

## VIETNAMESE HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE ERA OF GLOBAL RISE: INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCES AND REFORM DIRECTIONS TOWARD 2045

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INFORMATION	ABSTRACT
<p><i>Received: 26/07/2025</i>  <i>Revised: 17/08/2025</i>  <i>Accepted for publication: 18/8/2025</i>  <i>Code: TCKH-S03T08-2025-B18</i>  <i>ISSN: 2354 - 0788</i></p> <p><b>Keywords:</b>  <i>Higher education, reform agenda, international models, university autonomy, digital transformation, internationalization.</i></p>	<p><i>Globalization, digital transformation and the Fourth Industrial Revolution are reshaping higher education worldwide, creating urgent demands for systemic reform. This paper examines international experiences to draw lessons for the long-term development of Vietnamese higher education. The study employs a qualitative design, using document analysis of policy reports, academic publications and selected case studies from five developed countries: the United States, Germany, the Netherlands, Singapore and South Korea. The analysis focuses on five higher education models: liberal arts universities, applied universities, research universities, open-digital universities and internationalized higher education. Findings highlight the distinctive characteristics, strengths and enabling conditions of these models and distill six key lessons for Vietnam: advancing curriculum innovation; linking practice, research and industry; accelerating digital transformation; fostering internationalization; ensuring substantive university autonomy and building innovation ecosystems within institutions. These insights demonstrate that reform in Vietnam requires not only policy change but also structural, pedagogical and governance transformations. The paper concludes that adopting a comprehensive and evidence-based reform agenda to 2045 is essential for achieving sustainable development, strengthening global integration and enhancing national competitiveness in the knowledge economy.</i></p>

### 1. Introduction

In the era of globalization, digital transformation and the Fourth Industrial Revolution, higher education systems worldwide

are undergoing profound changes in both structure and governance. Universities are no longer confined to traditional functions of knowledge transmission; instead, they are expected to play

a central role in cultivating innovation, advancing research, fostering international collaboration and responding effectively to the rapidly changing demands of society and the labor market. These shifts have created strong momentum for higher education reform across both developed and developing countries.

Vietnam is not an exception. As the country accelerates its integration into the global knowledge economy, the quality and competitiveness of its higher education system have become critical factors in driving sustainable development. Despite significant achievements in expansion and diversification, Vietnamese higher education still faces persistent challenges, including limited autonomy, insufficient linkage between training and research, low international visibility and uneven digital transformation. Addressing these issues requires both structural reform and the adoption of best practices from successful international models.

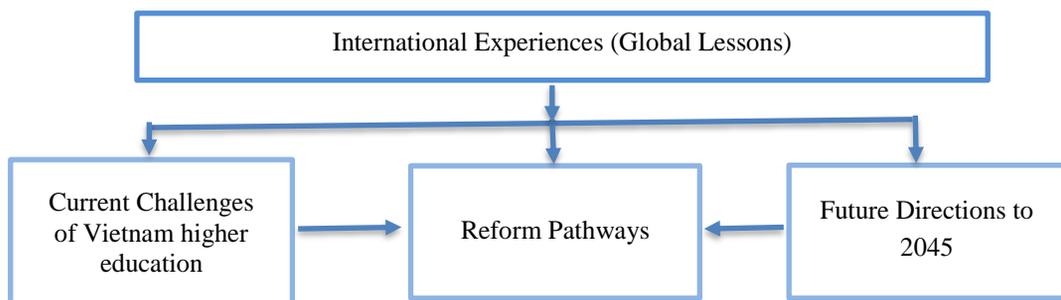
The experience of developed countries provides valuable insights for Vietnam’s reform agenda. Models such as the liberal arts college in the United States, the applied sciences university in Germany and the Netherlands, the research university in South Korea, the open and digital university in Singapore and internationalized higher education systems across Asia and Europe demonstrate diverse pathways for reform. Each model reflects specific cultural, social and economic contexts, yet they share

certain common principles: a strong emphasis on quality assurance, close integration of education with industry and research, commitment to internationalization and the creation of flexible, student-centered learning environments.

This paper, therefore, seeks to synthesize and analyze five key higher education models that have been effectively implemented in selected developed countries. Through a qualitative approach, it examines the core characteristics, advantages and enabling conditions of these models and identifies lessons that could inform Vietnam’s reform process. Particular attention is given to six priority areas: curriculum innovation, integration of practice-research-industry, promotion of digital transformation, strengthening of internationalization, implementation of substantive university autonomy and development of innovation ecosystems within universities.

