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University Merger as a Strategic Approach to Higher Education Development: International Experiences and Policy Implications for Vietnam

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Abstract
This paper examines university mergers as a strategic approach to modern higher education development and draws policy lessons for the Vietnamese context. Building on a synthesis of international theoretical foundations – including organizational change theory, the resource-based view, and new institutionalism – the study analyzes representative merger models in the United Kingdom, Finland, France, and China. The findings reveal five core determinants of successful mergers: (i) a unified and coherent strategic vision; (ii) a centralized yet flexible governance structure; (iii) substantial financial investment; (iv) a stable and supportive institutional framework; and (v) effective coordination of organizational cultures. In comparison, Vietnam's higher education system remains highly fragmented, with most merger initiatives limited to administrative consolidation rather than strategic integration, and constrained by insufficient financial resources. Based on international experiences and domestic realities, the study proposes a set of policy recommendations tailored to different institutional types and phases of implementation, with the aim of forming large, research-intensive universities capable of international competitiveness. The findings contribute both theoretically and practically to ongoing discussions on higher education restructuring and provide an evidence-informed foundation for policy formulation in Vietnam's higher education reforms.

Keywords: higher education reform, education policy, university merger.

1. Introduction

In the context of accelerating globalization and rapid technological change, higher education systems worldwide are undergoing profound transformation. Universities are no longer solely institutions for teaching and research; they increasingly serve as central actors within national knowledge ecosystems, innovation networks, and socio-economic development strategies. To enhance institutional efficiency and global competitiveness, many countries have adopted system-level restructuring policies, among which university mergers have emerged as an important strategic instrument. These mergers aim to create large, multidisciplinary universities with strong research capacity and international visibility.

Over the past two decades, university mergers have become a prominent trend in higher education reform. In Europe, the establishment of the University of Manchester (United Kingdom), Aalto University (Finland), and the University of Paris-Saclay (France) illustrates how mergers can strengthen research capacity, improve global rankings, and enhance the ability to attract talent and financial resources. In Asia, Shanghai Jiao Tong University demonstrates how mergers aligned with national development strategies can elevate universities to positions of international prominence. Successful cases generally share several common elements, including a unified strategic vision, supportive legal frameworks, flexible governance systems, and sustained financial investment.

In Vietnam, the restructuring of the higher education system has been emphasized in major policy documents, particularly the Politburo's Resolution No. 71-NQ/TW on breakthrough development in education and training. However, the system remains highly fragmented, with numerous small institutions operating independently and limited international competitiveness (Political Department, 2025). University mergers therefore represent a potential strategy for consolidating resources and strengthening research capacity.

This paper analyzes representative international merger models in the United Kingdom, Finland, France, and China and evaluates their implications for Vietnam. The study addresses three questions: 1) What characterizes successful university mergers?, 2) Which factors determine their effectiveness?, and 3) What lessons can guide Vietnam's higher education restructuring?

2. Theoretical Framework and Analytical Model

A university merger is a complex organizational process that involves far more than the mechanical consolidation of academic units. It encompasses the redefinition of institutional missions, the restructuring of governance systems, the harmonization of academic cultures, and the formulation of long-term development strategies. Understanding this phenomenon requires a solid theoretical foundation capable of explaining both internal organizational dynamics and external institutional pressures. Drawing on influential international scholarship (Barney, 1991; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Kotter, 1995; Lewin, 1947; Pinheiro et al., 2016), this study adopted three major theoretical lenses: organizational change theory, the resource-based view (RBV), and new institutionalism.

Organizational change theory emphasizes that any merger begins with an "unfreezing" phase – shifting perceptions and building consensus – followed by the restructuring of organizational systems and, ultimately, the "refreezing" of new operating models (Lewin, 1947). In the context of higher education, this process involves establishing a shared strategic vision, redesigning governance structures, and aligning organizational and academic cultures. Research by Kotter (1995) and Harman and Harman (2003) highlights the critical importance of transformational leadership and stakeholder participation in ensuring successful change.

