

# Historical Development of Internationalization of Vietnamese Higher Education

— Preliminary results from document content analysis —

Nguyen Thi Lan Ngan, Yohei Sekiguchi<sup>1</sup> and Takayoshi Maki

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**Abstract:** Vietnam considers international integration as an inevitable trend of its higher education. Yet, there has been lacked a review investigating internationalization development of Vietnamese higher education. Therefore, this study explores the historical development of this phenomenon by considering its political and educational ideologies. This study analyzed three datasets: 362 educational regulations from the French colonial period, 520 issues of the Journal of Historical Studies, Vietnam (1956–2019), and 26 regulations from 1998 to 2022. KHCoder was utilized for text analysis and visualization. The findings categorized the internationalization of Vietnamese higher education into five stages. *The first two stages (1858–1985)* were specific to North Vietnam, focusing on strengthening political ideology and sending students to socialist countries. *The third stage (1986–1999)* aimed to prepare national academics for connections with developed countries, involving increased international conference participation and research collaboration. *The fourth stage (2000–2012)* emphasized collaboration within Asia and reforming higher education governance. Finally, *the fifth stage (2013–2024)* focused on academic and economic competitiveness. Overall, the study reveals that the internationalization of higher education in Vietnam has been shaped by political, historical, and cultural factors, resulting in distinct strategies for each period.

Key words: internationalization, Vietnam, higher education, historical development

## 1. Introduction

Internationalization of higher education is defined as “the integration of international elements into the function, process, and purpose of higher education” (Knight, 2004). Internationalization contributes to the rise of knowledge products, the growth of the private sector, and the development of highly educated personnel (P. G. Altbach & Knight, 2007). Since the 1980s, the current internationalization has been governed by neoliberal ideologies as below:

1. Corporatization of universities driven by the commercialization and the self-promotion of universities to enhance their global visibility;
2. Emergence of New Public Managerialism characterized by a clear power division between management and staff;
3. Competition and performativity among people and universities.

Alongside promoting cooperation and competition for creating educational opportunities in higher education, the negative impacts of neoliberalism on academics and students include adverse effects

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<sup>1</sup>Graduate School of Education, Kio University

on the relationship between teachers and learners, framing it as a buyer-seller dynamic of knowledge (Desierto & Maio, 2020). It increases inequality among students from different socio-economic backgrounds and heightens occupational stress for academics (Sarpong, 2023) due to their academic disempowerment (Zhang, 2024) and disparity of resources for diverse disciplines (Giroux, 2014).

From a geopolitical perspective, the political, economic, and cultural characteristics of each country cause the impact of neoliberal internationalization to vary (Stenning & Hörschelmann, 2008). Neoliberalism began spreading to Asia in the 1990s affecting not only capitalist countries but also socialist ones like China (since the 1970s) (Ren, 2023; M. B. Steger & Roy, 2021) and Vietnam (since the 1980s) (Ngo, 2020). Meanwhile, the logic of socialism has not been philosophized into a universally accepted theory, especially as its governing logic during the internationalization of neoliberalism (Newman, 2020). Socialist thought is divided into six ideologies: Marxism, Leninism, Stalinism, Marxism-Leninism, Maoism, and Marxism-Leninism-Stalinism in China, with Eurocommunism emerging in the mid-1970s, advocating a more democratic form of communism in countries like France, Italy, and Spain (Holmes, 2009; Newman, 2020). In Vietnam, the socialist ideology was portrayed as Marxism-Leninism with the thought of Ho Chi Minh- the former president of Vietnam. Ho Chi Minh's thought is deeply reflected in both politics and education. Politically, it emphasizes the absolute leadership of the Communist Party and the importance of cultivating communist virtues, encapsulated in the principles of diligence, thrift, integrity, and righteousness. His educational philosophy links intellectual development with moral education, aiming to nurture both knowledge and character in learners. Since 1986, with the introduction of the Doi Moi (Renovation) policy, Ho Chi Minh's ideology has been integrated into Vietnam's educational development policies, particularly through the 6th Party Congress Resolution in 1986. Higher education under socialist ideology is characterized by state-centralized management and collectivism (Lancaster & Sanyal, 2013; Ren, 2023). Research on the internationalization of socialist higher education in Asia primarily focuses on China (Mok, 2008; Ren, 2023). In China, neoliberalism reflects a blend of governmentally authoritarian and market-oriented logic, demanding absolute political loyalty within a heavily hierarchical administrative context (Ren, 2023).