By providing a comparative perspective, the paper contributes to the broader discourse on higher education reform in Vietnam. It aims not only to highlight the relevance of international experiences but also to propose a comprehensive reform framework that aligns with the country’s socio-economic development strategy. Ultimately, the study underscores the necessity of a long-term vision and sustained policy commitment to transform Vietnamese universities into dynamic institutions that can compete globally while serving national development needs.

**2. Conceptual framework**



**Figure 1.** Conceptual framework of the study

This study is grounded in a conceptual framework that integrates international experiences in higher education reform with the internationalization and development of Vietnamese higher education. The framework synthesizes global lessons, local challenges, reform pathways and long-term strategic directions toward 2045, providing both academic rigor and practical relevance. Each dimension is supported by established theoretical foundations to guide analysis and interpretation.

*International experiences (Global lessons):* This dimension examines prominent international practices, including curriculum restructuring, digital transformation, governance innovation and quality enhancement. Guided by Fullan's Change Theory (2007, 2020), these international experiences serve both as benchmarks and catalysts for domestic reforms, highlighting the dynamic interaction between external trends and internal institutional factors. Recent studies (Fullan, 2020; Scott, 2021) confirm the relevance of these principles in modern education systems.

*Current challenges of Vietnamese higher education:* This dimension focuses on both external and internal factors: External factors: socio-economic conditions, culture, institutional frameworks, national education policies; Internal factors: organizational structure, internal governance, faculty and administrative staff capacity, infrastructure and technology systems and institutional learning and research culture.

Drawing on Knight's Internationalization theory (2004, 2021), a thorough understanding of both internal and external contexts is essential for the appropriate and sustainable adaptation of international practices in Vietnam. Recent studies (Knight, 2021; de Wit & Altbach, 2020) highlight new strategies for integrating internationalization into local contexts.

*Reform pathways (Synthesis):* This dimension represents the actionable roadmap for higher education reform, integrating insights from

international experiences and local challenges. It includes policy design, curriculum innovation, quality assurance and governance adaptation. Implementation of these pathways is guided by Fullan's Change theory (2007, 2020) and Policy Transfer theory (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000). Recent applications of policy transfer in higher education (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2021; Evans, 2022) provide evidence of effective adaptation across countries.

*Future directions toward 2045:* This dimension emphasizes long-term strategic planning, forecasting global trends, aligning with national priorities and achieving sustainable development goals. Informed by Strategic Foresight theory (Hines & Bishop, 2006; Hines, 2023; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004), this dimension provides a framework to analyze and anticipate the future development of Vietnamese higher education toward 2045, forming the basis for proposing appropriate strategies and policies. Recent foresight studies (Hines, 2023; Rohrbeck & Schwarz, 2013) demonstrate its applicability in higher education policy and planning.

The framework assumes that international experiences act both as references and catalysts for reform, while effective implementation requires careful adaptation to the Vietnamese context. The dynamic interaction among global lessons, local challenges, reform pathways and future directions forms the analytical lens through which this study examines the development of Vietnamese higher education toward 2045 and informs strategic policy-making.

### **3. Research methodology**

#### **3.1. Research design**

This study employs a qualitative, exploratory research design, focusing on the analysis of academic literature and policy documents. The goal is to evaluate and anticipate the development of Vietnamese higher education in the global context, based on a conceptual framework integrating international experiences, current challenges,

reform pathways and strategic directions toward 2045. This design allows for the examination of lessons from exemplary international university models, while assessing their applicability and adaptation to the Vietnamese context.

### **3.2. Data sources**

Journal articles, books and research reports related to the five international higher education models (Liberal Arts Education; University of Applied Sciences; Research Universities; Open & Online Universities; Internationalized Universities). Publications considered were from 2010 to 2025, including approximately 14 journal articles (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Aquino, 2025; Nguyen, Anh Quang, 2024; Do, Le & Vu, 2023; Nguyen & Le, 2021; Scott, 2021; etc.), 5 books (Fullan, 2007; Fullan, 2020; Nussbaum, 2010; Hines & Bishop, 2006; Yuan & Powell, 2013), and 6 research reports (Budiyanto et al., 2024; Dotan et al., 2024; RAND, 2017; OECD, 2018, 2020; World Economic Forum, 2023).

#### *Vietnamese policy and strategy documents:*

Legal documents, higher education development strategies, government resolutions and reports relevant to higher education reform and internationalization in Vietnam. Publications considered were from 2010 to 2025, including MOET (2021, 2022, 2025), Prime Minister decisions (2021, 2024) and other official documents.

### **3.3. Document analysis**

Screening and selection of documents based on relevance to the conceptual framework and the five international university models.

