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## Internationalization As A Strategy To Enhance Higher Education Quality In Vietnam – Reflections from university leaders

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## Internationalization as a strategy to enhance higher education quality in Vietnam – Reflections from university leaders

### Abstract

**Purpose** – Internationalization is viewed as an important strategy in the context of a country in transition from central planning to market orientation. Efforts to internationalize universities are being carried out at both national and institutional levels. However, there has been no study to investigate how individual institutions approach internationalization and what they gain from that process. This paper investigates the enhancement of teachers' and students' knowledge and skills using internationalization in Vietnam universities as a strategy.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Semi-structured interviews with leaders from 12 universities were conducted to investigate their perceptions, strategies as well as the perceived outcomes of the internationalization process of their universities. Data analysis involved coding the transcripts of interviews into themes.

**Findings** – Results show that current approaches to internationalized activities in Vietnamese universities are ad hoc in nature, while resources and language incompetence of staff and students are limited. In line with other previous studies, limited resources, and lack of English competence among educators and students were found to be the key obstacles and challenges for internationalized activities. We also note an issue that apparently has not been raised elsewhere in the relevant research literature, which is the challenge for the sustainability of knowledge production via research and publications.

**Originality/value** – Findings from our study not only contribute to Vietnamese Universities, but also to other developing institutions which do not have strong international exchange programs, or have not experienced strong benefits from international exchange programs.

**Keywords** Internationalization; Vietnam; Higher education; perceptions; strategies

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

Economic globalisation has a profound impact on the flow of goods, services, and capital as well as on the mobility of human resources and knowledge across countries. This process creates intense competition amongst countries to broaden their markets. As a country's sources of wealth shift from natural resources-based to knowledge-based assets (Dunning 2000), knowledge-based economy emerged as a popular economic development model to enhance national competitive advantage and growth (Barkhordari, Fattahi, & Azimi 2019). Given this context, internationalization within universities has become an inevitable approach to supply highly skilled labour and to raise institutional competitiveness (Altbach & Teichler 2001). Internationalization of higher education is viewed not merely as an international activity, but as a process to integrate "international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education" (Knight, 2007, p. 214). Internationalization of higher education has dramatically evolved within the past decades in response to increased globalization (de Wit & Altbach, 2021; Ge, 2022).

Universities across the world are interested in internationalization as a strategy to meet the demand for better quality of education (Howe, 2009), but internationalization arrangements vary greatly depending on institution's context. European universities, for example, view internationalization primarily as the main mechanism to enhance exchange of staff and students (Teichler, 2009). However, in Asian countries, internationalization has several roles: to increase institutional competitiveness, to change organisational culture, and to reform higher education systems (Shin & Harman, 2009). Despite its long history, internationalization within higher education institutions is still a topic of concern because of the emergence, in the past decades, of new approaches to cooperation and also because of competition between universities (Gao, Baik & Arkoudis, 2015).

In Vietnam, concern with internationalization of higher education is not just the business of universities themselves, it is also a demand by government in order to upgrade the quality of the education system. Vietnam experienced dramatic economic transformation after *Doi Moi* in the 1980s when the central planning system was abandoned and market forces gradually gained momentum (Nguyen, Huynh & Huynh, 2022). Since the 2000s, the focus of Vietnamese policy has been on integration into the world economy, which was marked by the country's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2007. More importantly, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) (2015) has agreed on an economic agenda, namely the *ASEAN Economic Community Blueprint 2025*, which enhances mobility of resources including skilled labour amongst member nations. This event has created even more pressure on the necessity to upgrade the quality of Vietnam's human resources, in order to effectively compete in the labour market under these new circumstances. The changing contexts of Vietnam creates unique opportunities to reform the country's higher education system.

Initial internationalized activities in Vietnamese institutions of higher education were comprised mainly of staff and student exchange programs with traditional partners that came from former Socialist and neighbouring countries. Since the 1990's, internationalization in domestic institutions has been more diversified with international cooperation, international programs for degrees, and joint publications, as well as staff and student mobility programs (Vietnam

