

# Chapter 3

## Institutional Transformation for Internationalization: The Making of National Language Program in Higher Education in Contemporary Vietnam



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**Abstract** This chapter looks at the institutional transformation of higher education institutions (HEIs) through the case study of the program training Vietnamese language for international students in contemporary Vietnam. The investigation focuses on a HEI in the South of Vietnam, the birth and development of its Vietnamese Studies program, in which the role of Vietnamese language education has been key to the department's success. The study is set in the context of post- *Doi Moi* opening, with the surge of market-based economic, social mobility and globalization, evident in the increase of international student mobility to Vietnam. The chapter unpacks the practices of HEI who put effort in changing for good, including curriculum development, textbook writing, research collaboration, leadership innovation, and so on. Framing and linking these practices with the larger economic and social movements, the chapter highlights the creative and active agency of Vietnamese HEIs and their teachers in embracing the change and accommodating the demand of language education from those who come to Vietnam for work, travel, or education. Yet, it also points out the challenges of change and the stress on implementing changes. The chapter reveals how institutions can position themselves for opportunities and success through institutional transformation. It argues that HEIs in Vietnam can be proactive agents in conducting transformation for internationalization with the use of its national language programs. Despite the dual nature of these practices, it opens up the opportunities for a much more globally connected education system, where an emerging country like Vietnam can amplify its voice.

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## Introduction

The issues of languages of instruction and language of knowledge development are constant focuses of research on the internationalization of higher education (HE) in contemporary Asia, in relation to students' mobilities and HE transformations (Collins & Ho, 2018; Ha & Fry, 2021). On the one hand, English has been established as a dominant language contributing to the internationalization of HE in Asia, with many countries implementing policies to enhance English (Ha, 2013). On the other hand, Asian language programs for international students are also thriving. For example, countries like China, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, and Thailand, to name just some, have developed national language entry requirements for international students (IS) pursuing higher education in these countries, using their national languages as medium of instruction. This trend has opened other options for the internationalization of HE. Higher education internationalization, with no dependent on, and no offense to, the rise of English used as the dominant medium of instruction.

In the case of Vietnam, the context of Doi Moi implementation has brought about abundant of changes to the landscape of its higher education, now influenced by opened market policies, global integration, and internationalization tendencies. From the perspective of education languages, it is the rise of central languages like English, influenced by Western values, and its impact on local languages and cultures.

Previous research on HE in Vietnam post-Doi Moi have initially mentioned changes in HE policies to develop curriculum to a "socialist-oriented market economy" and respond to the call of economic and cultural integration (Huong & Fry, 2004). Investigations have presented top-down factors in governmental strategies for education development, Education Law and Higher Education Law. There are also interpretations of how higher education institutions moved away from Soviet influence models to Western ones. These include the rise of English as the dominant medium of instruction for exchange education, co-training programs, and internationalized programs (Phan & Doan, 2020).

In the context of the internationalization of Vietnam's higher education system, Vietnamese is also the medium of instruction in Vietnamese-medium programs that enroll international students. Indeed, the teaching of Vietnamese to prepare international students for Vietnamese-medium programs is a significant part of some universities in Vietnam. Yet, the role of Vietnamese in current dynamic picture of higher education in Vietnam is not yet well investigated.

This chapter specially looks at Vietnamese and the education of the official language of Vietnam to its international students, to see how it is constructed and enacted in the national practices of internationalization in higher education. It does this by investigating the policies of language education to IS, and the institutionalization of the programs in HEIs in Vietnam. It focuses on one case study of a self-perceived successful internationalized program of Vietnamese Studies in a university in Ho Chi Minh City.

## **An Overview of the Education Programs *Vietnamese for Foreigners***

Vietnamese is the national and official language of Vietnam. It is the first language of about 85% of Vietnam's population and serves as a second language for ethnic minority communities in Vietnam. Vietnamese is the dominant language and the medium of instruction in Vietnam's national education system. For people with other linguistic backgrounds, coming from other territories to Vietnam to learn Vietnamese for living, working and education purpose, Vietnamese is taught to them as an additional language.

The term *Vietnamese for foreigners* mentioned in this article refers to all type of language education courses for speakers of other linguistic backgrounds, aiming to provide them with the knowledge and skills to use Vietnamese as a foreign language. The teaching of Vietnamese to people coming from other territories and other linguistic backgrounds is not new, if not saying that it is as old as the history of foreign exchanges of the Viet population. Leaving aside the complicated history of teaching and learning Vietnamese with its Sino Nom script, the following part provides a historical summary of the teaching of Vietnamese with its Romanized writing system.

