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# An experience of global higher education and university autonomy in Viet Nam: A case study of Ton Duc Thang University in Ho Chi Minh City

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**Funding:** No specific funding was received for this work.

**Potential competing interests:** No potential competing interests to declare.

## Abstract

In this study, we present issues in opening Ton Duc Thang University (TDTU) in Ho Chi Minh City to global education experience in which academic staff and researchers are recruited from mostly western countries' tertiary educational institutions in the past 5 years and the increasing number of student exchange programs. Besides cultural and language communication adjustment for both students and foreign academic staff, there are also various challenges for both foreign academic and university in integrating the local and global experiences from different perspectives. The overall result is positive with people of diverse background working together in an educational and research environment aiming to provide the best outcome for students and enhance the research capacity and output of the university. There is adjustment to be made for all actors in the transitional period to make Ton Duc Thang University as a model for exposing university environment in Vietnam to global experiences to gradually adapt and become an institution with international standard in teaching and research. And finally, the lessons learned are discussed and suggestion made on the way forward in the future for TDTU to capitalise on its present success of the internationalisation effort from its autonomy status granted by the Ministry of Education and Training.

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**Keywords:** Global institution, University Autonomy, Internationalisation, Collaboration, Exchange Program, Vietnam Higher Education.

## 1. Introduction

The concept of global education as presented and discussed by various authors (Davies et al. 2005, Landorf 2009, Kirkwood 2001) is based and rooted in the premise that “human beings are created equal regardless of age, ability, class, ethnicity, gender, nationality, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, or race” (Kirkwood 2001, p.10). It is commonly defined as (Tye 2014, p. 867)

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- *Global education involves learning about those problems and issues that cut across national boundaries, and about the interconnectedness of systems – ecological, cultural, economic, political, and technological.*
- *Global education involves perspective taking – seeing things through the eyes and minds of others.*
- *Global education involves taking individual and collective action for social justice and the creation of a better world.*

”

Learning on issues that cut across national boundaries and involving taking different perspectives requires contact and communication across national educational institutions. Thus, global education as a concept is related to internationalisation concept of education which was defined by Knight 2003 and is widely quoted as “*Internationalisation at the national, sector, and institutional levels is defined as the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education*”. Buckner 2020, in her study of cross-national patterns of Higher Education Institutions showing the worldwide growth of private higher education, indicated that dominant global ideas about higher education (HE) have encouraged the expansion of both public and private HE since the mid-1980s.

The benefits of global and internationalisation education on the students, the countries that offered the education as well as the countries from which the students come from have been studied by various authors. For example, Shaftel et al. (2007) conducted a large-scale research study on the impact of overseas experience for undergraduate students in the U.S and showed that students gained significant intercultural competence, and that studying abroad can develop many desirable skills beyond those typically ascribed to international study.

One of the main efforts by the Vietnamese Government in modernising the economy in the period from early 2000 until now, has been to improve work force capacity to meet the requirements and challenges of globalisation so as to be competitive in a rapid changing world. *Strategies for socio-economic development 2011-2020* and *Strategies for educational development 2011-2020* identified the role of education as important in the aim of transforming Vietnam to a basically modern and industrial country by 2020 (Tran and Marginson 2018). One of the most important change in higher education reform is to decentralise the management of the state universities and granting autonomy to this sector. The government had recognised that the university sector needs a comprehensive reform. In 2005, the Ministry of Education

and Training developed a Higher Education Reform Agenda (HERA), a blueprint for reform of the system by 2020, stating the university autonomy as an important factor in the reform (Hayden & Lam 2007). Subsequently, the Higher Education Law of 2012 was drafted and approved by the National Assembly to allow state universities to determine their enrolment quotas, manage their academic affairs.

The internationalisation of Vietnamese vocational and tertiary education to integrate it into regional and world education systems was identified as a crucial strategy. Many Vietnamese students have chosen to go to western countries to study and after completing their degrees a large number of them come back to Vietnam. The tertiary educational sector has adapted quickly to the changing situation in the past 10 years, responding to a higher standard demand and competing to attract students. Many returning graduates and post-graduates with overseas degrees have been recruited into the higher education sector. Many universities and research institutes have actively sought out and collaborated with their counterparts in other countries to enhance education and research capacity.

