

Quality Accreditation and Sustainable Development of Private Universities in Vietnam

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Abstract: This article analyses the management policies of the Government and Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) on how quality accreditation has an impact on the sustainable development of private universities in Vietnam. A qualitative method approach was used in the research consisting of discourse analysis and interviews with five managers from the three targeted private universities. This study revealed that the majority of the university management board was to guide public universities as well as private ones to develop toward regional and international educational standards. It is also revealed from the study that private universities should pay more effort than public institutions in the same accreditation set of standards due to the disadvantages of human resource, the enrollment of students, research capacity and funding scheme.

Keywords: sustainable development, private university, human resource, research capacity, funding scheme.

1. Introduction

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) once made a statement about the difference between public and private universities (schools). A public school is controlled and managed directly by the government or a public education agency, or directly by a government agency, or by a governing body (council, board, board, etc.) that most members of that organization are appointed by the State or elected by the school's administrators, teachers, and employees. A private school is controlled and managed by a non-governmental organization (e.g. company or business) where the majority of the board members are appointed by private institutions. Thus, according to OECD, the difference between public and private schools is the different management subjects and management mechanisms, from there, leading to a different management team and formation mechanism.

Higher education in the world and in Vietnam serves two distinct purposes, that is to produce knowledge in a research intensive approach (researching-led) and to educate students or teaching-led orientation (Anh et al, 2021; Ngoc et al, 2022).

In Vietnam, the difference between public and private schools is the form and right of ownership. Since then, Vietnam's policy orientation is to clearly distinguish between for-profit and nonprofit private universities. This shows that the world's concept of distinguishing public and private schools is mainly based on the governance structure, while the Vietnamese concept is based mainly on property rights (Ngoc et al et al, 2020; Minh et al, 2019). This is quite a big difference of Vietnamese education compared to the world.

In order to develop sustainably, universities need extensive and multilateral cooperation with diverse external partners, bodies and peer organizations. On the other hand, it should focus on recruiting experienced, reliable and professional staff; better university infrastructure, or invest in research quality, or seek for funded resources to retain university budget.

In that case, there is a competition between public and private universities in terms of student enrollment and investment fund. Furthermore, tuition fees in public universities are much lower than in private ones. Private universities have to seek research grants for academic staff, promote competitiveness and innovation in the field of scientific research in order to publish more. The quality of enrolled students is another factor to the development of private universities. Private universities face another pressure as the impact of the global slump, booming population, the pressing urbanization processes, number of students and the need for education are increasing. Wealthy families send their children to prestigious universities overseas to benefit from intercultural experiences, English qualification, high quality and standard of education there.

Private universities could emphasize boosting the relationship with stakeholders such as business partnerships or recruitment employers. The graduate's salary, framework of cooperation depends on the market conditions. They could also improve the domestic education quality by striving to attract European and American teaching staff in order to boost their competitiveness and attractiveness in the eyes of Vietnamese students, the customers.

2. Theoretical Framework

a) Issues of Sustainable Development

As the challenges for higher education expansion increase, universities need to be aware that they should solve all the encountered problems, rather than pursuing sustainability as a silver bullet. After the integration of sustainable development of higher education over the world, universities have gradually focused on teaching, recruitment approaches, then mutual cooperation and research (Filho, 2010). Other factors that may cover sustainability issues include: learning (Hansmann, Crott, Mieg, Scholz, 2009), solving problem skills, academic profession (Hammond and Churchman 2008) or campus operations (Conway, Dalton, Loo, Benakoun 2008). Campus operations include smart buildings, amenities and facilities management. Another point for sustainability is developing green and renewable energy (Najafian & Kara Midehkordi, 2018; Farinha, Caeiro & Azeiteiro, 2020)

Moreover, sustainable development issues may consist of employee's qualifications such as knowledge, skills, social capacities and working values. In terms of academic profession (Najafian & Kara Midehkordi, 2018), it is important to update training curricula toward the market demand. That means, training programs including curricular units should be revised and redesigned to utilize opportunities provided by sustainability.

Some research takes the debate into the campaign of sustainable development as they raised the concern that university sustainability will be affected by climate change, and unexpected matters such as the Covid-19 pandemic the world has encountered for nearly two years. Distance education emerged in the context of restricted movement requires the fact that technology should be enhanced in education so that everything is prepared to transform via online mode.