### **Before 1945—The Spread of Religion by the West and the Domination of French in Vietnam**

The need to learn Vietnamese in this early period was mainly for the purposes of religious propagation and colonial rule. The most obvious impression of foreigners learning Vietnamese started in the seventeenth century, associated with the birth of Chữ Quốc ngữ—a script crafted by Western missionaries to facilitate the spread of Catholicism in Vietnam. To do this effectively, they learn Vietnamese. “In order to spread their religion, Western missionaries needed a means to communicate with native speakers. The first task they undertook was learning Vietnamese” (Giap, 2006).

During the French domination (beginning in 1858), the French used Vietnamese as a medium of communication. Consequently, they carried out the teaching of Vietnamese to French administrative officials. In 1861, they established a Vietnamese language school in Saigon to train French interpreters, and Chữ Quốc ngữ was chosen as the medium of instruction.

During the Japanese occupation (1940–1945), a number of Japanese scholars were sent to Vietnam to learn the language and to study the country. Imprints left from this period include research works and Vietnamese teaching textbooks (the language was called Annamese during this time): *Annamese dialogue* by Taichi in 1941; *An Anamese Conversation* by Nobukazu and Tsuneo in 1941; Matsumoto's *Introduction to Annamese* was published by the Indochina Research Association in 1942, Scholar

Kin Eiken compiled *Japanese–French–Annam conversational dictionary* in 1942 (Masaaki, 2019).

## **The Period of the Two Governments, North and South Vietnam: 1945–1975**

Since 1945, Vietnamese became the national language, but during this period, Vietnam had two coexisting governments: the North was the Democratic Republic of Vietnam led by the Communist Party, the South was a pro-French and pro-American government, leading to differences policies in teaching and learning Vietnamese.

The North implements language policy aiming at democratization and massification. In Hanoi, right after its establishment in 1956, Hanoi University held a department teaching Vietnamese to foreigners, which later evolved into the Faculty of Vietnamese Language and Vietnamese Culture for Foreigners (Giap, 2006).

In 1950s, Nguyen Tai Can was the first Vietnamese professor to teach Vietnamese at the Faculty of Oriental Studies, Leningrad University in the Soviet Union. The lecturers of this university published a number of research works on Vietnamese, such as: *Vietnamese phonetic system* by M.V. Gordon and I.S. Bystrov; *Vietnamese Grammar* by I.S. Bystrov, Nguyen Tai Can and N.V. Stankevich; *Vietnamese grammar system* by V.S. Panfilov.

With the assistance of the Saigon government, Vietnamese language teaching in Korea began in the 1960s to serve the Korean army fighting in Vietnam. “The first Vietnamese class in Korea started in January 1965, under the help of the Saigon Embassy. In March 1967, Hankuk University of Foreign Studies (HUFS) officially enrolled and trained Vietnamese for the first 20 students” (Tae, 1998). After the Vietnam war ended, the demand for learning Vietnamese subsided, and the only Vietnamese department in Korea existed in name only due to a lack of students.

The Vietnamese language programs for international students have been tied to the nation-building agenda and foreign governmental affairs since the foundations of its nation-states. To take a closer look at the Democratic Republic of Vietnam government in North Vietnam (1945–1975) and then the current government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (since 1976), the programs primarily served the foreign affairs of the communist government with countries like Laos, Cambodia, Soviet Union, by providing Vietnamese language education to exchange democrats and students from these countries coming to Vietnam.

For example, in the training history of the Lao Viet Friendship School in Thai Nguyen, in 1955, they enrolled 150 Lao officials, soldiers and students in the Vietnamese language program. The number of learners increased rapidly until the Viet—Lao Treaty of Friendship and Comprehensive Cooperation (July 18, 1977), with about 35,000 Lao students having received Vietnamese language training at the school. Similarly, another Friendship School in Hanoi, found in 1980, specialized

in providing secondary education for Lao students under the Vietnamese government scholarship, has recently expanded to provide Vietnamese language training for higher education exchange students. In just one school year 2016–2017, this school enrolled 287 Lao and 93 Cambodian graduate students (Vietlao, 2017). This system of Friendship schools, as well as many training units in other universities, has been founded to serve this training request from the Vietnamese government, like the Vietnam National University in Hanoi (since the late 1950s) and Vietnam National University in Ho Chi Minh City (since the 1980s).

### **From Period of Reunification to Doi Moi: 1976–1990, the Period of Country Reconstruction After War**

After the war, Vietnamese language education mainly focused on the implementation of international missions aimed at strengthening security and fostering prospects for economic development cooperation with foreign countries. Teaching Vietnamese to Laotian and Cambodian officials served as a means to strengthen national security. Meanwhile, the demand for learning Vietnamese in countries related to the Vietnam War decreased significantly. “After 1975, due to differences in the political system, Vietnam-Korea relations froze, and since then, Hankuk University has only recruited around 20 Vietnamese students each year” (Minh and Woo, 2013).