Some universities in Vietnam now have the ability to host foreign researchers and students at their campus to conduct research in collaboration with local staff or to study via exchange programs. This trend is continuing, and we can expect that in the future there will be an increasing number of foreign students, educators and researchers, including from Australia, coming to work and study in Vietnam. In the last half of the 20th century until recently, many students from South East Asia including Vietnam had received scholarships to come to Australia to study under either the Colombo Plan scholarship program or the AusAid program provided by the Australian Government. Many of these students came back to their countries and achieved success in their careers and contributed to the development of their countries (Lowe 2015). The success of the program is now extending to Australian students under the scholarship program (or New Colombo Plan) offered by the Australian government come to South East Asian countries to study as a key part of their undergraduate studies (Byrne 2016). This 'reverse' direction of travel is an ever-growing trend, now not only for sponsored students, but also for all students in Australian universities who want to go to overseas institutions to attend courses approved by their home universities. Another trend that has less attention is the growing number of academic staff from various countries who want to take positions, to collaborate or have long sabbatical stays at other overseas universities or institutions, especially in developing countries such as in Vietnam or other South East Asian countries.

In this study, we describe the experience, including benefits and challenges, at Ton Duc Thang University in its effort at becoming a university with a more international outlook. TDTU seeks to do this by hosting many academic staff and researchers from overseas, including western countries in addition to foreign undergraduate students participating in academic courses and cultural activities as part of exchange programs between universities. The internationalisation of TDTU started about 5 years ago is considered an example of the evolving process of the improvement of higher education in Vietnam with the aim of being on par with international standards. Another reason that TDTU can take this approach without much difficulty is TDTU is the only university in Vietnam that was granted the status of autonomy on 29/01/2015 by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) as an experience on the autonomy model from the Government Decree of 158/QĐ-TTg. And the university council has fully supported the effort by the Vice-Chancellor to pursue this policy of open collaboration with overseas institutions and recruiting international staff. Currently in Vietnam even though many universities have the flexibility to enrol students with changing quotas, charging appropriate tuition

fees, determining new study programmes but many significant central controls still remain over operations such as human resources (appointment and dismissal of staff), chancellor and vice chancellor appointment. This is reinforced in a study by Vo and Laking 2020 in which they concluded that apparently the autonomy of state universities is growing, but, in fact it does not truly reflect a real transfer from the MOET to the universities. Thus, TDTU was granted the status of autonomy by MOET as an experience is a very important step to make TDTU as a case study in autonomy and its results as compared to those of other state universities in Vietnam.

## 2. Ton Duc Thang University as a case study of internationalisation of higher education in Vietnam

Ton Duc Thang University (TDTU) is a government university with campuses located in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), Bao Loc in Central Highlands and Nha Trang, a coastal city in Khanh Hoa Province. Currently the university has about 24,000 students and 1400 staff in 17 departments and 67 research groups. The university modern campus in district 7 of Ho Chi Minh city is the largest in the country with modern library, residential colleges for students and accommodation quarters for visiting academic and researchers. TDTU was formed in 1997 and is owned by the HCM Labor Union, a state-control organisation. As it is relatively new, it is endowed with large land area and modern building and facilities located in an expanding suburb of HCMC.

In the past 5 years, TDTU has expanded its academic teaching and research by having more staff recruited from overseas and it now has collaborations with universities and research institutes in countries such as Australia, Taiwan, U.S, U.K, Germany and Singapore. Currently the university has relations with 137 universities in the world including University of Wollongong, La Trobe University, University of Queensland in Australia (<https://international.tdtu.edu.vn/hop-tac/danh-sach-doi-tac>). Even though the number of foreign exchange students is less than that at other top universities in Vietnam, such as Vietnam National University, the number of foreign staff and collaborators is highest at TDTU. At its modern campus in District 7, Ho Chi Minh City, TDTU has many foreign staff. The campus has a more international outlook in comparison with other university campuses in Vietnam and its collaborations have resulted in many workshops and international conferences organised at the University. From 2012 to 2019, there were 37 international workshops and conferences from various disciplines held (<https://international.tdtu.edu.vn/hop-tac/hoi-thao-quoc-te>). All workshops and conferences are conducted in English, with participants from Vietnam and other countries. A number of papers in the workshop conference proceedings are selected or submitted to be published in international journals.