Vietnam, a middle-income country with a history shaped by prolonged periods of foreign domination, differs from China in terms of economic scale but shares certain political and economic characteristics. A study by Australian authors has begun to explore the interplay of neoliberalism, socialism, and Confucianism in Vietnam (Le Ha & Ba Ngoc, 2020). These authors found conflicts among neoliberal, socialist and Confucian values in Vietnamese higher education. This study added insights into impacts of these three ideologies on the university transition from the Soviet-style model to a more Anglo one. Additionally, Vietnam's internationalization of higher education has been led by national integrity and socialism (Tran & Ly, 2021). However, these works did not include evidence from historical and political documents. These documents can explain the process of how these political and cultural aspects have influenced strategies for Vietnam's internationalization over time. Developing countries are internationalizing their higher education with a trend of adopting Western strategies, such as using English in teaching and research, focusing on funding for scientific research at some intensive research universities, and increasing the visibility of their universities on regional and international ranking tables. The issue is that internationalization must help universities enhance their competitiveness in terms of quality while also preserving the traditions of universities in those countries. These traditions include political, historical, and cultural characteristics. Therefore, this research will clarify the features of the Vietnamese essence in the trend of higher education internationalization. Internationalization is the harmony between promoting both the local and global. Understanding local features can explain the causes and promote a shared understanding of how to balance conflicting ideologies in the internationalization of higher education in Vietnam.

Thus, this research will clarify the political and historical characteristics that impact the rationales and activities in the historical development of internationalization in Vietnamese higher education. To achieve this purpose, this study utilizes a series of historical studies journals—one of the oldest in Vietnam—and educational policies from 1858 to 2022 to explore the developmental history of the internationalization of Vietnamese higher education.

The purpose is to **explore the historical development of the internationalization of higher education in Vietnam from the French colonization-1858 period to the present 2024**. Three research questions are set to reach the research purpose.

- 1. How many stages of internationalization of higher education can be categorized for Vietnam?*
- 2. What are the rationales in each stage?*
- 3. What are the international elements for each stage?*

## 2. Methodology

This study employed content analysis of three datasets including 362 educational regulations issued during the French colonization; 520 issues of the Journal of Historical Studies, Vietnam from 1956 to 2019; and 26 internationalization-related regulations from 1980 to 2022. A juxtaposition of international elements including students' and academics' exchange, international conferences, foreign-content-related research in journal issues, and big policies such as Doi Moi-1986 (Re-innovation) was a principle of categorizing each internationalizing stage. One notable feature of the analyzed materials is that the historical journal focuses on educational issues in Northern Vietnam, specifically during the time frame 1858-1986, when the foreign contact only happened in Northern Vietnam, not yet in the central and southern regions. In addition to analyzing the content of articles and reducing the subjectivity of text review, text analysis by the KHCoder software was utilized to establish the word-occurrence function of keywords in the title corpus linked to the annual corpus performed by KHCoder (Higuchi, 2016). This approach illustrated the specific connections between years and these keywords. To identify the details of types of activities, the function of "correspondence analysis of words" among the most frequent keywords and "year" as a variable was employed. This function filtered keywords with minimal frequency as four, by Chi-square values, and only labels distinctive words to enhance the reliability of the keywords (Higuchi, 2016).

## 3. Findings

The findings divided the internationalization of Vietnamese higher education into five stages, with the 1st and 2nd for initial foreign connection and the 3rd, 4th, and 5th for its actual internationalization.

### 3.1 *The first stage from 1858 to 1950*

This duration indicated no foreign-related educational information. However, incidents of sending out college students primarily for political purposes rather than educational ones were found. In 1867, France sent 12 Vietnamese students to study in France, followed by 95 more to train staff for the colonial government. From 1905-1908, the overseas movement organized by Phan Boi Chau sent a total of 300 people to Japan, with the Journey to the East (東遊) to educate intellectuals for the independence war (Bui & Nguyen, 2016). In 1906, the University of Indochina was established by the French under the wave of the Journey to the East by Phan Boi Chau. The establishment of this university aimed both to fulfill the demand for higher education and enlightenment among Vietnamese youth, and to prevent them from studying abroad—such as in Japan—where they might be exposed to critical ideas against the French colonial regime (A. Nguyen, 1967).

**3.2 The second stage from 1951 to 1985**

The rationale was to strengthen the political ideology - postwar nationalism.