However, with the introduction of Doi Moi reforms, as the results of the opening policies in economic and social exchanges, the training practice radically shifted from short courses for political purposes to independent programs responsive to the globalization and internationalization of Vietnamese higher education.

In an effort to find solutions for developing, the Vietnamese government determined that it was necessary to renew its approach and decide on immediate action; as a result, the Doi Moi policy was introduced in 1986, opening the country to foreign investors. This led to an influx of foreigners coming to Vietnam to do business, which inevitably increased the need for learning Vietnamese to communicate with the native population.

### **The Context of Doi Moi and Governmental Policies Toward HEI’s Vietnamese Language Education**

Post-Doi Moi, Vietnam experienced a nationwide economic rise. The situation of foreign direct investment (FDI) in Vietnam has grown impressively. Data from the General Statistics Office show that FDI from countries investing in Vietnam has continuously increased, with the first quarter of 2019 reaching a record in the value of registered investment capital over the same period in the previous three years (Tuyet, 2018). Regional and global exchanges in all aspects of life in Vietnam, from

politics to economic, have brought changes and transformations to higher education (Tran & Marginson, 2018; Phan & Doan, 2020). General mobilities resulted in waves of foreigners coming to Vietnam for a variety of purposes, length of stay, and types of engagements. For a country not accustomed to such a large number of visitors, and for visitors in a country not previously popular as an international destination, language for communication became a focal point, leading to a surging demand for Vietnamese language training, from basic to advanced levels, for living and working purposes.

These eager learners are active in seeking out training centers, flexible in learning arrangements, and paying US dollars for tuition. With thousands of foreigners in Vietnam needing to learn Vietnamese, a new market emerged—teaching Vietnamese to foreigners, and the post-Đổi Mới policies have been just right for the birth of various forms of education businesses (center-based short courses, private tutors, contracted, and professional providers).

At the same time, globalization has led to an increase of international student mobility globally (OECD, 2022), with directions to previously less-known destinations, like Africa, Latin America, and Asia (Ha & Fry, 2021). If in early 2000s saw Vietnamese media filled with news about studying abroad opportunities, a decade later, there were more about international students in Vietnam.

The government has been supportive, allowing universities to open Vietnamese language centers and Vietnamese studies programs (VSP) for foreigners. The programs of teaching Vietnamese and using Vietnamese as a medium of instruction (VMI) were established in the 1980s and have seen significant growth since the 2000s, continuing to the present day. The open policies also allowed HEIs to be active and responsive to educational market, being creative in seizing this opportunity.

The rise in demand for Vietnamese language education from learners meets the active scholars and university leadership who promote scientifically and politically the establishment of a new graduate training program named Vietnamese Studies,<sup>1</sup> for both Vietnamese and international students. Since its first launch in 1998, which focused on defining Vietnamese Studies as a science and promoting Vietnamese international affairs in academia, the International Conference on Vietnamese Studies has been organized every four years, sponsored directly by the Vietnamese government. Between 2001 and 2005, some universities launched their training units and began enrolling domestic students in VSP at the bachelor's level; for example, Hanoi National University of Education welcomed its first-year students in 2002. The field of Vietnamese Studies as a higher education training program was made official in a decision by the Ministry of Education and Training (MoET) in 2005 (see Bộ Giáo dục và Đào tạo, 2005).

By the 2007–2008 academic, VSPs were present in 76 universities and colleges nationwide. These programs used Vietnamese as a medium of instruction and

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<sup>1</sup> The field of Vietnamese Studies has got a long history, as summarized in the sessions above, with the active involvement of the Chinese, Japanese, European intellectuals. Yet with the birth of the university education systems in the second half of twentieth century in Vietnam North and South, there has been no higher education program providing certificate for Vietnamese studies.

targeted both domestic and international students, contributing to the development of Vietnamese language education at HEIs.

For this rapid development, in 2015, MoET issued its first milestone decision, Circular 17/2015/TT-BGDĐT, establishing a six-level language competency framework in Vietnamese to assess foreign learners. In 2018, another circular was issued outlining the Vietnamese language competency requirements for international students studying at HEIs in Vietnam. Then, in November 2021, MoET issued another circular regarding the organization of Vietnamese language exams for international students. These circulars represent a series of top-down initiatives by MoET to institutionalize and standardize Vietnamese language education for international students in Vietnam.

These circulars, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, response to the rapidly developing programs teaching Vietnamese to foreigners in HEIs and private centers across. This growth has contributed to the dynamics of internationalization in Vietnamese higher education, a phenomena that, compared with the rise of English in education, has been under-researched.