In just a few years, TDTU's ranking in research output based on Web of Science (WoS) of ISI journal articles increased significantly to 7<sup>th</sup> position in 2019 among universities in ASEAN countries. In August 2019, the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) ranked Ton Duc Thang University as the top university in Vietnam and in the top 1000 best universities in the world. The result can be attributed to the research collaboration with new ideas and projects born out of discussion between local and foreign staff working in the same faculties.

There are some challenges that the university has recognised and solves as smoothly as possible so as to attract the right

people. Challenges include the salary, living conditions and research facilities for foreign-born academic staff, as well as the courses teaching methods adapting to local culture and education conditions. A number of foreign staff also come with their family and this requires the university to provide additional assistance to each individual in the employment contract if they decide to rent out a private place outside the accommodation quarter of the university within the campus. In a survey, a staff summarised the experience as followed

*“Great welcome from the faculty and the dean. All the staff, and all the other colleagues, I have felt from day one a part of the Faculty. This was the number one reason for wanting to stay, and still is.*

*That said, there are some difficulties. The support on paper is good, though there are a number of hiccups and decisions that did not seem right or clear (eg, some things said on paper do not really seem to be accessible or reasonably achievable - for example bonus for summer work, flight cost back to home, subsidy for housing if living off-campus - all not 'really' accessible despite being mentioned)“*

Free Vietnamese language courses are provided to foreign staff if they decide to learn. However, personal circumstances and time available changes and sometimes it is difficult to catch up.

*“Language support was good at first, and in the first year I made quite good progress. But in the second year, I was asked to take on ways of working that were incompatible with keeping up the level of language learning needed. The duties were not beyond me, but the level of teaching and reporting required in the second year I was here made it impossible to keep up with language classes. This was not only because of timetable clashes, though certainly teaching and meetings I had at different times of the day meant a daily language class am or pm was not really possible. When the learner falls behind the rest of the class through missing one or two sessions a week, the class cannot work, and the other member of the class are. after all, are private paying students so the class cannot wait on someone a bit slower. I have moved to private lessons and have made more progress in reading than speaking.“*

Cultural adjustment is sometimes more difficult and can be overcome only after a while. In many cases, it is due mainly to the way the system works differently from what the staff get used to in their countries. Again, a staff from a western country background provides an interesting observation on the way that TDT University in particular and many Vietnamese institutions in general operate

*“Cultural adjustment. I think I adjusted well and quickly. I really like living in Vietnam, despite the costs (it cost more for my family to be here than I earn). In terms of living in Vietnam and working within TDTU, I am determined to continue and find a way to make it work. However, in my second year here it became clear that there were others from abroad who came and could not easily make the transition. And in the circumstances of having a change in the Faculty leadership, some problems were made more serious by lack of understanding or*

*communication. I am not sure if it is a 'cultural adjustment' issue, but where information is tightly controlled, there is then a danger that a position of power in the university might fall to a person who is less capable of fulfilling that role, and this has negative effects. I have seen this sort of thing in all universities (as I have taught in 9 countries), but there should always be clear mechanisms to minimise abuse of the hierarchical system. It was not clear to me that these exist at TDTU - though I expect they probably do exist, but just that it's not obvious or easily found. Just as a hypothetical example, if someone with a personality disorder or psychological problem enters a position such as Dean, their ineffective way of working will not be able to meet the responsibility to be honest, sensible, encouraging and wise. This may lead to shouting, counter-productive decisions, and falsification/spread of false information to try and protect themselves from their mistakes. A number of people will leave a university if such a person is not dealt with quickly. All universities in the world need to recognise that some people will not be capable of the responsibility of authority, but still to me it is not clear exactly how TDTU deals with such situations effectively, even though I am fairly sure it has done so."*

Most foreign staff reported satisfaction at their role in the university and stay until the end of their contract which is usually at least 1 year. The renewal of the contract is also approved upon request if the contract condition is met satisfactory.

