

Developing Diverse Types of Higher Education in Vietnam: Assessing the Achievements and Challenges of the Local State Universities

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Abstract. In the context of educational reform, Vietnam has initiated a policy of expanding the network and types of higher education institutions to satisfy the country's human resource needs during the industrialization and modernization period. This policy resulted in the establishment of the local state university system, which has involved in the development of higher education, training human resources for the localities. The findings indicate that local state universities have a significant impact on the advancement of Vietnamese higher education. Some local state universities have developed a scale and training structure suitable for the characteristics of each region, ensuring quality and efficiency while integrating into the Vietnamese higher education system. Despite their contributions, a significant number of such universities have struggled to identify strategic directions and mobilize available resources. While these institutions have introduced valuable innovations to Vietnamese higher education, they also pose a challenge to the Vietnamese higher education system that requires restructuring and policy revisions at both the micro and macro levels.

Keywords: development, higher education, local, state universities

Introduction

The network of Vietnamese higher education institutions currently encompasses 238 institutions (excluding those in security and defense sectors), categorized into four types: national universities (2-16 institutions), regional universities (3-20 institutions), key universities (116 institutions), and local universities (85 institutions). National universities are owned by the Government; regional universities and key universities are managed by ministries, departments and central agencies; local universities are managed by the provincial or municipal governments directly under the central government. Local universities are divided into two sub-types: public and private. The network of local public universities consists of 26 institutions with a presence across the country.

The local university development policy was first mentioned in the Socio-Economic Development Strategy 1996-2000 (adopted at the 8th National Party Congress, 1996), in order to "meet the educational needs and promote on-site human resources", serving the country's industrialization and modernization efforts (CPV, 1996). Over more than a quarter of a century of construction and development, the network of local universities has transformed the structure of Vietnam's higher education network, contributing to training human resources at undergraduate and graduate levels for various provinces and cities across the country. Despite their contributions, local universities have been confronted by a number of challenges. "A few institutions with appropriate strategies have developed and integrated with the domestic higher education network, establishing themselves as reputable universities with a strong brand identity; Some institutions are facing significant challenges in maintaining their existence, facing the need for restructuring or even merging into branches of national universities" (Nguyen Kim Son, 2023). The development of local public universities raises a wide array of issues that need further studies and comprehensive assessments to formulate effective policies for this specific model.

In recent years, several scientific forums raised issues related to the development of local public universities. For example, the Association of Vietnam Universities and Colleges

(AVNUC) coordinated with universities in organizing a series of seminars with topics directly related to the development of local public universities such as: Autonomy of local universities in current period (AVNUC, 2018), the role of local universities in regional economic and social development (AVNUC, 2021), the development of science, technology and innovation in line with the local and regional potentials (AVNUC, 2022), local universities after 25 years of formation and development: current status and recommendations (AVNUC, 2023), local governments in Vietnam and the development of subordinate universities and colleges (AVNUC, 2024), etc. In addition to seminars, several scientific journals have published a wide variety of articles related to various scientific and practical issues regarding the development of local universities (Hiep & Nam, 2021, 2022; Ngo Hong Diep, 2023).

Acquiring outcomes from previous studies, this article provides an analysis of basic indicators of local public universities. The objective of this article is to sketch out the fundamental aspects of these institutions, including their development context, current scale and potential, and the challenges they face in the context of Vietnam's higher education reforms towards marketization and international integration.