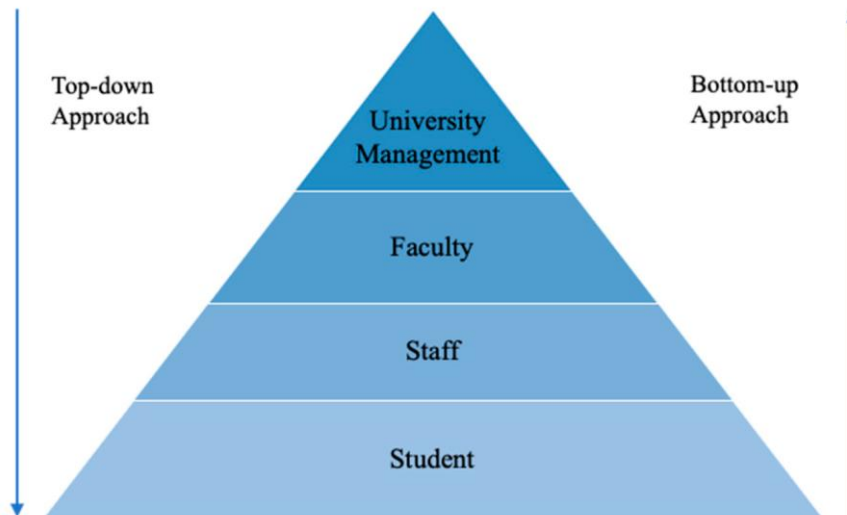


Figure 1. Top-down and Bottom-up approach used in higher education for sustainable development (Wang, Yang & Maresova, 2020)

b) Private Universities in Emerging Economies

It does not make sense that entrepreneurs would want to venture into higher education industry without ensuring quality (Kajawo & Dong, 2020). There is a holistic framework for engaging with grand challenges of society, in which European University Association has put sustainable development goals in their strategic plan. Some of the core issues include (Ngoc & Tien, 2020):

- Quality education: ensure inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning
- Industry, innovation and infrastructure: build resilient infrastructure, promote sustainable industrialization and foster innovation
- Affordable and clean energy: Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all
- Gender equality and reduced inequalities
- Sustainable cities and communities: Make cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable
- Peace, justice and strong institutions: promote just, peaceful and inclusive societies
- Partnerships for the Goals: revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development

Private universities depend on the demands from the labor market, external stakeholders, students paying fees, demographic changes, teaching practices, employers' requirements. They need a good curricular, a clear governance structure, strategic goals and management practices (Filho et al. 2020).

Regarding the funding scheme, private universities do not receive any funds supported from the government. So most often, they have to rely on their private fund to cover all campus facilities cost. As a result, private universities must base on number of students, satisfying funders and stakeholders at large, and economic goals to control their financial sustainability (Cernostana, 2017).



Figure 2. Stakeholders of higher education institutions (Koester et al. 2006)

c) Accreditation and Sustainability of Private Universities

In these competitive contexts, private universities can do more to pursue sustainable development goals by working with their faculty and staff, existing students, alumni, and stakeholder community (Purcell, Henriksen & Spengler, 2019). Their roles are critically specified when looking up criteria in regional and international accreditation standards.

In Vietnam, there are 237 higher education institutions, 172 of which are public universities and 65 are private ones. According to statistics from MOET (updated on January 31, 2021), there are 150 universities and nine teacher education colleges over the country granted the certificate of accreditation according to national standards. Many training programs offered by these universities are accredited by regional and international organizations in their professional field.

3. Research Design

a) Objects and Subjects of Research

The article was based on the research conducted at three private universities in Vietnam focusing on the university sustainable development by accreditation. This goal was achieved by examining the documents issued by the government and MOET

b) Spatial and Temporal Scope of Research

The research was done within the Vietnam territory from the first university accreditation (2016) until June 2021. There were 159 universities and colleges accredited by the national accreditation standards through program or institution level accreditation. The statistics were adopted from the Ministry of Education and Training in the field of accreditation.

c) Research Methodology

The research collected documents regulated the accreditation activities since 2016 when the first university was accredited. Discourse analysis was then applied through NVivo qualitative analysis program to check the difference of public and private institutions affected by accreditations.

In the second stage, the research interviewed five heads of departments from three private universities in the country in thirty minutes. They were asked on the perspective of current practice of accreditation, the advantages and disadvantages of private institutions in developing sustainably.

4. Research Results Presentation

a) PUVs – History and Current Policy of Development

In Vietnam, the development of private universities has more favorable conditions when associated with the policy of educational socialization of the Party and State. Specifically, the first private university - Thang Long University was founded in 1988. In 1993, the Prime Minister issued the Regulation on private universities (Decision No. 240/1993/QD-TTg), in which: Ownership is private (shares of investors); investor-based governance (2/3 of the Board of Directors (BOD) are investors); The Board of Directors has full autonomy in organization and finance. However, at that time, society was still not used to private investment in education, so this Decision was not applied (Tien & Anh, 2019). The Prime Minister's Decision (1994) promulgated the "Temporary Regulation of People-Founded Universities" has replaced the word "private" with the phrase "people-founded" (No. 196/1994/QD-TTg).