There are various motivations for foreigners to work at TDT university, depending on their backgrounds. Besides the usual employment opportunity to fulfil the career development and international experience, which especial applies for postgraduates, Ph.D or post-doc graduates from various institutions in the region such as Korea, Singapore, Thailand, Taiwan, India and Malaysia, there are mid-career and late career staff from well-established universities in developed Western countries wanting to work in Vietnam for personal reasons with a commitment to help and a sense of adventure living as an expatriate in a developing country such as Vietnam.

### 3. Results from opening Ton Duc Thang University to a global experience

Table 1 shows the number of teaching and research staff including foreign academic staff that have been recruited and work in each faculty at Ton Duc Thang University in 2019. This does not include 2 research institutes (Advanced Institute of Material Sciences and Institute of Computational Science) and 67 research groups where staff and international researchers collaborate in various research areas and topics (<https://grad.tdtu.edu.vn/chuyen-mon/thong-tin-khoa-hoc-giang-vien>). All together there are about 200 foreign staff at the university.

**Table 1.** Total number of teaching and research staff and number of overseas staff in each faculty at Ton Duc Thang University.

Faculty	Number of teaching and research staff	Number of overseas teaching and research staff
Faculty of Social Science and Humanity	62	8
Faculty of Environment and Labour Safety	60	29
Faculty of Business Management	74	7
Faculty of Finance and Banking	39	7
Faculty of Accounting	16	0
Faculty of Mathematics and Statistics	50	3
Faculty of Information Technology	95	11
Faculty of Civil Engineering	93	22
Faculty of Applied Sciences	41	2
Faculty of Law	17	0
Faculty of Electrical and Electronics Engineering	44	9
Faculty of Sport Science	25	12
Faculty of Industrial Fine Arts		
Faculty of Labour Relations & Trade Unions	11	3
Faculty of Pharmacy	20	0
Faulty of Foreign Languages	31	2

The number of foreign students coming to TDTU, either for study or involved in exchange programs, rose rapidly during the past 5 years as shown in Table 2. More than a ten-fold increase in numbers from 2014 to 2019 is not surprising considering the increasing internalisation outlook of TDTU at the campus.

**Table 2.** Number of foreign students studying or visiting TDTU for the last 5 academic years.

Academic year	Number of foreign students
2014-2015	119
2015-2016	290
2016-2017	618
2017-2018	871
2018-2019	1607

To help the University implement and manage its programs to encourage international collaboration and determine the outcome of the program, the University established a unit called FOSTECT (Foundation for Scientific and Technological Development). Its purpose is to fund collaboration and report on the research output from these collaborations. FOSTECH is the first point of contact for researchers within and outside TDTU to connect and collaborate with each other's as well as

information on funding opportunities.

## 4. Discussion

In the *Strategies for educational development for Vietnam 2011-2020*, the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET)'s internationalisation policy mainly focused upon international collaboration and the outbound mobility of students heading to educational institutions in other countries, without mention of inbound mobility of students coming to Vietnam.

“*Internationalisation at home*” has been neglected (Tran and Marginson, 2018). In the past few years, efforts to attract inbound mobility of foreign students (mostly from other South East Asian countries) to Vietnam have been pursued by several institutions, including TDTU. In 2006, the number of international students who studied in Vietnam was 2053 (Knight, 2013, Tran and Marginson 2018). This number is increasing, and MOET has set a target of 15,000 by 2020 (Tran and Marginson, 2018).