How do HEIs seize this opportunity and address the challenge to construct or adjust their development strategies? To elaborate further on this point, we will delve into the theoretical debate on institutional transformation at HEIs in the context of increasing globalization and student mobilities. These theoretical debates will guide our analysis of an accidental internationalization and strategic transformation for internationalization in a HEI in Vietnam.

## **Institutional Transformation and Internationalization of National Language Program at HE**

The concept of institutional transformation is used here to frame the internal adjustments of HEIs to adapt to changes stemming from factors like society, economic, and politics, leading to the reconstruction of the institution for development.

According to Levy and Merry (1986), institutional transformation involves planned alterations in the institution's core elements, including authority, goals, decision-making, practices, and policies. As outlined by Levy and Merry, institutional transformations are: (1) deliberate, purposeful, and explicit; (2) a "process" of alteration; (3) engaging external or internal expertise; and (4) involving a strategy of collaboration and power sharing between the experts and others (1986, cited in Fox, 2018, p. 83). In other words, transformation is a "strategic reorientation" (Wischnevsky & Damanpour, 2006, p. 104), involving purposefully changes in the institution's mission, organizational structure, management and leadership, functional practices, and communication patterns (Levy & Merry, 1986).

What are the indicators of institutional transformation? Nutt and Backoff (1997) categorize four main indicators: (1) changes in the institution's vision, (2) changes in action strategies, (3) changes in organizational structure, (4) changes in institutional

culture or communication patterns. In terms of vision and mission, new discourses would often present changes in the statements of the institution's leadership, in short- and long-term development plan, or, in other words, in the alternative "ways of thinking". This future vision is followed by evidence of alternative "ways of doing" compared to the usual practices, in everyday practice. In a structural view, it is evidenced in the de/restructure of the old with significant changes. And finally, the fourth indicator refers to the expertise network and professional culture of the institution, like teaching, research, and service (Eckel & Kezar, 2003, pp. 27–28).

Applied to higher education, Fox summarized others' research to emphasize four characteristics of transformation: (1) systemic, (2) deep, (3) intentional, and (4) cultural (2008, 83–84). First, the systemic aspect discussed the interrelatedness between different parts of the institution, such as *personnel policies and practices, faculty development, recruitment and admissions*, research and publications (Burkhardt, 2002, p. 120). Introducing change to one part of the institution can result in *stresses and tensions* connected to other parts, potentially leading to *resistance to change* (Astin & Astin, 2001). Second, transformation is deep because it affects values and assumptions as well as structures and processes in the higher education institution, encompassing both "interior" and "exterior" aspects (*ibid.*). Third, transformation is intentional, involving deliberate and purposeful decision-making about institutional actions and directions.

Elaborating on the key factors that facilitate transformation in higher education, Burkhardt (2002) first emphasizes the leadership factor, which has the authority to shape organizational visions, present institutional statement, and implement changes. Another key facilitator of transformation is identifying stakeholders throughout an institution who may be involved in designing and implementing activities for the process of transformation. Effective networks (Eckel & Kezar, 2003) include pathway for personal development, collaborated steps of change implementation, and training to equipped human resources with new capacities to meet new expectations, or so-called work innovation). In addition, transformation is enhanced by generating supports outside of the institution, like agencies and foundations which provide both material and symbolic support (Astin & Astin, 2001).

In what follows, we elaborate in more detail about institutional transformation of HEIs in Vietnam, through the case of the Faculty of Vietnamese Studies at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities (USSH), Vietnam National University in Ho Chi Minh City, to show how these institutions addressing the challenges and developing its Vietnamese language education program for international students.



## **Vietnamese Language Education at the Faculty of Vietnamese Studies Faculty**

Strategic internationalization of higher education at Vietnam National University in Ho Chi Minh City (VNU-HCM) began in the 1990s, but it was not until the years 2000s that it really made its mark. The strategic plan for socio-economic development of Vietnam for the period 1996–2000 clearly defined this as a very important period for accelerating industrialization and modernization of the country, promoting comprehensive and synchronous industrialization; it continued to develop a multi-sector economy operating according to the market mechanism, creating a solid premise for higher development at the beginning of the next century (Đảng cộng sản Việt Nam, 2015, p. 427).

Following the national strategy, VNU-HCM identified that world higher education had developed rapidly with obvious trends: massification, marketization, diversification, and internationalization. In the general objective of period 2006–2010, VNU-HCM promoted internal resources, integrated actively, strengthened international cooperation, innovated training, and created a strong change in the quality of training, science–technology, and international cooperation, contributing to meeting the demand for high-quality human resources for society and develop VNU-HCM on par with advanced universities in the Southeast Asia region (Đại học Quốc gia HCM, 2006).