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2  
3 International Education Cooperation Department [VIECD], 2017). This new era also depicts a shift  
4 in the selection of partners for cooperation, and more recent statistics show that Vietnamese  
5 institutions are more likely to collaborate with institutions from developed countries rather than  
6 traditional partners (VIECD, 2017). This is a significant shift, given the large number of domestic  
7 scholars that received training and degrees from traditional partners up to then (Tuan, 2013).  
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10 The current Vietnamese Higher Education Laws does not provide any official philosophy of higher  
11 education (Ha, 2018). Likewise, within national education policies, there has been no official  
12 philosophy of internationalization in higher education settings, despite the fact that activities in  
13 relation to internationalization have been taking place for decades. Even in the most recent national  
14 policy to comprehensively address activities related to internationalization in higher education, no  
15 definition of the concept of internationalization is found (see Government of Vietnam, 2013a).  
16 Instead, within Vietnamese policy texts, activities in relation to international cooperation,  
17 integration, and international academic exchange are referred to as 'internationalization of  
18 education' (Tran, Marginson, & Nguyen, 2014).  
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21 In the last two decades, there have been growing concerns over the delivery of internationalization  
22 into the Vietnamese higher education system. Several studies have explicitly addressed  
23 international integration in the Vietnamese higher education system (Anh & Winter, 2010; Welch,  
24 2010; Tran, Marginson, & Nguyen, 2014; Tran & Marginson 2018). However, these studies  
25 focused primarily on internationalization issues *in the whole of Vietnam's* higher education system,  
26 rather than on how individual institutions, considering their own characteristics, implemented (or  
27 benefitted from) internationalized activities. Some of the other international publications focused  
28 on quality assurance and international programs but, again, the sample studied included only public  
29 universities and the only foreign-owned campus, all of them located within Vietnam's two largest  
30 cities.  
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34 Vietnam's higher education system is under the auspices of the Ministry of Education and  
35 Training, however higher education institutions have acquired increasing autonomy in relation to  
36 the appointment of leaders, finance, development strategy, and academic activities in the past  
37 decade. This is as a result of the Vietnamese Higher Education Reform Agenda, the long-term  
38 national plan, approved in 2005, to comprehensively reform the higher education system by 2020  
39 (Hayden & Thiep, 2015). As part of the agenda to encourage foreign investment in education,  
40 government policies have facilitated, since the early 2000s, a higher education system that is more  
41 open to foreign investment and cooperation (Hoang, Tran, & Pham, 2018). The adjusted national  
42 plan for the national network of universities and colleges from 2006 to 2020, specified that  
43 international students should account for at least one per cent of total student enrolments in the  
44 country by 2015, and three per cent thereof by 2020 (Government of Vietnam, 2013b).  
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48 Issues and challenges in relation to internationalization of the Vietnam higher education  
49 institutions remain to be addressed. While the neighbouring countries increasingly attract  
50 international students to their domestic universities that are well-positioned in the league tables  
51 (Tham, 2013; Sanders, 2018; Jampaklaya, Penboona & Lucktong, 2022), Vietnamese universities  
52 have failed to progress sufficiently. Previous literature on Vietnamese universities states that the  
53 country's universities are outdated, inward-looking, and inefficient in using resources and insights  
54 brought in by existing internationalized activities (Tran, Marginson, & Nguyen, 2014; Phan, Tran,  
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3 & Blackmore, 2019). Thus, each university needs to contextualize and adapt initiatives to regional  
4 and institutional contexts, accentuating the importance of going from a merely strategic level into  
5 the role of institutional agents and leaders. The universities' responses to the pressures and  
6 changing contexts make them become learning organizations (Patterson, 1999), and this  
7 transformation is beneficial to higher education institutions (White & Weathersby, 2005). There  
8 are various versions of the learning organisation (Örtenblad, 2018) and universities have a  
9 uniquely advantageous position to apply the practice of learning organisation in their institutions  
10 (Franklin, Hodgkinson & Stewart, 1989). Empirical evidence shows that the transformation of  
11 universities into learning organisations can be found in both developed and developing nations  
12 (Bui & Baruch, 2013).  
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16 The purpose of this paper is to investigate the enhancement of teachers' and students' knowledge  
17 and skills using internationalisation in Vietnam universities as a strategy. The main research  
18 questions include:  
19

- 20 (1) What are the rationales behind the internationalization activities by Vietnam universities?
- 21 (2) How do internationalization practices in Vietnam universities contribute to improving the  
22 knowledge and skills of educators and students?  
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26 Our study offers the following insights through the following contributions. Firstly, this study is  
27 useful not only in the Vietnamese context, but also for other developing institutions which do not  
28 have strong international exchange programs or do not benefit from international exchange  
29 program. Studies on internationalization are mainly found in developed countries which also tend  
30 to be the favourite destinations of international students (Craciun, 2018), while the experience of  
31 internationalization varies according to country-specific contexts (de Wit & Altbach, 2021).  
32 Secondly, our study is one of the first to empirically investigate approaches to internationalization  
33 from a micro-perspective, through interviews with university leaders in the country. Thirdly, our  
34 interviews cover a more diversified sample of universities than that of other published works of a  
35 similar topic and methodology. While previous studies approached one to two public universities  
36 located in the same geographical location (see Anh & Winter, 2010; H.T. Nguyen, 2018), our  
37 sampled universities cover a wider range of characteristics such as ownership type, geographical  
38 location, size, and time of establishment (see Table 1). Fourthly, our findings highlight the  
39 challenges faced by universities in the internationalisation process, including the shortage of  
40 human and financial resources, staff's limited English competency and the lack of opportunities  
41 for domestic students to exchange with foreign counterparts. Remarkably, our findings raise  
42 concerns over the challenges for the sustainability of knowledge production via research and  
43 publications in the sampled universities. This finding has not been raised elsewhere in studies on  
44 higher education in the country.  
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## 49 **2. Internationalization in universities**