**❖ Policy analysis:**

In 1956, with the support of Soviet educational experts, the Ministry of Education of Vietnam established a new higher education model based on the Soviet system (Bui & Nguyen, 2019). By October 1956, five universities followed this model of the socialist state, including: 1. Hanoi University (now Vietnam National University); 2. Hanoi University of Education; 3. Hanoi University of Science and Technology; 4. University of Agriculture and Forestry; 5. University of Medicine and Pharmacy. From 1958–1960, a three-year plan was introduced to reform socialist society and initiate economic and cultural development in Northern Vietnam. The movement to build socialist schools began in 1958, with four key characteristics defining socialist schools: 1. Marxism-Leninism holds the most important place in the school system; 2. Productive labor is a fundamental element of school education; 3. Teachers enlightened by socialist ideology are essential to building socialist schools; 4. The leadership of the Communist Party must be guaranteed.

**Table 1. Sending students to socialist countries from 1950 to 1975**

Country	Quantity of students	Period
Albani	60	58-74
Balan	1476	52-74
Bulgari	1103	53-74
Germany	1941	53-74
Cuba	885	61-74
Hungari	1319	52-74
Russia	11858	52-74
Mongolia	48	56-74
Rumani	1485	55-74
Czechoslovakia	1439	52-74
North Korea	684	58-67
China	3830	53-73

Article 14, the 1980 Constitution stipulated that the diplomacy is only with socialist countries (Prime Minister, 1980).

**❖ Content of journal papers:**

A popular activity was to send students for undergraduate and graduate education to twelve socialist countries from 1952 to 1975 (Table 1). Besides, updates on scientific news from those socialist nations, invitations of foreign socialist academics to Vietnam, rare participation in international conferences (first time in 1969), and translation of Marxism-Leninism-related scientific papers from Russian academics were found (Table 2).

**Table 2. Frequency of international activities, 1951-1985**

Types of activities	Frequency
<i>Foreign-related scientific update</i>	62
<i>Foreign-related research contents</i>	60
Paper by foreign authors	8
In-bound academics	7
Presenting at international conferences	5
Collaboration with foreign author	5
Joining international conferences	5
Hosting an international conference	2
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>158</b>

**3.3 The third stage from 1986 to 1999**

The rationale was to prepare national academics to connect with researchers in developed countries for the recovery from the economic crisis.

**❖ Policy analysis:**

Vietnam opened its doors to all countries in 1986, followed by the Decision in 1991 aimed at establishing the diplomacy with all nations (Q. H. Nguyen, 1991).

The 1998 Resolution emphasized selectively adopting foreign cultures while

**Table 3. Frequency of international activities, 1986-1999**

Types of activities	Frequency
Foreign-related research contents	57
Paper by foreign authors	28
Foreign-related scientific update	16
Hosting an international conference	8
Collaboration with foreign author	1
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>110</b>



400 officials abroad, including 200 PhDs, 100 Masters, and the remainder at university and postgraduate levels (Prime Minister, 2005). Project 911 aimed to train university and college lecturers with doctoral degrees from 2010 to 2020, to produce at least 20,000 PhDs by 2020: 10,000 abroad, 3,000 through training partnerships, and 10,000 domestically (Prime Minister, 2010). Changes in university governance became apparent with the introduction of credit-based systems and increased university autonomy and accountability starting from 2003. The Law on Higher Education in 2012 further granted higher education institutions autonomy in organizational and personnel matters, finance and asset management, curriculum development, research and technology, international collaborations, and ensuring the quality of higher education (The National Assembly, 2012).

