Vietnam's context is in stark contrast to the legacy of centralized governance adopted from the former Soviet countries in which the ministries have complete control over public universities and are conservative in adopting foreign values (Hayden & Lam, 2007; Huisman et al., 2018). For example, while internationalization aims to attract internationally-recognized scholars, the recruitment of foreign labors for teaching and research activities is subject to ministerial approvals, resulting in bureaucratic processes that are lengthy and cumbersome, but not consistently successful (Tran et al., 2017). The Soviet's legacy emerges as the main challenge for internationalization in Vietnam.

To support public universities in internationalizing processes, the Vietnamese government has enacted the institutional autonomy policy. As the Higher Education Law (2012) states, the autonomy policy signifies the transfer of decision-making authority from ministries to public universities; accordingly, university leaders will have the power to decide on issues of teaching, research, finance, personnel, and international collaboration to achieve internationalizing goals. In this study, I explore how the autonomy policy has been implemented in a centralized context of Vietnam to support public universities in internationalizing processes. The findings contribute to our understanding of higher education reform in centralized contexts, not only Vietnam but also other post-Soviet countries in the shifting context of globalization.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on internationalization of higher education in Vietnam has been enriched by both local and foreign researchers who cover a wide range of topics from conceptualization, initiatives, challenges to outcomes (Nguyen et al., 2016; Altbach & Knight, 2007; Nhan & Le, 2019). Internationalization is defined as the process of integrating international, intercultural, and global dimensions

into the purpose, function, and delivery of tertiary education (Knight, 2003). Internationalizing initiatives might include branch campuses or cross-border collaborative programs and degrees (Altbach & Knight, 2007). For example, Vietnam is an emerging center of internationalization in Asia with RMIT's branch campus in Vietnam. Rationales of internationalization can be classified as academic, cultural, political, and economic reasons (de Wit, 2020) and include international profile and reputation, student and staff development, income generation, strategic alliances, and research and knowledge production (Knight, 2004). Most studies share a commonly held belief on internationalization in Vietnam's context as westernization in higher education, in which Vietnamese institutions adopt practices from western countries (Tran et al., 2017; Sperduti, 2017), for instance, using curriclum from Australia, Canada, America, or England. Prior studies have also found interactions between local history, culture, politics, and foreign influences during the internationalization process at Vietnamese universities (Nguyen & Tran, 2018; Ngo et al., 2006).

The concept of institutional autonomy has been discussed extensively in the literature under different terms such as university autonomy, academic freedom, self-governance, and independence. Scholars in early studies defined university autonomy as academic freedom—the freedom of individual academics to teach, research, and pursue truth without fear of punishment or termination of employment (Ashby & Anderson, 1966; Berdahl, 1990; Ash, 2006; Enders, 2006). Behind this conceptualization of autonomy lies a rationale based on the principle that freedom of thought is a non-negotiable condition that is necessary to uphold the university's mission to provide society with scientific knowledge (Neave, 2012). Autonomy is also conceptualized as self-governance, that is, the power of an institution to govern all matters concerning admission, curriculum, assessment, recruitment, finance, and research, without control or influence from any level of government (Tight, 1992; Anderson & Johnson, 1998). In the neoliberal context, the meaning of autonomy has been expanded to include influences of external stakeholders such as the state, market, and society on the university. A vast body of literature has explored autonomy as a mutually dependent relationship between the university's decision-making authority and accountability to the state (Yokoyama, 2007, 2008, 2011; Maassen et al., 2017; Amsler & Shore, 2017). For example, Huisman (2018) argues that public universities are gradually being granted more authority to make decisions on their matters, yet, the

government is also implementing accountability measures to keep track of the university's behavior and performance.

Recent studies have also explored the influence of local context, that is, historical, cultural, political characteristics, on the enactment of autonomy policy in Vietnam (Tran, 2009; Vo, 2018; Dang, 2013). For example, drawing on neo-institutionalism, Vo (2018) illuminates how institutional factors shape the implementation of autonomy policy which borrows the reform ideology from western countries. Despite many studies on internationalization and autonomy policy, there is an absence of study investigating the connection between these two important reform policies in Vietnam. I argue that a nuanced understanding of the linkage between the autonomy policy and internationalization can boost the internationalizing process at Vietnamese public universities. Specifically, university leaders can take advantage of their autonomy to adopt internationalizing initiatives and be aware of what to take into consideration in their internationalization strategies to avoid conflict with the ministries.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