In this section, we observe the case of the Faculty of Vietnamese Studies at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities (USSH) in VNU-HCM, the first institution in the South of Vietnam to offer Vietnamese studies. Strategic institutional transformation of VNS was the continuation of the implementation and concretization of the strategies of the VNU, in which the market factor was particularly focused.

### **The Birth of VNS at USSH**

The Faculty of Vietnamese Studies (VNS) at USSH has led in training Vietnamese studies and Vietnamese language for foreigners for over 20 years. Its initial purpose was to carry out a political mission—to teach Vietnamese for national security and then for nation building. After the liberation of Vietnam in 1975, the country focused on reconstruction and strengthening solidarity with fellow socialist countries, undertaking international missions where teaching Vietnamese to Laos and Cambodia was seen as crucial for national security (Liên hiệp các tổ chức hữu nghị, 2020). Given the complex geopolitical positions of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, heavily influenced by international relations with major “ambitious” countries, all three shared a path of liberation and a common front against aggression. Establishing a good relationship would benefit all three countries, especially in terms of economy, politics, security, and defense; helping Laos and Cambodia meant Vietnam was also helping itself.

The year 1979 marked Vietnam's significant involvement in Cambodia, supporting the Khmer People's National Liberation Front against the Pol Pot genocide. The following year, 1980, the Ministry of Education summoned the leaders of the Faculty of Literature at USSH to Hanoi to receive an urgent decision to establish a group of experts to teach Vietnamese to Cambodians (Giang, 2018). This Group, with initially five lecturers under the Faculty of Literature, is the predecessor of today's VNS. According to the agreement between the two governments of Vietnam and Cambodia, USSH-HCM annually trained 30 Cambodian students. From 1985 to 1990, USSH-HCM annually sent lecturers to Phnom Penh to teach Vietnamese at Cambodian universities. "During this period, the economic conditions were still difficult; we lacked everything, even textbooks" (Lich, 2008, p. 663).

Prof. Bui Khanh The, former head of the Group of Experts teaching Vietnamese (1986–1989), noted, "Cambodia at that time was almost ruined, all valuable knowledge destroyed by the Khmer Rouge. We, along with some intellectuals of the newly established Cambodian government, went to find survivors to bring back for training, built a core force, and re-established Phnom Penh University" (VNS, 2018).

Teaching Vietnamese to Cambodian students was crucial as it enabled them to access other science and technology subjects taught by Vietnamese educators. Language education often leads the way for international cooperation and exchange relationships, followed by the internationalization of higher education in Vietnam.

After the mission in Cambodia, USSH's leaders decided to continue Vietnamese language education, seeing an opportunity to serve many foreigners coming to Vietnam for business. In 1990, the Group of Experts teaching Vietnamese split into the Department of Vietnamese Language and Department of Vietnamese Culture, both under the Center for Vietnam—Southeast Asian Studies.

Post-Doi Moi in 1986, Vietnam experienced significant changes, starting with thought reform and opening door for economic growth (Chính Phủ, 2010). This attracted foreign investment, with many foreigners coming Vietnam for business and settlement. The Vietnam government encouraged activities promoting the development of Vietnamese studies. In 1998, the first International Scientific Conference on Vietnamese Studies was held in Hanoi, marking an important milestone for the birth and growth of VNS. Concurrently, VNS was established as per *Decision No. 439/QĐ/ĐHQG/TCCB*, signed on December 26, 1998, by the Director of VNU-HCM,<sup>2</sup> based on the Department of Vietnamese Studies and Vietnamese language for foreigners at USSH, VNU-HCM.

Over 20 years (1998–2018), VNS saw a significant increase in enrollment, from 600 in 1998 to 2164 in 2018 (*Lịch sử hình thành phát triển Khoa Việt Nam học*, 2023). Initially, enrollment was 885 in 1998 (Hong Phuong, cited in *ibid.*, Fig. 1), doubling to 1719 in 2004, and doubling again by 2013, reaching half a million in 2017 and 2018 before COVID (Hong Phuong, cited in *ibid.*, Fig. 2). The enrollment rate increased rapidly from 2005 to 2008, then sharply decrease from 2008 to 2010, before gradually increasing again from 2015 to 2018 (*ibid.*).

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<sup>2</sup> Vietnam National University is the management agency of USSH-HCM.

Regarding bachelor's courses, from 2000 to 2018, VNS enrolled 19 courses with 734 successful candidates and 470 graduates (VNS, 2018). The postgraduate program, started in 2009, has trained 98 students, including 15% international students from various countries, like Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Thailand, and the USA. To unpack the success of VNS, we consider key activities such as responding to market's needs, strategic transformation, student care, and research-based activities. We also pointed out the challenges faced by VNS in its development history.