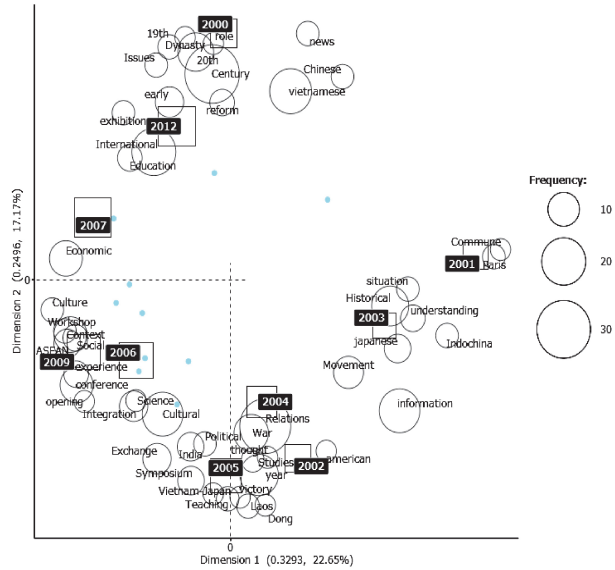


Figure 2. Co-respondence of title-keywords and year, 2000-2012

❖ **Content analysis of journal papers:**

International elements in journal issues revealed strong academic interest in Asian countries in 2006 shown in countries mentioned in the article contents and density of Asia-related key words e.g ASEAN, Vietnam-Japan, Laos (Figure 2). Articles in journals summarized in English, French, and Vietnamese, contrasting with previous publications in Vietnamese, French, and Russian (Vietnam Institute of History Study, 2006). Organizing international conferences in and about Asian countries is an expanding international activity.

**3.5 The fifth stage from 2013 to 2024**

The rationale for internationalization of higher education was for academic and economic competitiveness.

❖ **Policy analysis:**

There are two smaller phases within this stage. From 2013 to 2019, various activities emerged, including sending academics abroad, joining academic shared frameworks, collaborating in research, and forming English-based programs. Decision No. 599 (2013) aimed to train 1,800 Masters and undergraduates from 2013-2017, prioritizing specific countries such as English-speaking and developed countries in Asia and Europe (Prime Minister, 2013a). Decision No. 89 targeted training PhD-level scholars, aiming for 10% of university lecturers to hold PhDs, with 7% trained abroad, 3% in joint programs, and attracting 1,500 PhDs currently working abroad to work at Vietnamese universities (Prime Minister, 2019). By 2030, the Vietnamese education system aims to achieve an advanced level within the Asian region. This goal is evidenced by the expected number of journal articles, outstanding universities, the influx of international students to Vietnam, scholarship programs for educators to study abroad, and the proportion of doctoral degree holders in universities (Prime Minister, 2013b).

During this period, the university reform direction focuses on the stratification of universities and encourages institutions to increase academic productivity to enhance the visibility of universities in the region and the world. Domestically, universities have been categorized into research-oriented,



application-oriented, and practice-oriented groups, with three ranks (1, 2, 3) for each orientation (Government, 2005). The issue of ranking is stated in the Higher Education Law 2018.

Regarding university governance, a pilot program for full autonomy and accountability was conducted for public tertiary education institutions during 2014-2017 (Government, 2014). This program focused on: a) teaching and scientific research, b) personnel organization, c) finance, and d) tuition policies. Twenty-three public universities implemented comprehensive autonomy starting in 2014. Vietnam's goal was for all universities to operate under an autonomy mechanism by 2025.

Additionally, the approval of the Vietnamese National Qualification Framework with 8 levels include Preschool: Level 0, Primary Education: Level 1, Lower Secondary Education: Level 2, Upper Secondary Education: Level 3, Professional Education, Professional Diploma: Level 4, Professional College: Level 5, Bachelor: Level 6, Master: Level 7, Doctor: Level 8 (Prime Minister, 2016).

❖ **Content analysis of journal papers:**

Results of the co-occurrence analysis of words in titles by year show that during this period (Figure 3), the two most frequently appearing words are "Vietnam" and "International", marking Vietnam's interest in educational content from other countries. Two most frequent activities were foreign-related research content and hosting international conferences in Vietnam (Table 4).

*The second phase is from 2020-2024 featured by internationalization at home to promote academic productivity of domestic academics to increase regional and international rankings.*

Since 2020, terms like "international ranking" and "world-class university" have emerged, marking a new phase in viewing internationalization as an environment and motivation to increase the competitiveness of universities on the world rankings. This was followed by regulations on faculty work requirements, such as teaching hours and research hours (MOET, 2020). Policies to enhance faculty research productivity include using national and international publications for evaluations and grants. For promotion to associate professor or professor, candidates must have publications in Web of Science or Scopus-indexed journals, a book chapter from leading publishers, or an authored book from a domestic publisher (MOET, 2021a). In the Educational Strategic Plan for 2021-2030, the internationalization of Vietnamese education will focus on enhancing internationalizing curriculum; exchanging students and educators; developing international research groups; developing

Table 4. Frequency of international elements, 2000-2012

Types of activities	Frequency
Foreign-related research contents	139
Hosting an international conference	42
Foreign-related scientific update	26
Paper by foreign authors	21
Joining international conferences	4
Presenting at international conferences	1
Joining international conferences	1
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>234</b>