Content analysis: Coding information related to the four dimensions of the conceptual framework: International experiences (Global lessons) - international university models; Current challenges of Vietnamese higher education - domestic context; Reform pathways (Synthesis) - potential reform strategies; Future

Directions toward 2045 - long-term strategic planning. Identifying strengths, limitations and issues of each model, to infer lessons applicable to Vietnam. Comparison and synthesis: Integrating findings from academic literature, international case studies and Vietnamese policy documents to identify lessons, strategies and context-appropriate adaptations. Triangulation: Cross-checking multiple sources to enhance credibility, validity and academic rigor.

### **3.4. Rationale for the method**

Advantages of the method: Enables a comprehensive survey of international higher education models and the Vietnamese context; Allows in-depth analysis of domestic challenges and opportunities, facilitating the identification of lessons and strategies suitable for Vietnam; Ensures reliability and adherence to Scopus standards, emphasizing the alignment of international theory and practical applicability in Vietnamese higher education.

Challenges and limitations: Some international models may not fully reflect the unique cultural, economic and regulatory context of Vietnam, potentially limiting the direct applicability of certain lessons; Access to the most recent and comprehensive data may be constrained, affecting the completeness of the survey; Qualitative insights derived from policy documents and literature may be subject to interpretation bias and not all domestic challenges may be captured quantitatively.

Overall, while the chosen method provides a robust framework for comparative analysis, it requires careful contextualization and triangulation with updated national statistics and expert inputs.

## **4. Findings and discussions**

This section synthesizes findings from the analysis of international literature and Vietnamese policy documents, highlighting prominent global university models and the current state of Vietnam's higher education

system. These findings serve as a foundation for shaping reform directions and development strategies in subsequent sections.

#### **4.1. Findings and discussions on international university models**

##### *4.1.1. Liberal arts education*

Fullan (2020) and Scott (2021) emphasize that liberal arts education promotes holistic human development, critical thinking, creativity and interdisciplinary learning. This model is widely implemented in the United States (Harvard, Amherst) and selected Asian universities (University of Tokyo, Yonsei University). Nussbaum (2010) notes that a humanistic foundation supports students' adaptability and lifelong learning. Analysis of the literature suggests that adopting liberal arts principles in Vietnam could enhance students' critical thinking and interdisciplinary skills. However, large student populations and compatibility with existing technical and professional curricula must be considered. Feasible solutions include modular courses, blended learning approaches and faculty capacity building (OECD, 2018; MOET, 2022).

##### *4.1.2. University of applied sciences*

Deissinger (2015) highlights that universities of applied sciences focus on practical training, internships and alignment with labor market needs, exemplified by Germany's Fachhochschule and the Netherlands' Hogeschool systems. Dolowitz & Marsh (2021) and Evans (2022) note that strong industry partnerships can enhance graduate employability. In Vietnam, integrating applied learning could reduce skill gaps and post-graduation unemployment. Challenges include developing collaboration frameworks with enterprises, ensuring program relevance and providing adequate facilities for practical training (World Bank, 2021; Pham, 2020).

##### *4.1.3. Research universities*

Fullan (2020) emphasizes that research universities integrate teaching, research and societal

service, fostering innovation and knowledge creation. Prominent examples include Oxford, MIT and ETH Zurich. Evidence indicates that research-intensive universities play a key role in global competitiveness and innovation. Strengthening research capacity in Vietnam requires investments in infrastructure, digital resources and human capital, along with incentives for faculty research and enhanced university-industry collaboration (Nafosted, 2020; Doan, 2020). Embedding research in undergraduate programs can also develop problem-solving and innovation skills early in students' academic careers.

##### *4.1.4. Open and online universities*

Yuan & Powell (2013), Hines (2023) and Rohrbeck & Schwarz (2013) observe that open and online universities offer flexible, accessible education and lifelong learning opportunities. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the adoption of digital and open learning globally. Vietnam can leverage online platforms to expand access for remote learners and working adults. Challenges include digital infrastructure gaps, faculty technology skills and quality assurance for online learning. Investment in Learning Management Systems (LMS) and supportive policies are essential (McKinsey & Company, 2020; Le & Nguyen, 2021).

##### *4.1.5. Internationalized universities*

Knight (2021), de Wit & Altbach (2020), and Altbach & Knight (2007) note that strategic internationalization-through English-medium instruction, dual-degree programs and student mobility-enhances global collaboration. Evidence shows that internationalization can elevate curriculum quality, research capacity and global engagement. Effective implementation in Vietnam requires strong governance, clear quality standards and alignment with national priorities (MOET, 2022; UNESCO, 2022). Challenges include faculty language proficiency, accreditation procedures and balancing domestic and international program needs.