## **Responding to the Market's Needs: VNS Strategic Transformation**

From the outset, VNS's leaders prioritized flexible and strategic program development. As stated in 1998, "Right from the time of developing program, we planned it under the credit system. The program meets the needs of students, so the number of students is continuously increasing" (Lich, 2008). VNS provided a variety of courses, with short-term (including pre-university), graduate, and post-graduate programs being the most prominent. Each course was designed to cater to students' need at different stages, from basic to advanced, ensuring the continuity of the program system. The primary reason students chose to study Vietnamese was for job opportunities and the necessity of living in Vietnam. A March 2022 survey of 54 foreign students at VNS revealed that 57.4% aimed to find jobs, 50% intended to reside permanently in Vietnam, 12.9% had interests in the history, culture, language and people, with a noted cultural affinity between Vietnam and Korea, and 11.1% followed their parents working and living in Vietnam, with some students citing multiple reasons.

In addition to the standard admission process, VNS also participated in 2 + 2 and 3 + 1 cooperative programs (where students study 2 or 3 years in their home country and then complete their education in Vietnam for the remaining 1 or 2 years to obtain a bachelor's degree) under agreements between Vietnamese and foreign partner universities. These students can earn dual bachelor's degrees, enhancing their employment prospects in both nations and fostering bilateral relations and economic human resource development. Since 2019, VNS has offered an online Vietnamese studies bachelor's program and short-term language courses, which gained increase attention during the COVID-19 pandemic. These programs are accessible globally, allowing students from Korea, the US, Japan, and elsewhere to enroll easily.

VNS has gained recognition for its "Methods of teaching Vietnamese as a foreign language" course, which not only enhance its reputation but also increase its revenue. The faculty saw the need from people who wanted to conduct training to be a qualified teacher to teach Vietnamese as a foreign language. Consequently, these courses initiated primarily for Vietnamese learners, have been offered since 2017, with 19 sessions over 300 individuals. The curriculum encompasses second language education theory, teaching Vietnamese as a second language (TVSOL), and pedagogies

for teaching core language skills. Delivered over three months, the course culminates in a practical teaching session evaluated by a committee of instructors. The program also attracts international students graduates from bachelor's and postgraduate Vietnamese Studies programs aspiring to teach Vietnamese. For instance, in 2021, several Korean students enrolled. Despite the pandemic, online course delivery continued, and international training, such as at Chihlee University of Technology in Taiwan, proceeded as planned (VNS, 2022).

VNS also conducts Vietnamese language proficiency assessments for foreign students. Designated by the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training (MoET), VNS administers tests and issues Vietnamese language proficiency certificates according to the Vietnamese language proficiency national framework standard. This certificate is crucial for foreigners seeking education or employment in foreign-invested firms or any organization requiring Vietnamese communication skills.

## **Taking Care of Students**

A standout aspect of VNS is its commitment to prioritizing foreign students, encompassing both academic programs and extracurricular activities. This approach, novel in the early 2000s Vietnamese higher education context, positioned VNS as a pioneer in taking care of students like valued customers. The rationale is clear: foreign students are viewed as highly beneficial, often referred to metaphorically as the “goose that lays golden eggs”. The university has prioritized foreign students by enhancing training quality, fostering teacher enthusiasm and care, and providing top-notch facilities. A former VNS leader highlighted the keys to attracting students: “The secret to attracting students lies in the quality of the training, the enthusiasm and teaching methods of the faculty, and the teaching and learning facilities” (Lich, 2012, p. 628).

Notable activities at VNS include the orientation for new students and internships for those nearing graduation. For local students, orientation is usually on-campus, while for foreign students, this event is usually held in tourist destinations, creating fun and relaxing environment for introductions to the school, faculty, and academic programs, as well as for student socialization.

Similarly, the internships or field trip practice serve as significant attractions, particularly for third- and fourth-year students, lasting about two weeks. These excursions, often to areas with scenic beauty like traditional craft villages and cultural sites, aim to encourage students to delve deeply into the local life. This allows them to explore, experience reality firsthand, and employ their Vietnamese language skills for interviewing and gathering data for their final graduation project survey reports.