The experiences of foreign and local academic staff at Ton Duc Thang University as to adjustment to changes in the last few years are not unexpected as the university has initiated a policy of encouraging its faculties and departments to collaborate with international universities and researchers and to recruit non-Vietnamese staff into academic positions. English as a medium of instruction (EMI) has been gradually introduced from a few courses a few years ago to most of the courses currently at TDTU. Local academic staff is required to upgrade their skills and acquire acceptable academic degrees (Ph.Ds.) to be qualified for teaching. Research output is now a performance indicator for all staff. This has caused anxieties for existing staff. An observation from a foreign staff on the overwork situation of local staff is an indication of the conflicting requirement for teaching and research ability:

*“The colleagues in the faculty are great teachers. They are dedicated and good at what they do as far as I have seen. They are however overworked and have no time to really do the research needed to be excellent top-level scholars teaching the latest research. Some of the teaching materials seem very dated (old sociology, less critical approaches, sometimes formulaic rather than creative ways of doing things). The hours some of the younger colleagues have to teach are impossible and they should be released from their huge time commitment.”*

But as the university is expanding with more students enrolled each year, the demand for qualified academic staff has been expanded with a recruitment effort in other countries such as Taiwan and Thailand. In such an environment where change is fluid, there are some communication problems between local and foreign staff such as an example below in the beginning expressed by a foreign staff:

*“In terms of communication. At first most communication was clear enough and there were great efforts by the then Dean to show the way, although it took 7 times of asking to get a clear definition of what an ISI article was (since this is not a common term or even considered in the UK, and I found that no-one in the faculty really knew, and the research office Demasted<sup>[\*]</sup> kept saying ask the faculty and Faculty said ask Demasted - this is what is*



*called Catch 22. After seven months this was sorted out). I think in general there is a problem for those coming into the system since the system apparently operates with an opaque or even unclear and restricted use of information. A need-to-know basis seems to be the norm, and this is maintained across the university so that those who do know what is required are often unable or reluctant to share their knowledge down the chain unless mandated by process. This looks like a lack of openness and the sense of hierarchy it generates was quite a surprise.”*

(<sup>[\*]</sup> Department for Management of Science and Technology Development)

The increase in the number of exchange programs and overseas students in the past 5 years allows staff and students at the university to communicate and to foster career development and friendship with exchange students. From 2014 to 2019, TDTU has attracted more than 2,000 foreign students from 18 countries including Thailand, Malaysia, Laos, Indonesia, Korea, Singapore, Japan, Taiwan, France, Denmark, Germany, Sweden, U.S, the Netherlands, Belgium to study, exchange from weeks to months.

In the exchange study program of 1 term or 1-year duration, foreign students attend classes according and courses provided at TDTU generally. The classes are conducted in English. Class attendance is credited with the course the student enrolled at their university back home. The students have the chance to experience the educational environment in Vietnam as well as to gain knowledge of Vietnamese culture and its people by participating in various cultural, intellectual and sporting activities organised by the students and the university. Recently in 2019, an exchange program with Cornell University on labour relations resulted in a group of staff and students from Cornell visiting and working with their counterparts at TDTU. The feedback from foreign exchange students is mostly very positive.

The New Colombo program implemented in 2014 by the Australian Government to provide scholarships of up to one year to Australian students to study in Indo-Pacific countries will undoubtedly allow more Australian students in the future to choose Vietnam as a destination to study. Up to now, only a few Australian have been chosen to study in Vietnam. This is mainly due to the lack of institutions having the ability to host and provide quality and suitable courses to Australian students enrolled at their universities in Australia.

As for local Vietnamese students, the following observation from an experienced foreign staff who taught at universities in a number of countries provides lessons and changes in attitude and method of studying that is worthy of improvement or reform in the Vietnamese education system in general and at TDT University in particular as these are systematic problems that frequently occur at all levels.