I draw on neo-institutionalism to gain insights into the enactment of autonomy policy in Vietnam. Neo-institutionalism emphasizes the dependence of any change on characteristics of local context; accordingly, the reform must occur within the interplay of organizational characteristics and the ideology adopted externally (Maassen, 2017; Campbell, 2004). The perspective of neo-institutionalism is useful for understanding the implementation of autonomy policy in Vietnam's context, in which the autonomy policy is borrowed from western countries in order for Vietnam to adapt to the shifting context of globalization. Yet, the reform ideology, that is, transferring authorities from ministries to public universities, is conflicting with the local context in which the governance system is centralized to the ministries' control.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, I employ a qualitative case study to explore the influence of the autonomy policy on internationalization. As Yin (2014) suggests, case study is a design particularly suited to the situation in which it is impossible to separate the phenomenon from its context. Given Vietnam's cultural and political context, a case study is appropriate to explore the phenomenon of autonomy. The study is situated within an interpretivist paradigm, in which the goal is to rely as much as possible on participants' views of the situation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Such a

goal is consistent with this study—to gain an in-depth understanding of autonomy and internationalization from the perspectives of university leaders. The first primary data source I used is semi-structured interviews with seventeen leaders at one Vietnamese public university, which I call University A. I interviewed senior leaders because they are information-rich participants who have thorough understandings of and experience on implementing autonomy policy and internationalization at University A. Thus, they can provide useful insights on these reform strategies.

In addition to interviews, I used the Vietnamese government's official policy documents and University A's internal documents. With the support of Nvivo, I conducted thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) which include six steps: (1) familiarizing myself with data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing a report. With this data-driven coding method, themes or findings emerge from data. To increase trustworthiness of the findings, I used strategies of triangulation between data sources, member checking, reflexivity, and audit trail.

RESULTS

The findings indicate that the autonomy policy has facilitated internationalization with significant outcomes for research and teaching. Specifically, the Vietnamese government has transferred considerable authority to University A and removed barriers of ministerial control to pave the way for the university in adopting international practices. University A has gained the power to recruit foreigner scholars without having ministerial approvals. Thanks for this support, the university's research reputation has been boosted through the organization of international conferences and publications on prestigious English scientific journals. The outcomes support the university's goal to become a research-intensive university by 2030. In addition, University A has authority to internationalize curriculum such as using foreign textbooks and importing international programs, which help to modernize curriculum and increase education quality. However, the university's autonomy on managerial issues, especially the appointment of senior positions, is very limited. Furthermore, the government strictly controls content in curriculum. For example, the university is not allowed to abolish political courses and must use textbooks written by Vietnamese authors for these courses, although contents are not necessary for many majors. The restrictions have limited the university's integration process

into the international education market because the university has difficulties in developing joint degrees with foreign institutions.

DISCUSSION

I argue that the autonomy policy has been enacted through interactions of Vietnam's political features and foreign ideologies. The policy has supported University A to achieve its goals of internationalization, that is, to increase resources in a globalized context (Knight, 2004). Specifically, the university has gained international profile and reputation through strategic alliances with foreign institutions and researchers. It also achieves knowledge acquisition through imported curriculum in which contents are updated. However, the legacy of centralized governance in which the ministries have ultimate power and are conservative on western values still impedes the internationalizing process. As Stensaker et al. (2008) emphasizes, the political power of a country plays a critical role in the field of internationalization. Consequently, the university's curriculum is a mixture of Vietnamese and foreign contents and leadership positions are limited to Vietnamese people. This means local forces still play a decisive role in Vietnam's internationalization agendas.

The findings confirm the literature on outcomes of internationalization in Vietnam (Nguyen et al., 2016; Nhan & Le, 2019) and the hybridity of Vietnamese values and external influences during the integration process (Nguyen & Tran, 2018; Ngo et al., 2006). The paper contributes to the field of comparative and international higher education by reinforcing the goal of internationalization in Asian countries, that is, to seek a national identity (Ritter, 2019) and a global competitiveness and status (Zhang, 2020). The study joins with Sperduti (2017) about internationalization as westernization, in which Vietnam's universities import contents from western countries and publish in English academic journals. However, the study advances the conversation by acknowledging the role of centralized governance context in post-Soviet countries during the reform process to adapt to globalization.

CONCLUSION

This study explores the implementation of autonomy policy as the Vietnamese government's support for internationalization strategies at public universities. While Vietnamese institutions are in the initial phase of implementing autonomy and internationalization, findings have important implications for future policy-making and practice. University leaders can take advantage of their

decision-making authority to boost internationalizing processes. However, they need to be aware of what to consider in their internationalization plans. I strongly recommend that policy-makers and university leaders take into consideration political features of Vietnam in adopting the autonomy policy. Also, given the Soviet's legacy as the main challenge for internationalization in Vietnam, university leaders must dare to think, dare to act, and be extremely flexible during the internationalizing process.

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