In order to encourage all economic sectors to participate in the development of non-public higher education, they concentrated on the direction and policy of socialization of activities, activities in education, health care, culture and sports (Government Resolution No. 90/1997/NQ-CP). Two years later, the Government by Decree No. 73/1999/ND-CP focused on policies to encourage socialization for activities in the fields of education and health, culture and sport. Back to the history, by Resolution No. 90/1997/NQ-CP in 1997, the Government sets forth the policy: "Consolidate existing tourism universities, allow the establishment of more tourism universities in some localities with needs and management capacity; Allow a number of universities to be established, including foreign educational institutions, Vietnamese overseas may open schools in Vietnam according to Vietnamese law; Allow domestic universities to invite foreign teachers and Vietnamese teachers living abroad to teach."

b) PUVs – Current State of Accreditation

Regulation about the quality assembly of universal education institutions by the Ministry of Education and Training (Circular No. 12/2017/TT-BGDĐT) stipulates the accreditation of higher education institutions, including standards for quality assessment and the process and cycle of accrediting higher education institutions.

There are national and international standards on accrediting institutions and training programs. 25 standards in internal institutional accreditation (MOET) consist of criterion on: quality assurance on strategy, the (training) system, the function performance, and performance achievements. While there are 11 standards of accreditation training program which are Objectives and output standards of the training program, Description of the training program, Structure and content of the curriculum, Approaches to teaching and learning, Assess the learning outcomes of learners, Lecturers and researchers, Staff, Learners and learner support activities, Facilities and equipment, Improve quality, Outputs. ASEAN University Network - Quality Assurance (AUN-QA) criteria include: 1 Expected Learning Outcomes, 2 Program Specification, 3 Program Structure and Content, 4 Teaching and Learning Strategy, 5 Student Assessment, 6 Academic Staff Quality, 7 Support Staff Quality, 8 Student Quality, 9 Student Advice and Support, 10 Facilities and Infrastructure, 11 Quality Assurance of Teaching and Learning, 12 Staff Development Activities, 13 Stakeholders Feedback, 14 Output, 15 Stakeholders Satisfaction. However, top universities ranking (QS ranking) focuses on criteria such as Academic Reputation, Employer Reputation, Faculty/Student Ratio, Citations per faculty, International Faculty Ratio, International Student Ratio. Although there are many different organizations of accreditation, they all follow three main stages in conducting assessment: Exploring the standards; Self-assessment; and External assessment.

However, the research data shows that there are certain factors that contribute to the development of university reputation. First of all, sources of staff: human resources are competent at teaching and doing research, based on long term contracts and commitment, look for talents, invest in development and promoting staff/ faculty leaders; sharply reduce long-term tenure contracts and shift to teaching hour basis in order to save money to survive (Jose et al, 2020a).

Accreditation results also specify the pros and cons of public and private institutions in its location and infrastructure. Whether private ones should hire or buy campus and infrastructure. If they hire all, they would be badly accredited and positioned lower in the general ranking. Therefore, their major assets are well-trained and qualified human resources. Many state-owned as well as privately funded universities in Vietnam invest heavily in best locations, magnificent headquarters, buildings and classrooms, but not staff quality and quantity. It is also indicated that universities could combine both domestic and international accreditation to boost external cooperation (Dana et al, 2020b).

On the other hand, the documents do not mention the university structure, but there is a dichotomy between management structure, whether it is a centralized or decentralized approach. They also do not specify if universities should use local or international language of instruction. In order to sustainably develop, it is suggested that universities could invest in English as a language of instruction to enhance students' market value after graduation. Similarly, textbooks were not focused on the assessment criteria, but they play an important role in developing sustainability. Universities could invest into designing their own textbooks or updated textbooks by exchanging with stakeholders or benchmarking with international textbooks.

5. Research Results Discussion

a) Uncompleted Accreditation Criteria and Their Impact on Sustainability of PUVs

As accreditations are viewed as a costly process, universities must think if this endeavor could have a positive impact in the long run (Fleşeriu et al, 2020). The study revealed that there are no specific targets to realize the goal of educational socialization. The legal framework for universities is oriented towards the common goal of encouraging socialization to invest in the construction and development of high-quality schools at all levels of education and training. It focuses on increasing the proportion of non-public schools for vocational education and higher education. The goal is towards having the type of educational institution invested by the community and ensuring equality between public school teachers and non-public school teachers in honor and opportunities for professional training and retraining. Higher education system is also oriented towards equality in the right to receive support from the government for learners in public and non-public schools.