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51 Universities have been involved in some type of international activity since the Middle Ages, but  
52 internationalization of higher education gained momentum several decades ago, when education  
53 was viewed as a national and institutional strategic policy in response to a more globalised  
54 economy (Teichler, 1996; Altbach & Teichler, 2001). According to de Wit (2002), there are four  
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3 driving forces that may explain higher education institutions' interests in internationalization,  
4 including political, economic, social/cultural and academic considerations. There are several  
5 attempts to conceptualise higher education internationalization. The concept of  
6 internationalization has evolved from institutional context (Arum & van de Water, 1992) to  
7 national and global scope (Knight, 2007; Van der Wende, 2001). Among these, Knight's (2007)  
8 definition is more succinct and applicable to a wider context. Their view of internationalization of  
9 higher education is not merely a task to be accomplished by individual universities. This process  
10 requires nation-wide coordinated efforts by both universities and government to internationalize  
11 the higher education system as the global context reflected a shift in paradigm from cooperation  
12 to competition (Van der Wende, 2001).  
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16 Universities and their stakeholders benefit from internationalization in several ways and at various  
17 levels. Many countries, especially non-Western ones, have made internationalization of higher  
18 education a national strategic focus because of the promising outcome associated with  
19 internationalization. These include the development of domestic human resource and the  
20 enhancement of economic, geo-political and educational position of the country (Jon & Yoo, 2021;  
21 Garwe & Thondhlana, 2022). Universities can take advantage of the financial supports and  
22 favourable policies to implement internationalized activities which help faculty members and  
23 students to advance their knowledge and skills towards international norms. Academic exchanges  
24 with international scholars contribute to the expansion of international networks, which can be  
25 beneficial to the local institutions (Bremer, 2018). Through international exchange programs,  
26 students are offered the opportunity to experience studying in a multicultural environment that in  
27 turn leads to an enhancement of their psychological and sociocultural adaptation skills (Ellahi &  
28 Zaka, 2015; Larbi & Fu, 2017; Forstorp, 2017; Abdulai, Roosalu & Wagoner, 2021). The increase  
29 in publications of scholarly journals not only enhance the production of knowledge, but also  
30 improve the academic reputation of institutions and staff (Abramo, D'Angelo & Di Costa, 2009).  
31 The implementation of internationalization strategies is also connected with changes in  
32 university's organizational cultures and structures, with the aim of developing the institutions into  
33 a better functioning learning organization. Developing into a learning organization is increasingly  
34 being targeted by many universities, since this choice is claimed to help universities to meet  
35 external challenges and pressures as well as to gain competitive advantage (White & Weathersby,  
36 2005; Bui & Baruch, 2013; Voolaid & Ehrlich, 2017). Empirical evidence shows that a positive  
37 relationship exists between the learning organization and organizational performance  
38 (Habtoor, Arshad, & Hassan, 2019).  
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44 In practice, rationales for and approaches to internationalization of higher education are based on  
45 country and institution-specific interests (de Wit, 2001; Knight, 2007; Knight, 2008). Although  
46 these concerns are commonly found in U.S. universities, they are not commonalities shared by all  
47 universities as each institution places its focus on one or some of the above rationales (Klasek,  
48 1992; de Wit, 2001). In the past decades, internationalization in the U.S. placed emphasis on  
49 enhancement of competitiveness of higher education institutions and this country has become the  
50 most popular destination of students around the world, but such approach was criticised for its  
51 commercial orientation (de Wit, 2013).  
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54 In the EU, internationalization of higher education also saw a shift in rationale from political to  
55 economic. This change manifested in the evolution of initiatives, namely Erasmus program,  
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3 Bologna Process and Lisbon Strategy, that aimed at improving global competitiveness of European  
4 higher education institutions and creating a competitive knowledge society (de Wit, 2013;  
5 Mazzoleni, 2013). However, member states of EU performed differently in internationalization as  
6 higher education in some countries ranked high globally while others fell behind, and the reasons  
7 fundamentally came from the diversity in their domestic social, cultural, political, and economic  
8 contexts (Kwiek, 2004; Mazzoleni, 2013; Egron-Polak, Howard, de Wit & Hunter, 2015).  
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11 Internationalization in Asian countries, especially in East and Southeast Asia, was mainly driven  
12 by capacity building and the desire to become higher education hubs. While some universities in  
13 Asia have internationalized for many decades, most others are latecomers (Forest & Altbach, 2007;  
14 Mok & Chan, 2008). As a commonality, higher education institutions in this region worked hard  
15 to thrive in teaching and research activities, with supportive government policies and resources in  
16 the quest for joining world-class league tables (Mok & Chan, 2008; Chan, 2013). Adoption of  
17 models and academic resources from developed Western countries, recruitment of foreign  
18 scholars, staff and student mobility, and the use of English as the medium of instruction also  
19 featured in this region (Huang, 2007; Ding, 2018). Some Asian countries have succeeded in  
20 establishing world reputation for some of their universities, but problems also arose such as limited  
21 English-language proficiency, brain drain, commodification of education, and the differences  
22 between domestic norms and Western styles (Howe, 2009; Chan, 2013; Sanders, 2018). Ironically,  
23 evidence showed that efforts to enhance research capacity to compete globally turned out to be  
24 limited in comparison to domestic knowledge diffusion and technology progress (Yang & You,  
25 2018).  
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### 31 **3. Methodology**