*“The general level of the majority of the students is in my opinion equal to those of any undergraduate program I have seen. While it is neither outstanding is it also never lower than expected. In some ways, the attitude of students in Vietnam, or at least at TDTU, was much better than the lowest levels of the UK system, for example. But the highest performers were perhaps a smaller percentage. That is, there were a smaller number of very excellent students, but a higher number of excellent and good students, I would say the general level is higher, but*

*very top performance is less frequent. I think this is a good thing and shows that the education system works in an egalitarian way.*

*A problem I see however is that plagiarism is not understood by students or, often, staff, and I have found a large percentage of students do not challenge themselves to do their own work, but actively borrow from elsewhere. In my first year looking back I think there was very little I could do about this, but now that I can read Tieng Viet quite well, I have found an extraordinary number - perhaps 15 to 20% - of students tried to hide their copying by taking cut and paste text from Tieng Viet websites that were then just translated to Tieng Anh. They thought I could not find them out. Giving 0 scores for repeat offences seems to be starting to address this. I would however like to see a statement by the Dean of the Faculty attached to every document the University produces. The reasons for this plagiarism are many. It is, for obvious reasons, not a good thing and could damage the international reputation of TDTU, even where it has to do with lack of confidence in Tieng Anh, and this lack of confidence is a general fear of taking the risk of being wrong. For the same reasons students who know a little English stay very quiet in class rather than risk saying something out loud that is wrong. Only by being wrong and trying can you learn correct English. It may be different with another language, but in English the cultural habit of blurting out whatever words to be corrected is normally accepted.*

*Another (worldwide) problem in the system I think is the reluctance to read original sources. Students want a summary, a textbook, and a wiki page, rather than going to the original and finding out for themselves - which is the basis of good scholarship. In general, I think students at TDTU spend too much time in long classes and not enough time in the library with books. This is just an impression, but after three years I think it is correct - students are not assumed to be going to the library between classes, it is not a cultural habit on campus, and it is not expected. Indeed, the library is great (except for the slippers requirement for cleanliness), but still limited in terms of book collection (which is always a problem, for all libraries).“*

So, the benefit of internationalisation of the university is not only on the improvement of teaching and research ability and output of local staff, but it is also potential improvement of the kind and methods of learning that the university could give to the students. In such a way that students can be equipped with the skill to think for themselves and to have more inquisitively analytical minds and creativity as well as the habit of learning for life to adapt to a rapid changing world.

## 5. Conclusion

Since 2015, Ton Duc Thang University has adopted a policy direction that fosters open research collaboration as well as raising the academic standard of both students and staff by making the university more international in its outlook, by recruiting qualified academics in other countries and by increasing the international collaboration. This policy direction is facilitated by the autonomous status of the University which was granted to the TDTU by the Ministry of Education and Training as an experimental model. The internationalisation of TDTU is necessary for the university to grow and increase its ranking and to fulfil its aim to be one of the best universities in Vietnam.

The growing number of foreign academic staff and researchers at the TDTU is one result of this policy direction, which is in line with MOET inbound mobility policy of attracting foreign students to study in Vietnam. As a consequence, it will increase the internationalisation of Vietnamese universities at home and enhance their competitiveness of their educational quality and research capacity. Most important is the quality of its research output and of its education in equipping students with necessary skills and providing courses of high standard comparable to other international universities (Nguyen, Le & Do, 2020). On this respect, TDTU have been doing well and its performance has been recognised by ranking organisations as the second university in Vietnam with the highest number of ISI and Scopus research publications, just behind Vietnam National University and the 7<sup>th</sup> position in ASEAN countries.

As for the future, it should not focus solely on the performance indicator which at present is excellent but to shift instead to be more appreciative and to build capacity for its most important asset: its human resources. This is encapsulated by another staff observation and suggestion on the way forward.

*"I think in general TDTU is doing a great job and deserves praise. There are a few things that are still strange. The 9-month salary system is not effective. The one-year contract system makes it hard to plan. The information distribution system is not confidence-inspiring. The class-time requirement for colleagues is too much, where everyone is hugely overworked and has insufficient time for research which would be needed for up to date teaching. And perhaps the frankly almost obsessive care for the ranking status of the university is worth rethinking (it might be considered that a university that is high in the ranking does not have to keep mentioning the ranking all the time).*

*In general, I am committed to TDTU and think on the whole it is on the correct path. I would certainly consider my decision to come here a good one and I am very keen to stay for at least the next ten years. "*

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