## ***4.2. Findings and discussions on the current state of Vietnam's Higher education***

### ***4.2.1. Key characteristics***

Between 2010 and 2024, Vietnam's higher education system experienced substantial growth in terms of scale, policy reform and international integration. The statistics presented here are based on the most recent official data published by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET, 2025), covering the academic year 2023-2024, which provide the latest available insights into the scale and composition of Vietnam's higher education system. According to MOET, by the academic year 2023-2024, the country had 243 higher education institutions, including 176 public and 67 private universities, with a total enrollment of over 2.35 million students. The rapid expansion in both the number of institutions and training capacity contributed significantly to improving access to higher education and partially meeting the human resource demands of the economy.

Institutionally, a major milestone was the amended Law on Higher education passed by the National Assembly in 2018. This law provided a crucial legal foundation for promoting university autonomy in academic affairs, organizational structures, finance and personnel. In practice, many public universities gradually implemented governance councils, exercised partial or full autonomy and expanded academic partnerships with enterprises and international organizations (MOET, 2019).

In terms of student composition, female students accounted for approximately 1.27 million, while students from ethnic minority groups totaled over 141,000. Higher education was delivered through various modes, including full-time, part-time and distance learning, reflecting the system's efforts to diversify access and respond to different learning needs.

Postgraduate education also grew steadily. In 2023-2024, new enrollment for master's and

doctoral programs reached 33,752 students, including 30,902 master's students and 2,850 doctoral candidates. The total number of students enrolled in postgraduate programs was over 108,600, with roughly 97,300 master's students and 11,300 doctoral students.

The higher education workforce expanded alongside student growth. In 2023-2024, the system employed 95,236 staff members, including 84,031 full-time lecturers. Among them, approximately 42,600 were female and over 1,000 belonged to ethnic minority groups. The academic ranks included 668 professors and 5,166 associate professors, with lecturers holding various qualifications: 28,862 with doctoral degrees, 49,229 with master's degrees, 4,552 with bachelor's degrees and 1,388 with other qualifications.

### ***4.2.2. Current challenges***

**Uneven quality:** Significant disparities exist between national key universities and regional institutions; curricula remain outdated in some areas and are gradually being updated to align with technology and labor market demands (Pham, 2020; Do, Le & Vu, 2023).

**Research and innovation capacity:** Although international publications are still limited compared to global standards, lecturers and researchers have significantly improved their research output, international collaborations, grant acquisition and innovation activities in recent years (MOET, 2025; Nguyen, 2024; Do, Le & Vu, 2023).

**Limited institutional autonomy:** Some universities remain financially dependent on the state, with governance, transparency and accountability below optimal standards (Tran, 2019; Nguyen & Le, 2021; MOET, 2025).

**Early-stage digital transformation:** Infrastructure, faculty capacity and data management are not fully integrated, although COVID-19 has accelerated digital adoption and

digital teaching capacity continues to improve (Nguyen & Le, 2021; MOET, 2025).

These challenges suggest that reforms need to address disparities, strengthen governance, and further accelerate research, innovation and digital transformation strategically, based on the latest national statistics and recent studies.

#### 4.2.3. *Current capacities*

Faculty and administrators have gradually enhanced their capabilities through international training programs and active participation in research and innovation projects (MOET, 2025; Nguyen, Anh Quang, 2024; Do, Le & Vu, 2023).

Universities have increased their research publications, patents and international collaborations, reflecting a significant improvement in innovation capacity. Several programs meet national and regional accreditation standards, laying the groundwork for international integration (MOET, 2025). A number of institutions have entered regional and global rankings, expanded international collaborations and enhanced English-medium instruction (MOET, 2025; Nguyen, Anh Quang, 2024). These capacities indicate a strong foundation for further reforms and provide opportunities to scale up both quality and internationalization, thus demonstrating the universities' growing research and innovation strength.

#### 4.2.4. *Strategic directions*

Vietnam's higher education development strategy aims to: Expand enrollment while improving quality and achieving comprehensive institutional autonomy (MOET, 2025; Nguyen & Le, 2021). Promote digital transformation by building online learning platforms, digital governance systems and strengthening faculty digital competencies (Nguyen & Le, 2021; MOET, 2025). Strengthen international integration through program standardization, attracting international students and faculty and expanding research collaborations (MOET, 2025; Nguyen, Anh Quang, 2024).