## Research-Based Activities and Connections with Foreign Universities

Besides teaching, VNS has a strategy to develop its research capacity as an essential component of its training and social service. The motto “research to support teaching” underpins this strategy, with specific goals such as compiling textbooks, reference books, monographs, and encouraging the publication of scientific works in journals (VNS, 2012). Each full-time lecturer is required to publish at least one paper or one research work annually. This mandate is reflected in institutional policies and the research profiles of its individual staff members. *Official Letter No. 576/XHNV-TCCB* (USSH, 2020a) specifies that a lecture’s scientific research tasks must include at least one scientific product from categories like articles with ISBN, textbooks, reference books, published monographs (excluding reprints), or successfully defended Ph.D. and master theses. Staff who achieve these scientific outputs are eligible for incentive rewards, either as bonus points or cash. For instance, an article indexed with ISSN earns two points, equivalent to 100,000VND; one with an international ISI index gets 30 points, or 15,000,000VND (USSH, 2023); and an article in the ISI/Scopus (Q1) list equates to 1400 hours of scientific research (*Official Letter No. 589/XHNV-TCCB*).

Collaborated research efforts have seen significant interactions in materials and curriculum design between scholars in Ho Chi Minh City and Ha Noi. The VNS’s founders, like Bui Khanh The and Nguyen Van Lich from the south, had strong connections with scholars in Ha Noi due to their time in the north during the war, facilitating the development of this field. Nguyen Van Hue, a third-generation leader of VNS, has significantly contributed to expanding VNS’s global connections. Biennially, VNS collaborate with USSH Hanoi to host an Interfaculty Scientific Conference, continuing a decade-long tradition of cooperation between the two institutions (USSH, 2020b). These scholars have worked together on creating teaching materials for both domestic and international training, leading to the creation of textbooks like *Que Viet* and *Vietnamese Reading—Writing*<sup>3</sup>.

Scholars have also been sent abroad for teaching exchanges, fostering interactional collaboration and impacting Vietnamese studies. For example, Nguyen Van Hue promoted the *Vietnamese as a Second Language* (VSL)<sup>4</sup> book series globally, with institutions like Australian National University in Australia, Kanda University of International Studies in Japan, Bushan University of Foreign Studies in Korean, the University of Bonn in Germany), United States Department of State adopting it. In another instance, Nguyen Quang Ninh from Hanoi National University of

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<sup>3</sup> *Que Viet* is a set of Vietnamese language teaching textbooks consisting of 06 books, divided into three levels (A1, A2, B1, B2, C1 and C2) edited by Mai Ngoc Chu (VNU, Hanoi) and Nguyen Van Hue participates as a member editor. *Vietnamese Reading—Writing* A1&A2 is the series of textbooks co-written by Nguyen Quang Ninh (Hanoi National University of Education (HNUE)) and Tran Trong Nghia (HCM-USSH) at Busan University of Foreign Studies (BUFS), South Korea.

<sup>4</sup> The series of current VSL textbooks for foreigners consists of five books compiled by a group of authors (edited by Nguyen Van Hue) is the result of 10 years of preparation of many lecturers. VSL was first published in 2000, so far, they have been reprinted for 8 times and are still widely used in many countries around the world like the US, Canada, Australia, Korea, Brunei.

Education was invited to teach at Busan University of Foreign Studies (BUFS) in Korea from 2015 to 2016, while Tran Trong Nghia from USSH at Ho Chi Minh City served as a lecturer in Vietnamese at BUFS from 2015 to 2018. Together with Korean colleagues, they produced a series of *Vietnamese Reading–Writing* textbooks, now used in Korean universities offering Vietnamese language courses.

VNS's research initiatives focus on Vietnamese studies and Vietnamese language, addressing both theoretical and practical issues. To date, they have published over 25 textbooks, hosted 14 domestic and 5 international conferences, and released more than 350 articles. They maintain connections with numerous foreign universities to collaborative training in Vietnamese studies and Vietnamese languages, with key partners in Japan, Korea, France, Czech Republic, and Taiwan (VNS, 2018).

## Current and Coming Challenges to VNS

Vietnamese studies are currently facing the challenges, including developing human resources, constructing curriculum and teaching material banks, and improving graduate employability.

Firstly, regarding human resource development, VNS acknowledges the need to develop a team of professional lecturers ready for the internationalization of this discipline. The VNS's report for the academic year 2020–2021 indicates a shortage of qualified teachers to replace those retiring. A 2022 survey of 59 discipline teachers showed that 30.5% having a suitable background for TVSOL; 10.2% having highly relevant backgrounds (like Vietnamese literature); 18.6% having educated in foreign languages other than Vietnamese. However, 40.7% had less relevant backgrounds, such as Sociology, Cultural Studies, Communication, and Asian Studies, facing difficulties in teaching TVSOL without additional training in its pedagogies. Since 2020, the discipline has required teachers from other backgrounds to undergo training in TVSOL pedagogies.

Second, VNS is developing a systematic bank of textbooks and teaching resources. The current stock does not fully meet the teaching and learning needs. Although VNS planned to develop a new textbook series by 2020 (VNS, 2015), this has yet to be completed as of 2024. Existing textbooks mainly support short-term courses; with many subjects in the official training program lacking specific textbooks for foreign students (VNS, 2021). A compilation committee, editor-in-chief, and a comprehensive plan are needed to create a complete textbook set, building on the curriculum from basic to advanced level.