Data and Analysis Framework

The data used in the article is compiled from the database of universities that publicly disclose information regarding educational institutions and training systems under the national education system. In Vietnam today, this concept is known as "three public disclosures" – a term derived from the contents of the public disclosure documents for higher education institutions issued by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET, 2017). The first is to publicly disclose the commitments to the equivalence of theoretical and actual education quality, including admission conditions and criteria, curriculum, programs, projects, and scientific research activities, etc. The second is to publicly disclose the conditions for ensuring the education quality, including the facilities and lecturer capacities. The third is to publicly disclose financial revenues and expenditures, including tuition fees, sources of income, scholarship policies, etc. The objective of performing the three public disclosures, according to MOET (2017) is to enable students, competent state management agencies and society to supervise and evaluate educational and training institutions in accordance with the law regulations. This aims to enhance transparency, promote democracy, strengthen the autonomy and self-responsibility of educational and training institutions in resource management, and ensure the quality of education and training. According to public disclosure regulations, educational and training institutions must keep the disclosure comprehensive regarding the content, form and time; the disclosure directly at educational and training institutions and on websites must be accurate, complete, timely and easily accessible. Under MOET's regulations, the data in the "three public disclosures" are required to be accurate and higher education institutions shall be responsible for the data source. In addition to the data of "three public disclosures" in higher education institutions, this article also utilizes several documents related to the history of the establishment of local public universities and the development situation of such universities by approaching the history of education.

On the basis of approaching the history of education, the article develops a goal-based analytical framework clarifying the historical context, development process, achievements and contributions of local public universities to the economy, society and higher education in Vietnam. The article also examines the challenges of local universities from its institution and in today's context. The analysis of the article will revolve around the following contents:

- Institution context, development conditions, achievements and challenges in the interrelationship of local public universities.
- Developing training curriculum to adhere to the goal of "meeting the educational needs and promoting local human resources", serving the socio-economic development of the

locality.

- Enhancing the scale of students and lecturers amidst the university autonomy in Vietnam; the challenge of scaling up while maintaining quality, facilities and lecturer resources.

Results

After 28 years, since the Party's policy on local university development, Vietnam is currently home to 26 public undergraduate institutions under the management of provincial and municipal governments. Table 1 presents some information about the training level, curriculum, the scale of students and lecturers under such institutions.

Table 1: List and basic information of local public universities

No.	Name of institution and date of establishment	Training levels	Training program scale	Scale of students	Scale of lecturers
1.	Tan Trao University (TTrU) 1959-2013	University, Post-graduate, College	20	7,233	297
2.	Hung Vuong University (HVVU) 1961-2003	University, Post-graduate	22	4,778	324
3.	Hai Phong University (HPU) -1997	University, Post-graduate	27	14,093	387
4.	Thai Binh University (TBU) 1966-2011	University, College	10	-	-
5.	Ha Long University (HLU) 1959-2014	University, Post-graduate, College, Intermediate	17	4,881	176
6.	Hoa Lu University (HLU) 1959-2007	University, College, General School	13	1,229	181
7.	Hanoi Metropolitan University (HNMU) 1959-2014	University, Post-graduate, College, General School	24	8,456	332
8.	Hong Duc University (HDU) 1957-1997	University, Post-graduate	36	8,882	412
9.	Thanh Hoa University of Culture, Sports and Tourism (TUCST) 1967-2011	University, Post-graduate, Intermediate	19	6,013	215
10.	Vinh Medical University (VUM) 1960-2010	University, Post-graduate	7	-	-
11.	Ha Tinh University (HTU) 1965-2007	University, College, General School, Kindergarten	-	-	-
12.	Nghe An University Economics (NAUE) 1960-2014	University, Post-graduate	12	1,370	153
13.	Quang Binh University (QBU) 1959-2006	University, College	14	1,084	158
14.	Quang Nam University (QNU) 1997-2007	University, College	13	907	101
15.	Pham Van Dong University (PVDU) 1976-2007	University, College	8	-	-
16.	Phu Yen University (PYU) 1976-2007	University, College	15	1,195	111
17.	Khanh Hoa University (KHU) 1976-2005	University, College	22	3,440	234