Secondly, mechanisms and policies still lack equality between public universities and private universities. Public universities and private universities do the same thing. However, public universities are invested by the government to build facilities, ensuring funding for recurrent expenditure tasks. Meanwhile, private universities not only do not have the same benefits as public universities, but the provisions on encouraging socialization for education in Government decrees also reveal many shortcomings and infeasibility, creating a burden on the shoulders of private university students.

In addition, the public-private partnership represents the interaction between the Government and the market, in which the public and private sectors are equal partners in higher education development. Therefore, public-private relations are not limited to the construction and development of private higher education institutions, but also include

encouraging private higher education institutions to innovate operating mechanisms to increase external revenues.

Discourse analysis indicated that there is a lack of policies and regulations that concretize and thoroughly grasp property rights in private universities. Investing in private universities is very diverse. Some private universities have only one company or a family as a capital contributor (similar to a one-member limited liability company), in some cases invested by several capital contributors (similar to a public limited company, limited liability company with two or more members). Meanwhile, the private university governance model is a shadow of a joint stock company. This causes investors to transform to hold management rights, bringing many complicated consequences.

Law on Higher Education (2012, Article 4, Clause 7) stipulates: "Private higher education institutions and foreign-invested higher education institutions operating not for profit are higher education institutions in which the accumulated annual profits are common assets, not divided, to reinvest in the development of higher education institutions; shareholders or capital contributors do not receive dividends or enjoy annual income not exceeding the interest rate of government bonds". However, in fact, the Government does not have any preferential credits for private universities. Therefore, the University must mobilize capital under the agreement higher than the interest rate on government bonds and account the interest rate into expenses. Moreover, investors must also find ways to ensure that the dividend does not exceed the interest rate on government bonds. As a result, no one has yet determined which university institutions are 'not for profit', because many investors self-identify that the university facilities they invest in are 'not-for-profit'.

b) Solutions for Uncompleted Accreditation Criteria to Enhance Sustainability of PUVs

First of all, it is necessary to develop a set of criteria with specific criteria on land, facilities, taxes, credit, training, staff, etc. to bring the policy of socialization of education to life. There should be a mechanism to encourage private higher education institutions and foreign-invested higher education institutions to develop high-quality human resource training institutions, to change the curriculum in accordance with practical requirements.

To build an equal and fair legal environment between public universities and private universities, the legal system needs to be synchronous and specific so that subjects participating in educational activities understand what they can and cannot do. If they violate the regulations, they will be handled by legal sanctions. There should be a mechanism for private universities, businesses, and research institutes to link together in all stages of the training process to meet the needs of high-quality human resources of enterprises, and to facilitate the transfer of scientific and technological results.

Third, the Government needs to promulgate sub-law documents to concretize and thoroughly grasp the property rights in private universities, giving more autonomy to private universities. Create a legal framework to encourage private investment in education. Expanding the autonomy and social responsibility of private universities. In addition, the State also needs to enhance its role in the following aspects: Establish a mechanism to monitor the development of higher education; Building a legal environment to ensure the social responsibility of higher education institutions; Ensuring equity in higher education, linking higher education quality with budget investment; Strengthen the participation of the social community in monitoring and evaluating the quality of higher education.

6. Conclusion

a) Limitations

The research is limited as it involved only three private institutions. As reviewing the management policies, the research could not survey for the accreditation practices and experience from the majority of non-public institutions. The statistics of accredited private schools was not accessed so it could not cover all the institutions that have been accredited.

c) Recommendations

Private schools adjust their activities accordingly to remain financially balanced. It is suggested that, in terms of location and infrastructure, universities should choose the option “to hire” to utilize resources for the quality of staff and training activities. Schools should be more teaching- oriented by introducing teaching performance related to remuneration systems, or practical-oriented lectures. Moreover, they could be sustainably developed by strengthening their research intensity and e-learning technologies which is the key to virtual learning during this pandemic.

Universities in developing countries need to invest further and heavily in their human resources, the professionalism of faculty staff members, create all conditions needed for them to reach new heights of career development and advancement. Furthermore, private institutions could generate connections with internalization of the scope of cooperation and exchange with diverse external partners and using English as the predominant language of teaching, textbooks publication. Bi-lingual teaching model is an alternative period to prepare for teaching in English approach.

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