Third, the employment rate of graduates is a concern, as students struggle to find jobs due to an interdisciplinary but shallow knowledge base and lack of practical experience. With society needing more specialized skills, many students often study some other additional fields to enhance job prospects. In 2020, only 71.15% of graduates found employment, the lowest rate among USSH majors at VNU-HCM (USSH, 2020d). VNS annually organizes meetings with employers to gather feedback to improve the training program, but more detailed post-training assessments

are needed, including job placement rates and the satisfaction level of employers, to inform future training initiatives.

## **Wrapping Up Discussion: Accidental Versus Strategic Internationalization of HE Beyond English**

In researching on pathways of internationalization in Vietnam, Phan (2019) breaks the ground to reveal the need for more research on internationalization in higher education (HE) beyond English, emphasizing the alternative role of national language as medium of instruction. This discussion section brings the case of VNS at USSH into the context of internationalization beyond English, reveal different transformation methods within HEIs during the same process of internationalization.

Phan, Dang and Ngo (2022) present a case study of HEI where internationalization happened as an unintended gift resulting from increasing social and economic exchanges between Vietnam and Korea. This led to a bottom-up demand of learning Vietnamese and a rise in self-enrolled students at the institution. Vietnamese Studies (VS) at Binh Minh University (BMU) in this article emerged not internally but from economic impacts and external demand, described as “the relationship between Vietnam and Korea kept getting warmer and the demand for VS from Koreans kept rising”. The influx of Korean students to VS at BMU and the transformation of this institution is termed as “accidental, bottom-up, responsive, and by-product internationalization of HE beyond English” (ibid., pp.11–13). Though not elaborated in the article, the concept of accidental internationalization contrasts with other HEIs proactively adopting “strategies gearing toward internationalisation” (ibid., 12), referring to the development of English as a medium of instruction (EMI) programs that Phan (2017, 2018) pointed out, with strategies like “internationalising their curriculum and training programmes and attracting international students”.

This novelty concept of accidental internationalization inspires and enriches the conversation in this chapter, especially in the critical comparison between BMU and USSH. Unlike BMU, VNS at USSH has played in the game as pioneers, establishing the norms, and leading the field. Unlike other HEIs that focus on EMI programs, USSH has made its Vietnamese as a Medium of Instruction (VMI) program highly sought after by international students in HCMC and abroad. This success is evident in the institution’s transformation, marked by leadership, internal collaboration over an extended period, and the development of external relationship. We posit that VNS at USSH exemplifies strategic internationalization of HE using Vietnamese as medium of instruction.

From its origin as a small department for training Cambodian learners, VNS at USSH has evolved into an internationally recognized training unit, expanding its learner network through Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) for students exchanges since 1975. Strategically, VNS at USSH has been proactive in changing



core elements, such as devising its curriculum and teaching materials, developing internal policies to promote academic research alongside teaching improvement, and establishing external partnerships to attract more international students. These initiatives are, indeed, (1) purposeful; (2) part of a planned process; (3) engaging both external and internal expertise; and (4) involving collaborative and power-sharing strategies (Levy & Merry, 1986). In other words, it is “strategic reorientation” within the institution (Wischnevsky & Damanpour, 2006).

Contributing to its success are actions aligned with Nutt and Backoff’s (1997) four main indicators of institutional transformation: (1) changes in VNS’s vision to become an international hub in the South, (2) changes in action in teaching and promoting research, (3) changes in organizational structure, evidenced by the expansion from a small unit to a department with 70 staff members, and (4) changes in institutional culture, with responsive policies toward student care and service quality. Changes in teaching, research, and service (Eckel & Kezar, 2003) are further detailed in Mai and Chau (2022), highlighting that attracting international students has been a central priority of USSH’s sub-institutions, including VNS.

However, the process of innovation within the institution has also faced challenges, including *stresses and tensions* and *resistance to change* (Astin & Astin, 2001). We have pointed out that VNS at USSH continues to confront the need to enhance the quality of human resource and reduce resistance. The pressure to improve career prospects for learners and increase the employment rate for has intensified, especially as the market grows and faces more competitors from private sector entities with smaller and more agile organizational structures. Furthermore, there is an open question regarding the investigation of the identities and agencies of stakeholders, including teachers and students.

In conclusion, the case of VNS at USSH offers a unique story of strategic internationalization of HE beyond English. It provides valuable insights into the pathways of HEIs in countries like Vietnam, which were previously less dominant and proactive in the internationalization of HE.

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