18.	Sai Gon University (SGU) 1972-2007	University, Post-graduate, College, General School	40	17,552	1,214
19.	Ho Chi Minh City Cadre Academy (HCMCA) 1965-2014	University	4	-	-
20.	Pham Ngoc Thach University of Medicine (PNTUM) 1989-2008	University, Post-graduate	7	-	-
21.	Thu Dau Mot University (TDMU) 1976-2009	University, Post-graduate	52	14,964	673
22.	Dong Nai University (DNU) 1976-2010	University, College	10	6,097	240
23.	Tien Giang University (TGU) 1976-2015	University, College	21	4,393	312
24.	Can Tho University of Technology (CTUT) 1981-2013	University, Post-graduate	22	5,813	252
25.	Tra Vinh University (TVU) -2001	University, College	39	9,065	1,002
26.	Bac Lieu University (BLU) 1976-2006	University, College	15	1,812	234

Table 1 contains chronological information upon the date of establishment and launching of undergraduate training. The date of establishment of local universities can be divided into two groups. The institutions in the North were formed in the 50s-60s of the 20th century as technical training institutions, vocational schools (under the Ministry of Higher Education and Secondary Education) and a number of teacher training institutions, from preschool vocational, teacher training intermediate schools, and teacher training colleges (under the Ministry of Education). In the South, Saigon University was established during the resistance war against the U.S imperialists for liberating the country in the war zones (1972), while the remaining were mostly formed after 1975 as pedagogical intermediate schools, preschool intermediate schools, pedagogical colleges, and technical vocational schools. Beside these two primary groups, only two institutions were formed during the national renovation, industrialization and modernization; i.e., Tra Vinh University which was formerly known as a community college established in 2021 under the project funded by the Canadian International Development Agency and the Government of Vietnam; Ho Chi Minh Cadre Academy, formerly known as Ho Chi Minh City cadre training and promoting school before 1975 which adopted its new name of Cadre Academy in 2014 and was allowed to award university degrees. The general historical picture of formation shows that building and developing local universities is also the process of bettering the appearance of elementary, intermediate schools and colleges to shape higher education institutions.

After more than a quarter of a century of construction and development, local public schools have strived to shape higher education institutions. Statistics of training qualifications showed that 16/26 institutions have provided undergraduate and graduate training; 6/26 provided undergraduate and college training; 3/26 provided undergraduate, college and general education; one institution also provide vocational training (Thanh Hoa University of Culture, Sports and Tourism). Three general education institutions are home to all-level education including preschool, inter-level general education, and pedagogical practice (Hanoi Capital University, Saigon University, and Hoa Lu University).

For developing the scale of students and lecturers. According to the "three public disclosures" data, there are currently a total of 20 local public universities with a total student

enrollment of 122,305 and 6,836 faculty members. In terms of the student population, local public universities can be divided into 3 groups. The first group, with over 10,000 students, consists of three institutions (Saigon University, Thu Dau Mot University, and Hai Phong University); The second group, with over 5,000 to less than 10,000 students, has 7 institutions; The third group, with less than 5,000 students, has 9 institutions. Among those with less than 5,000 students, there are currently five institutions with 1,000 – 2,000 students. When it comes to faculty, according to the "three public disclosures" data, there are two institutions with over 1,000. Thu Dau Mot University ranks the second in terms of student size but third in terms of Faculty scale (673). The total number of lecturers varies among institutions with 5,000 to 10,000 students. There are two institutions with a Faculty scale of ± 400 , the remaining mostly with ± 300 . The institutions with less than 5,000 students correspond to the number of lecturers from just over 100 to 250. According to Nguyen Van Hiep (2021), in order for a local university to be able to survive regular expenditure autonomy under Vietnam's current university autonomy policy, its training scale needs to reach 12,000 or more students. Accordingly, only three institutions under the category of the local universities are qualified for implementation of the autonomy of recurrent expenditures (spending on lecturers and teaching facilities). All local public universities are currently unable to invest in the construction of facilities.