Develop research capacity and establish university-industry-local government clusters based on innovation ecosystems, while increasing research outputs, patents and international publications of faculty and researchers (MOET, 2025; Nguyen, Anh Quang, 2024; Do, Le & Vu, 2023). These strategic directions reflect alignment with global trends and the potential for Vietnam to gradually enhance competitiveness while addressing local challenges, based on the most recent national data and research.

## 5. Conclusion and recommendations

### 5.1. *Conclusion*

Vietnamese higher education stands at a pivotal moment in the era of national ascendancy, characterized by rapid technological advancement, integration into the global knowledge economy and increasing international collaboration. The findings of this study highlight both the opportunities and challenges that Vietnam faces in modernizing its higher education system.

Analysis of international university models-including liberal arts education, universities of applied sciences, research universities, open and online universities and internationalized institutions-demonstrates that holistic development, practical skills, research integration, digital transformation and strategic internationalization are critical success factors for sustainable and competitive higher education. Meanwhile, the Vietnamese higher education system has shown remarkable growth in scale, diversification and incremental quality improvements. However, challenges remain in research capacity, institutional autonomy, digital transformation, curriculum relevance and alignment with labor market needs.

In conclusion, Vietnamese higher education must pursue strategic reforms that balance international best practices with local realities, emphasizing quality over quantity, adaptability, innovation and knowledge creation. The system

must not only respond to national development needs but also actively lead to cultivating talent, fostering research and promoting societal progress.

### ***5.2. Recommendations and lessons for the development of Vietnamese Higher education***

In the context of a global surge in technological advancement, the knowledge economy and international integration-also referred to as the “era of national ascendancy”-higher education plays a central role in cultivating high-quality human resources, promoting innovation and enhancing national competitiveness. For Vietnam, redefining the role and mission of its higher education institutions and drawing on valuable international lessons is essential to realize the country’s aspirations for rapid, sustainable and comprehensive development in the coming decades. Based on an analysis of successful higher education models in developed countries, several directional lessons can be drawn for Vietnamese Higher education:

First, there must be a shift from knowledge-heavy, lecture-based instruction toward a holistic approach that develops learners' comprehensive competencies. Modern universities in the United States, Japan and South Korea adopt liberal arts educational philosophies that emphasize critical thinking, creativity, communication skills, teamwork and lifelong learning. Vietnam should continue adjusting its curricula towards interdisciplinary integration, reducing academic rigidity, strengthening hands-on experience, soft skills training and supporting personalized learning pathways.

Second, Higher education must be closely linked to real-world demands, labor market needs and the innovation ecosystem. Experiences from Germany and the Netherlands highlight the success of applied university models that benefit from effective collaboration between schools and enterprises. In Vietnam, greater efforts are

needed to establish paid internship programs, co-develop curricula with industry partners and expand innovation and entrepreneurship spaces on university campuses.

Third, digital transformation is an inevitable trend and should be considered a key driver for modernizing higher education. The COVID-19 pandemic marked a turning point in the perception and adoption of online education. However, for sustainable development, Vietnamese universities must develop comprehensive digital strategies-including technology infrastructure, faculty capacity building, teaching methods, open educational resources and integrated online learning platforms. In addition, a regulatory framework should be established to recognize online learning credits, out-of-school learning and lifelong learning.

Fourth, the internationalization of higher education is not only a tool for expanding academic influence but also a strategic means to improve training quality. Many top universities in Singapore, South Korea and the Netherlands have successfully implemented dual-degree programs, English-medium instruction and cross-border academic collaboration. Vietnam should promote international accreditation, encourage global publications, expand joint programs and actively participate in global research networks.

Fifth, university autonomy must be understood as a comprehensive reform process in terms of institutional governance, finance and management. Autonomy is not merely about reducing state intervention but also about enhancing governance capacity, establishing accountability mechanisms and ensuring transparency in financial and academic operations. Lessons from national and advanced public universities show that genuine autonomy is essential for fostering innovation, improving

quality and expanding universities' social responsibility.

Sixth, it is crucial to build and develop innovation ecosystems within universities, integrating training, research, knowledge transfer and entrepreneurship support. Universities should not only disseminate knowledge but also serve as hubs for local innovation, connecting with businesses, governments and communities. Vietnam should encourage universities to establish research centers, startup support centers and business incubators, along with offering incentives to

attract enterprise investment in university-based research.

Vietnamese higher education stands at a pivotal moment to “rise” in this new era—an era that demands a shift in mindset, operational flexibility and bold strategic choices. Lessons from developed countries suggest that sustainable university development in Vietnam must go beyond quantitative expansion to focus deeply on quality, adaptability and the capacity to generate knowledge-based value. In this journey, higher education must not only serve development but also lead in it.

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