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33 We applied qualitative, semi-structured interviews with leaders of 12 universities to investigate  
34 their perceptions, strategies as well as the perceived outcomes of the internationalization process  
35 of their universities. These types of interviews can best explore individual beliefs, as well as  
36 finding patterns of similarity and difference (Bédard & Gendron, 2004; Forsey, 2012). The  
37 participants' knowledge and experience of the phenomenon was considered as the principal  
38 criterion. University leaders or department heads with responsibility for developing institutional  
39 internationalization strategies were deemed to be the most appropriate participants since they are  
40 arguably 'good informants' for the selected topic (Spradley, 1979).  
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43 The sample included universities serving diverse populations and the universities were  
44 specifically chosen to address diversity in size, geographical location, time of establishment,  
45 orientation. Elucidation of each criterion is as follows.  
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48 *Size:* the study looks at universities that attract total student enrolment above and below country's  
49 average, which is about 7,523 students per institution (General Statistics Office, 2017).  
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51 *Geographical location:* selected universities are in the North, Centre, and South of the country.  
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*Time of establishment:* the sample includes universities established before *Doi Moi* when the central planning was prevailing in Vietnam, as well as after *Doi Moi* when that system was abandoned in late 1980s.

*Orientation:* both monodisciplinary and multidisciplinary universities were included.

To address the research objective, discussions with interviewees were conducted around the following questions: How do they think about the role of internationalization in relation to their institutions? What are the key dimensions that constitute their university internationalization strategies? How do they describe the approach to implement internationalization strategies? What can be gained from internationalization given the individual context of their institution? These questions were written in both Vietnamese and English and sent to leaders of sampled universities one month in advance. In addition, the leader of our research group also contacted leaders of sampled universities by phone to explain the interview. The notification of questions in advance allowed participating universities to have sufficient time to prepare and make decision on who would be the interviewees.

**Table 1:** Sampled universities

University	Time of Establishment	Geographical Location
Vietnam National University, Hanoi	Before <i>Doi Moi</i>	North
University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University, Hanoi	Before <i>Doi Moi</i>	North
University of Da Nang	Before <i>Doi Moi</i>	Central
University of Economics, Hue University	Before <i>Doi Moi</i>	Central
Nha Trang University	Before <i>Doi Moi</i>	Central
Duy Tan University	After <i>Doi Moi</i>	Central
Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology	After <i>Doi Moi</i>	South
Foreign Trade University Ho Chi Minh City Campus	Before <i>Doi Moi</i>	South
International University, Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City	After <i>Doi Moi</i>	South
University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City	Before <i>Doi Moi</i>	South
Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology, Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City	Before <i>Doi Moi</i>	South
Ton Duc Thang University	After <i>Doi Moi</i>	South

For ease of discussion, face-to-face interviews were conducted in the Vietnamese language. There were 21 informants from 12 universities participating in the interviews. Each interview lasted an average of two hours, with total interview time of 24 hours. All interviews were audiotaped with the consent of the interviewees, and the recordings were transcribed. Interview transcripts were

scrutinised and coded into main themes, following a combination of emerging and predetermined codes (Creswell, 2014). The whole process of coding and analysis of transcripts was conducted in the Vietnamese language with the technical assistance of MAXQDA version 18, a software package for qualitative and mixed methods research. Data analysis involved coding the transcripts of interviews into themes. The coding frame was created by both inductive and deductive category construction (Kuckartz, 2014). We particularly looked for convergence across respondents' reports (Creswell, 2012). Finally, the results were translated into English.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

This section presents and discusses the thematic issues that emerged from the interviews with universities leaders. The analysis of the results provides answers to the research questions raised in our study. We found new challenges to be addressed as the process of internationalization responds to global and domestic contexts.

##### *Goals and activities in relation to internationalization*

In our study, the reported goals of universities when pursuing internationalization converged with three of these categories. These are academic rationales: improving knowledge and skills of staff and student, enhancing the university's reputation and ranking, and producing and disseminating knowledge (see Table 2). Only two university leaders mentioned students' cultural integration as being among their goals. The goals we found are generally in line with findings from previous studies (see de Wit, 2001; Knight, 2008). Although none of the respondents specified economic concerns as being a factor driving their internationalization, the financial benefits have implicitly become a major goal of internationalization efforts, regardless of institutional context. Domestic student enrolment is crucial to Vietnamese universities, given the fact that the number of newly established academic institutions has almost doubled in over a decade and public universities are hypothetically on the road towards being financially autonomous. The current academic reputation of Vietnam higher education is legitimately at the periphery of the world university rankings, thus domestic universities hardly secure desired international student enrolment.

**Table 2:** Leaders' perspectives on the goals of internationalization

University	Knowledge and skills of staff and student	Reputation and ranking position	Knowledge production and dissemination	Students' cultural integration
A	✓	✓	✓	
B	✓	✓	✓	✓
C	✓	✓	✓	
D	✓	✓	✓	
E	✓	✓	✓	
F	✓	✓	✓	
G	✓	✓	✓	
H	✓	✓	✓	

K	✓	✓	✓	
L	✓	✓	✓	
M	✓	✓	✓	✓
N	✓	✓	✓	
Frequency	12	12	12	2

Note: University names are anonymized and arranged in different order from Table 1. The themes presented in this table emerged from the coding of interview transcripts. The ticks indicate whether the answers of universities leaders match any of the themes found.