Discussion

The development of local public universities has ushered in a profound transformation of the network and types of higher education institutions in Vietnam. With 26 universities currently operating in various regions, spanning from the Northern midlands and mountainous areas, the capital city of Hanoi, the Red River Delta, the North Central, the South Central, the Southeast, the Mekong River Delta, these local universities have made significant contributions to extending Vietnamese higher education network while simultaneously narrowing the disparities between regions, positioning the correlation system between human resource training and socio-economic development of regions and localities. The development of local public universities has become a significant factor in establishing an open, equitable and accessible higher education system, enhancing people's university opportunities, the demand for highly qualified human resources, the application of science, technology and innovation for sustainable development of localities. This type of local public universities addresses to the educational needs of the people, the socio-economic development requirements of the localities, while promoting the changes in the labor market, providing high-quality human resources for the localities amidst the constant shortage of human resources in Vietnam. In fact, the operations of local public universities in recent years have promoted the scale of student training proportion to the total population, significantly impacting the structure of qualification and occupation, the demand for human resources of socio-economic sector of localities, especially in the fields of science, engineering, technology, pedagogy, healthcare sciences, and even several specific fields (arts, music, and painting). In the context of Vietnam promoting the marketization of higher education, the local public university system will facilitate provinces and cities in proactively targeting human resource development for the public benefits, training labor groups leading the development of the economy, society, culture, science and technology of localities. The benefits that local public universities bring to local governments are of equal importance as the benefits it offers to individual learners. With this spirit, the local governments can invest and sponsor their university, and considering it as a duty. These are advantages that other universities cannot rival.

The system of public universities has grown strongly recently but is facing significant challenges today. Originating from a series of technical, economic, cultural vocational schools, intermediate schools, pedagogical intermediate schools, pedagogical colleges, etc. local universities face countless obstacles in overcoming the legacy of being secondary or college

institutions to become [true] universities. In particular, Nghe An University of Economics has undergone the formation, merger, and rename experience of 42 vocational schools and colleges under diverse models of vocational schools in economics, finance, industrial engineering, statistics, planning, accounting, commerce, banking, vocational training, trading cooperatives, agriculture, agriculture and forestry, economic management, and irrigation, etc. Despite available potentials in facilities and human resources, the course of renovating, repairing and shaping the university is not an easy feat.

In the context of Vietnam's promotion of university autonomy policies, local universities are confronted by a competitive environment of "fair management model, major opening conditions, major maintaining, and enrollment capacity" across their system. According to Ngo Hong Diep (2024), the university tier policy has not made any specific changes, the policy of opening, maintaining majors, determining enrollment capacity at local universities is not provided any "priority" conditions compared to universities in the "upper tier". The legal conditions for university autonomy, especially the autonomy to open majors, maintain majors, determine enrollment capacity for local universities are quite rigid and lacks flexibility. With today's advanced science and technology, the life cycle of a profession is getting short. For a locality, the life cycle and the ability to saturate the human resources in a particular industry and sector is even shorter. Therefore, the conditions of autonomy for major opening, maintaining, and quality inspection are scientifically suitable in terms of principle and vision, however, their application to local universities is real challenges to overcome.

Conclusion

During the renovation of higher education in Vietnam, the local public university system has formed, developed and left a significant imprint through diverse types of institutions, networks and forms of training. The emergence and development of local universities has drawn on resources from localities, both in terms of economic and human factors, contributing to making higher education accessible for the people, providing high-quality human resources, aiming to serve the economic and social development and the industrialization and modernization of the localities and the country. The development of local public universities has realized the Party's directives, contributing to the successful implementation of the strategic breakthrough "continuing to comprehensively develop human resources, science, technology and innovation in association with arousing the desire for national development, national pride, self-reliance, and the promotion of Vietnamese cultural values and people " (PCV, 2021). Despite these achievements, local public universities have not developed evenly, the enrollment and training scale still varies significantly, with many smaller institutions facing operational inefficiencies; several universities struggle to expand and align with their strategic development goals.

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