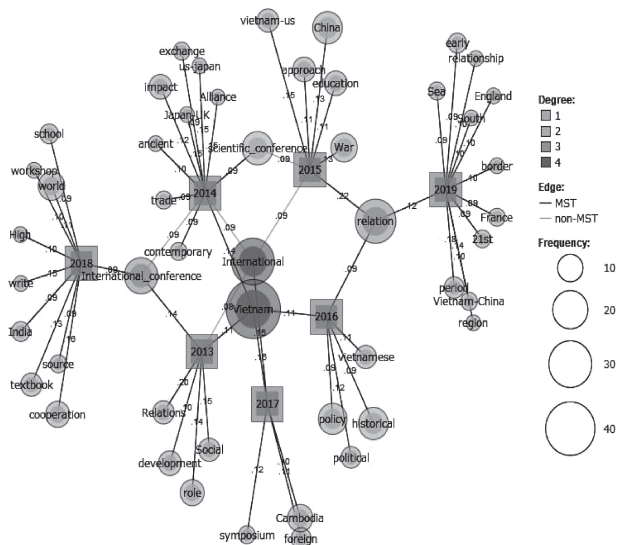


Figure 3. Co-occurrence of title-keywords and year, 2013-2019

international projects; accrediting training programs, and recognizing international diplomas (MOET, 2021b). The government targets to have 2 universities in the top 100 in Asia, 10 in the top 400 in Asia, and 4 universities in the top 1000 best universities in the world. Regarding research, Vietnam aims for 50% of higher education institutions to conduct 1 international conference/per year; at least 1 journal is indexed as an international journal in Asia. About the curriculum, 50% of HEIs entirely implement or partly integrate foreign curricula; 100% of institutions design their curricula to meet social-economic development and labor needs; and increase English-based teaching programs (MOET, 2021b).

#### 4. Discussion & Conclusion

In Vietnam, the concept of internationalization refers to international integration, that is, participating in educational activities with foreign elements. The rationales for international integration in each stage are influenced by politics, the awareness of the nation's position in the region and the world, and the awareness of current trends in developed countries. In stages 1 and 2, the political factor is the core point of the international integration strategy. Integration of foreign ideologies and languages from the socialist bloc, starting with the Soviet Union, was favored and trusted. Then, stage 3 began with the policy of transitioning from a fully centralized economy to an acceptance of market elements into the economy. However, there were still many restrictions on international elements. The next stage is regional integration, closely linking with neighboring countries with similar political characteristics such as China, Laos, and Cambodia, and then expanding to other countries. The stage 5 has been driven by competition and cooperation in the region and international arena. This stage reveals the presence of neoliberalism's impact on Vietnamese higher education. By comparing neoliberal principles in higher education with 1. corporatization of universities, emergence of New Public Managerialism; and competition and performativity among academics and universities (M. B. Steger & Roy, 2021), the impacts of neoliberalism upon Vietnamese higher education are evident in the following aspects:

1. Merging some small universities into larger ones;
2. Increasing university autonomy and accountability over internal matters and international cooperation (now, piloting);
3. Encouraging research publications in international journals to increase the reputation and rankings of universities.

In conclusion, although each stage exhibits distinct rationales and dominant activities, the internationalization of higher education has been shaped by four ideologies: governmental authoritarian control, competitive neoliberal values, nationalism, and Confucianism. The authoritarian control is displayed in top-down policies issued by the government, followed by the Ministry of Education, and then to the universities, similar to other socialist countries (Ren, 2023; Želvys, 2020). Due to this characteristic, the commitment of leadership to international integration is key to promoting this phenomenon in Vietnam (Nghi, 2013). Nationalism emphasizes loyalty to political ideology and national identity, while Confucianism, inherited from the feudal period, underscores respect for learning and teachers. Neoliberalism planted its ideology in the regulations of competition, stratification of institutions, and performance-driven evaluation and promotion of its staff. In recent years, changes in university governance serving competition have led to specific requirements and regulations on the academic productivity of academics. To a moderate extent, government control has also prevented strong and negative transformations caused by competition for ranking. However, this is the time to consider defining the long-term strategy and destination of the internationalization of Vietnamese higher education, in line with Vietnam's historical, political, and cultural characteristics.



## 5. Limitations

This study has two limitations. First, due to limited access to complete journal archives, only the Journal of Historical Studies in Vietnam available at Hiroshima University was analyzed, focusing on political and social aspects of internationalization. Expanding this analysis with additional educational journals could provide more details on international elements. Second, the development stages identified through an exploratory approach could be validated in future studies using a confirmatory approach.

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