Internationalized activities primarily focus on improving the knowledge and skills of educators and students (see Table 3). However, such activities are currently limited to the educators. The internationalizing curriculum is a core part of the country's internationalization agenda (Ministry of Education and Training, 2012). Although this activity is claimed to be merely the import of curriculum from universities highly ranked in the world league tables (Tran, Phan, & Marginson, 2018), the role of domestic educators is very important because they serve as the main agent to transfer the absorbed knowledge to their students. The next two activities, which are staff mobility and collaborative research and publications, were reported to enhance staff competency so that educators can transfer their learned knowledge and skills to students more effectively.

Offering international degree programs is the reported internationalized activity that involved both staff and students. Student mobility is also included in these programs, however this activity is optional in some programs. All the university leaders explained that the international degree programs gave universities the perceived and desired status of internationalization to attract more students, which implies revenue coming from tuition fees. However, most interviewees in this study reported that the recruitment of international students is a difficult task for all international degree programs. Given this challenge, the presence of international students, rather than a source of income, was mostly reported as being visible evidence that could be used in the advertisement of internationalized programs for attracting more domestic students. Three universities leaders viewed the presence of foreign students was mainly to facilitate the English-speaking environment for domestic staff and students (see Table 3).

The only programs that attract numerous foreign students to enrol in domestic universities are modules on Vietnam studies. The leader at university K reported that thousands of foreigner students registered for non-degree and degree courses on Vietnam studies every year, even when tuition fees applied to international student were higher than those for domestic students in university K. Interestingly, most of the international students participating in courses such as the ones described above come from Korea and Japan, as specified by university K leader and university M leaders. University K leader believes that business reasons are the main incentive for people from these two countries to study in Vietnam. Perhaps this is understandable, given that Korea and Japan are currently top investors in Vietnam (General Statistics Office, 2017). Arguably, the international success of programs on Vietnam studies is possibly only attributable to Vietnam's fortunate position in international business, rather than on specific effort from the universities to internationalize.

**Table 3: Reported internationalized activities**

University	Internationalizing curriculum	Staff mobility	Collaborative research and publications	International degree programs	English-speaking environment
A	✓	✓	✓	✓	
B	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
C	✓	✓	✓	✓	
D	✓	✓	✓	✓	
E	✓	✓	✓	✓	
F	✓	✓	✓	✓	
G	✓	✓	✓	✓	
H	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
K	✓	✓	✓	✓	
L	✓	✓	✓	✓	
M	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Frequency	12	12	12	12	3

Note: University names are anonymized and arranged in different order from Table 1. The themes presented in this table emerged from the coding of interview transcripts. The ticks indicate whether the answers of universities leaders match any of the themes found.

### *The approach to institutional-level internationalization strategies*

All university leaders viewed partnerships with high-ranking foreign universities as the key to internationalizing and improving the reputations of domestic universities. As the leader of university B explained, “the strategy [is] to stand on a giant’s shoulders.” The benefit of this idea was expressed by the president of university H as follows: “...if I can establish partnerships with large [foreign] universities, then smaller [foreign] ones would be okay [with our university]”. This suggests that if a domestic university is successful in establishing a partnership with one of the world’s top universities, then it can easily gain trust from foreign universities of lower ranking to build collaborative programs with them too.

However, only three of the universities sampled expressed clear strategies regarding choosing international partners, developing staff ability to reach international standards, and monitoring of international activities in terms of resources invested and expected measurable outcomes (see Table 4). The descriptions by the other ten universities representatives about the approach to internationalized activities revealed that their approaches were unplanned or opportunistic. In most cases, it was found that approaches to the selection of partner foreign universities were basically described as ad hoc and as relying upon personal network connections or even luck (see Table 5). This situation also happened in the research and publications activities and the international degree programs. Due to limited staff ability, all sampled universities reported relying mainly on foreign partners for expertise, curricula and even funding in some cases, in order to develop international degree programs to attract domestic and international students. In all universities sampled, international programs were taught by a mixture of domestic and foreign lecturers. Initially, foreign staff completely took over all teaching tasks, but the replacement of these by suitably qualified domestic staff (with degrees completed abroad) happened gradually. We found that, in some cases, financial constraints hindered university leaders’ desire to push for research collaborations. In other cases, research efforts are promoted by the kindness of the foreign sponsors and scholars. As the leader of University M says, “we don’t really pay them [foreign scholars] all. Many of them are voluntary”. The shortage of financial resources made it impossible for domestic universities to have full control over the direction of research projects. Obviously, the themes of these projects were determined by the main sponsors whose studying topics may or may not be related to the universities’ interests.

The answer to whether the opportunistic or the planned approach to internationalization was more academically or financially successful to the sampled universities is not covered our research project<sup>1</sup>. However, the planned approach to internationalization is believed not only widely adopted by universities in the developed contexts but also better than the opportunistic process in enhancing universities’ international competitiveness (Edwards, 2007). We found that the three universities sampled reported the more planned approaches to internationalization are characterized by six features as follows: First, they were relatively young universities (all established after *Doi Moi*); Second, they were amongst the country’s top five universities and, furthermore, also had the largest number of international publications up to 2018 (DTU Research Informeta, 2018); Third, they acquired increasingly higher positions in world rankings in

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<sup>1</sup> Also, it should be noted that such information is perhaps sensitive for universities leaders to reveal to the interviewers who are working at the university competing with most of the sampled institutions.

comparison to many other older or larger domestic academic institutions (Webometrics Ranking of World Universities, 2018); Fourth, their administrative styles were reported to resemble a corporate enterprise, which aims at performance, efficiency, and competitiveness (Henkel, 1997); Fifth, these universities were characterised by single-person leadership that, as described in the interviews, had complete power over the university to implement transformational leadership style. And sixth, these three universities included one private and two financially autonomous public institutions.

**Table 4: Reported approach to internationalization strategies**

University	Internationalization was designed as		Approach to internationalization	
	a separate plan with measurable outcomes	components of the university's general strategy	Systematic/ Planned	Unplanned/ Opportunistic
A		✓		✓
B	✓			✓
C		✓		✓
D		✓		✓
E		✓		✓
F		✓		✓
G		✓		✓
H	✓		✓	
K		✓		✓
L		✓		✓
M	✓		✓	
N		✓		✓
Frequency	3	9	2	10

Note: University names are anonymized and arranged in different order from Table 1. The themes presented in this table emerged from the coding of interview transcripts. The ticks indicate whether the answers of universities leaders match any of the themes found.

### ***Obstacles and Challenges***

All sampled universities reported limited resources and lack of English competence among educators and students as the obstacles and challenges for internationalized activities. These findings are in line with previous studies (Nguyen, H.T., 2018; Guo, Guo, Yochim, & Liu, 2021)). The fact that the internationalization activities are happening 'at home' with a limited number of foreign students may hinder universities' goals of cultural integration, as domestic students do not have sufficient opportunities to exchange with foreign counterparts.

Results from interviews revealed that the desire for international publications is so strong that institutional policies and resources of all kinds are deployed to stimulate staff efforts. It was reported that the main ones are financial incentive schemes, where staff receive an amount of money as a reward for every paper published internationally. The amount awarded, normally one-time payments, varies based on the indexing database and on the impact factor of the journal. For

instance, the higher the impact factor of the journal, the higher the one-time cash reward to authors who successfully published on that journal. Although they do contribute to the reputation of universities and lecturers, publication efforts are relatively costly for universities to pursue. This situation really matters, as domestic universities' budgets rely heavily on tuition fees, which account for about 70 per cent of total revenue (Cuong, 2018). As reported by all university leaders in the interviews, most research activities that lead to international publications were not financially self-sustaining. Some universities even tightened spending controls to overcome the financial challenges in research and publications (see Table 5). Such behaviours imply that the universities sampled found it difficult to secure funding for research and publications from the sources other than revenue from tuition fees. This situation imposes challenges for the sustainability of knowledge production via research and publications in the sampled universities, since the funding received may fluctuate according to the trends in student enrolment. This finding has not been raised elsewhere in studies on higher education in the country. Contrary to evidence found in Western Europe, Eastern and some Southeastern Asian countries where funding for research and publications typically comes from government budgets and industrial sources (Kwiek, 2004; Howe, 2009; Beerkens, 2010), no universities leaders sampled reported securing funding for research from industrial sources. Rather, the reported collaborations between universities and firms primarily focused on internship and employment opportunities for students. This finding shows the weakness in collaboration for research between domestic universities and enterprises which is in accordance with findings by Vo, Nguyen, and Dinh (2018).

**Table 5: Selected responses from the interviews**

Categories	Selected responses from universities leaders
Approaches to partnerships with high-ranking foreign universities	<p data-bbox="683 1220 1414 1472"><i>“Most of them [target foreign university] did not trust us. Most of them say ‘No’ to collaborative degree programs with us... Finally, luckily, a friend who is a co-author in one of my publications introduced me to them [target foreign university]. I had another chance to explain to the president of that university. Then he agreed to discuss and signed [the agreement]” (University H)</i></p> <p data-bbox="683 1514 1414 1692"><i>“Let me tell you the story about university U from Sweden. They [university U] came to our university by mistake because their actual intention was to find another university. But they enjoyed working with us after all” (University C)</i></p> <p data-bbox="683 1734 1414 1862"><i>“...foreign counterparts are the most important in research projects sponsored by NGOs or other research organisations. There are, for instance, research projects on agribusiness in the Centre of Vietnam, others on</i></p>

	<p><i>climate change... but they all focus on topics related to agriculture, which is to our advantage. They are community-based projects. These projects focus on poverty alleviation and disaster risk reduction. There is no project yet on enterprise development” (University D)</i></p> <p><i>“The notable thing is that we can’t control it completely. We really want to develop some disciplines that we need but foreign partners do not. So, we must balance between our needs and our international partners’ wants” (University C)</i></p>
Financial challenges in research and publications	<p><i>“In these days, we cannot absolutely expect to break even in scientific research, especially those aiming at international publications... But we should invest in them because such activities bring about comprehensive university development that appeals to students” (University B)</i></p> <p><i>“We have to opt for savings. Currently, it is like, as we often joke about, belt-tightening to save for research. However, we should think of other policies and financial sources as solutions in the future” (University M)</i></p>



## 5. Conclusion

Results from our study on Vietnamese universities leaders' reflections on internationalization provide interesting information in relation to the key research questions posed by this paper. The rationales behind the internationalization activities by Vietnam universities imply the focus on economic considerations. The universities' approaches to internationalization are ad hoc in nature and result in the vagueness of the directions of the university and this situation may hinder their international competitiveness. Our findings also highlight the challenges faced by universities, including the shortage of human and financial resources, staff's limited English competency. The lack of opportunity for domestic students to exchange with foreign counterparts. We contribute to the literature by raising concerns about the potential challenges for the sustainability of knowledge production via research and publications in the context of universities in emerging economies where resources are limited.

To increase the presence of foreign students, the government may support domestic universities to organize Erasmus-like programs with other countries of economic ties such as ASEAN nations as a regionalization strategy. In addition, universities may engage in the high economic potential of academic tourism in most beautiful regions of Vietnam. To enhance the sustainability of the research and publications activities, the collaboration with firms in R&D activities should be particularly encouraged and supported so that the knowledge and skills gained from internationalized activities can be applied and beneficial to the country.

Learning from models and best practices from other higher education systems is desirable, but Vietnamese universities should make proper adaptation to the country context. In the next decades it is essential that domestic universities work together to identify priorities in internationalization activities which entail coordinated efforts among institutions for more efficient use of limited resources. Interconnected library networks, discipline expertise networks, and freely accessible online learning materials are examples of projects that domestic universities may collaborate to make use of academic resources. Given the increased adoption of online learning platforms due to the pandemic, the virtual mobility activities with foreign universities should also be enhanced. This would offer the opportunities to exchange with other cultures to all students regardless their backgrounds.

Future studies should analyse the impacts of Vietnamese universities' internationalization strategies on universities themselves and other stakeholders, the research area that was not covered in our study. Outcomes from the impact analysis would inform the universities leaders of the effectiveness and efficiency of internationalized activities so that they can adjust the policies where needed. This may be beneficial to the universities in country where resources are limited.

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Response to the Reviewer 1’s comments

No.	Comment	Response
1	<p>The paper attempts to describe the current situation within Vietnam, but does not do so in a clear and concise manner. A stated key finding "vanishing", not clearly defined as a term, but no data was provided to support this. A key recommendation to partner with industry seems to have mysteriously appeared without any evidence or analysis of the validity of such an approach.</p>	<p>We thank the reviewer for pointing out the weakness. We removed the sentences on “vanishing” because of its vagueness and replaced by “sustainability of knowledge production via research and publications”. We also restructured the last paragraph of the subsection on <b>Obstacles and Challenges</b>.</p> <p>The last paragraph of the subsection on <b>Obstacles and Challenges</b> also added explanation for recommendation to partner with industry as follows:</p> <p>“Contrary to evidence found in Western Europe, East and some Southeast Asian countries where funding for research and publications typically comes from government budgets and industrial sources (Kwiek, 2004; Howe, 2009; Beerkens, 2010), no universities leaders sampled reported securing funding for research from industrial sources. Rather, the reported collaborations between universities and firms primarily focused on internship and employment opportunities for students. This finding shows the weakness in collaboration for research between domestic universities and enterprises which is in accordance with findings by Vo, Nguyen, and Dinh (2018).”</p>
2	<p>Table 1 is a disaster. Is one to believe that the enrollments for these institutions is not known, and that the university web sites state their size as "below average"? Why not simply state the university names and anonymize the interview excerpts?</p> <p>The author needs to continue to sort through ideas and concepts, and clearly organize these in a convincing, and well-organized manner.</p>	<p>We thank the reviewer for pointing out the issues with Table 1. We included the names of sampled universities in Table 1 and anonymized their names in other tables and interview excerpts.</p> <p>We made changes to the structure of section 4. Results and Discussion to make the ideas well-organized.</p>

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<p>1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39</p>	<p>3 Results and discussion begins with what should be part of the literature review. And I'm not sure that the nature of the motivation for pursuing internationalisation (planned vs. random) is even significant. Did it affect the outcomes at those institutions? i.e. planned implementations were academically or financially more successful? How does vanishing come into this? Is this regarding funding of one-time payments for publications? Or lack of funding and planning in it's entirety?</p>	<p>We thank the reviewer for pointing out the weaknesses. As mentioned above, we restructured the section 4. Results and Discussion by moving what should be part of the literature review to section 2 and removed unnecessary sentences.</p> <p>We addressed the issue in relation to the impacts of planned vs. random approach to internationalization as follows:</p> <p>“The answer to whether the opportunistic or the planned approach to internationalization was more academically or financially successful to the sampled universities is not covered our research project . However, the planned approach to internationalization is believed not only widely adopted by universities in the developed contexts but also better than the opportunistic process in enhancing universities’ international competitiveness (Edwards, 2007). We found that the three universities sampled reported the more planned approaches to internationalization are characterized by six features as follows:..”</p> <p>We also further explained why we could not get the answer for the impacts of internationalization from the interviews by adding the footnote to page 11 as below:</p> <p>“Also, it should be noted that such information is perhaps sensitive for universities leaders to reveal to the interviewers who are working at the university competing with most of the sampled institutions.”</p> <p>The term “vanishing” was replaced by “sustainability of knowledge production via research and publications” and explained in the last paragraph of the subsection on <i>Obstacles and Challenges</i>.</p>
<p>40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47</p>	<p>4 Is there any evidence of qualitative impact of</p>	<p>We thank the reviewer for pointing out the weaknesses. We addressed this</p>

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	internationalisation and or that motivation is a moderating factor on outcomes, or that vanishing or private funding have had other impacts?	issue in point 4 above. We could not obtain evidence to investigate the impact of internationalization on outcomes.
5	The author has greatly improved the paper over the last version, however, there is much more work to do sorting through concepts, organizing them into the structure of sound scientific research.	We thank the reviewer for pointing out this issue. The manuscript was proofread and restructured where necessary.

The Learning Organization

**Response to the Reviewer 3's comments**

No.	Comment	Response
1	<p>Obviously, this paper has certain merits to provide a comprehensive understanding of internationalisation as a wise strategy for higher education institutions in Vietnam. The paper aligns with the journal's aims and scopes; therefore, it could be published in a mainstream education journal without any doubts. However, I recommend that the author(s) frame the context of Vietnam by citing the current work of Nguyen et al. (2022) about the revolution and changes in Vietnam. Therefore, Vietnam faces the most incredible opportunities to reform its education system.</p> <p>Nguyen, H., Huynh, T.L.D. and Huynh, A.N.Q. (2022), "Book review", Journal of Asian Business and Economic Studies, Vol. 29 No. 2, pp. 86-90.  <a href="https://doi.org/10.1108/JABES-06-2022-207">https://doi.org/10.1108/JABES-06-2022-207</a></p>	<p>We thank the reviewer for your comment. We added the recommended work to the third paragraph of section 1. Introduction.</p>
2	<p>The literature review looks fine. However, two studies might complement and extend your arguments (especially, Pakistan has a similar context to Vietnam and Italy could give a good lesson for your arguments), so I suggest the author(s) enrich your literature review by mentioning these studies.</p> <p>[a] Ellahi, A., &amp; Zaka, B. (2015). Analysis of</p>	<p>We thank the reviewer for your comment. We added the recommended papers to the second paragraph section 2. Internationalization in universities.</p>

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	<p>Higher Education Policy Frameworks for Open and Distance Education in Pakistan. <i>Evaluation Review</i>, 39(2), 255–277.  <a href="https://doi.org/10.1177/0193841X15570046">https://doi.org/10.1177/0193841X15570046</a></p> <p>[b] Abramo, G., Andrea D’Angelo, C., &amp; Di Costa, F. (2009). Mapping Excellence in National Research Systems: The Case of Italy. <i>Evaluation Review</i>, 33(2), 159–188.  <a href="https://doi.org/10.1177/0193841X08322871">https://doi.org/10.1177/0193841X08322871</a></p>	
3	<p>The methodology is perfectly matched with your research aims and purpose. I do not have any further comments or suggestions related to the research design. The tables and figures should have self-explaining content (for example, tables 2, 3, and 4 should have a small note below the tables to explicitly indicate the meanings of tick or how to obtain the content in the table).</p>	<p>We thank the reviewer for your comment. We added small note to Table 2, 3, 4 as follows:</p> <p>Note: University names are anonymized and arranged in different order from Table 1. The themes presented in this table emerged from the coding of interview transcripts. The ticks indicate whether the answers of universities leaders match any of the themes found.</p>
4	<p>The results are properly discussed. Therefore, I think it could go ahead with this content.</p>	<p>We thank the reviewer for your approval of this content.</p>
5	<p>This part is fully addressed. It would be great if the author(s) could emphasize and elaborate on the vision of internationalisation strategy of higher education institutions in the following decades. Concomitantly, the future avenue and limitations should be embodied in the conclusion. However, I like your discussion.</p>	<p>We thank the reviewer for pointing out our weakness. We added the vision of internationalization strategy of higher education institutions in the following decades as well as addressed limitations and future research to the last section as follows:</p> <p>Learning from models and best practices from other higher education systems is desirable, but Vietnam universities should make proper adaptation to the country context. In the next decades it is essential that domestic universities work together to identify priorities in internationalization activities which entail coordinated efforts among institutions for more efficient use of limited resources. Interconnected</p>

		<p>library networks, expertise network, and freely accessible online learning materials are examples of projects that domestic universities may collaborate to make use of academic resources. Given the increased adoption of online learning platforms due to the pandemic, the virtual mobility activities with foreign universities should also be enhanced. This would offer the opportunities to exchange with other cultures to all students regardless their backgrounds.</p> <p>Future study should analyze the impacts of Vietnam universities' internationalization strategies on universities themselves and other stakeholders, the research area that was not covered in our study. Outcomes from the impact analysis would inform the universities leaders of the effectiveness and efficiency of internationalized activities so that they can adjust the policies where needed. This would be beneficial to the universities in country where resources are limited.</p>
6	This is promising research with clear communication. However, I would like to suggest the authors re-read and proofread this paper once again to obtain a better form before it gets published	We thank the reviewer for your comment. We read and proofread the paper thoroughly again.