The *resource-based view* (Barney, 1991) conceptualizes mergers as a strategic mechanism for integrating and optimizing resources – including academic talent, infrastructure, institutional reputation, and international partnerships. Unlike purely administrative consolidation, strategic mergers create "dynamic competitive advantages" by restructuring and mobilizing shared resources to enhance performance. This perspective explains why many advanced higher education systems use mergers to build leading, large-scale research universities.

Lastly, *new institutionalism* (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2014) underscores the role of policy, legal, and cultural environments in shaping merger decisions and outcomes. Countries with stable legal frameworks, clear autonomy mechanisms, and long-term policy commitments tend to achieve more successful merger results – both in organizational scale and in research and training quality.

Integrating these three theoretical lenses, this study proposes an analytical framework composed of four pillars, as summarized in Table 1.

Table 1 – Four pillars of the proposed analytical framework

No.	Pillar	Description
1	Merger motivations and objectives	Reflects the strategic drivers behind institutional consolidation (e.g., scale expansion, resource optimization, international competitiveness).
2	Institutional and policy environment	Includes legal frameworks, autonomy mechanisms, financial policies, and national higher education strategies.
3	Organizational governance	Refers to organizational design, leadership practices, decision-making systems, and academic culture integration.
4	Outcomes and impacts	Assesses the effectiveness of mergers in terms of scale, quality, research capacity, and internationalization.

This analytical framework enables a multidimensional understanding of university mergers by combining internal organizational logic with national institutional contexts. The concurrent use of the three theoretical foundations not only describes the merger phenomenon but also explains its underlying drivers, operational mechanisms, and success conditions. This model also provides the basis for analyzing Vietnam's current context and developing appropriate policy solutions in subsequent sections.

3. Literature Review

University mergers have become a prominent subject in global higher education policy research since the late twentieth century. International scholarship approaches this phenomenon from multiple perspectives, including organizational governance, strategic resource management, institutional environments, and socio-economic impacts. Influential studies include those of Harman and Harman (2003), Eastman and Lang (2001), Kyvik (2002), Pinheiro et al. (2016), as well as OECD policy reports (2019).

Harman and Harman (2003) emphasized that mergers serve as a strategic tool for improving resource efficiency, strengthening research capacity, and expanding international influence. Eastman and Lang (2001), by contrast, underscored the importance of organizational culture, arguing that internal consensus and transformational leadership are decisive for successful post-merger integration. Kyvik's (2002) analysis of Norway demonstrates that mergers can expand educational capacity and enhance system efficiency but may also result in administrative complexity without complementary governance reforms. From an institutional perspective, Pinheiro et al. (2016) showed, through international comparisons, that successful mergers require strong governmental support, a coherent legal framework, strategic financial investment, and genuine institutional autonomy. Synthesizing European experiences, the OECD (2019) has confirmed that mergers have helped reduce fragmentation and foster the emergence of large, research-oriented universities with growing global competitiveness.

In addition to theoretical contributions, many studies investigate emblematic merger cases. The University of Manchester (2026) represents a fully integrated merger model that significantly enhanced the institution's international standing within a short period. Aalto University (Finland) illustrates how multidisciplinary consolidation can drive national innovation through a redefined academic mission. The University of Paris-Saclay (2021) demonstrates a flexible "alliance-to-merger" trajectory, with gradual integration coordinated by the state. Shanghai Jiao Tong University (China) exemplifies how mergers aligned with national strategies can elevate higher education quality and international visibility.

Across this body of international research, a common conclusion emerges: university mergers are not merely administrative actions but comprehensive transformation processes involving long-term strategy, substantial financial investment, and deep governance reform. Successful models consistently depend on three core elements: (i) a clear, shared strategic vision; (ii) flexible and unified governance structures; and (iii) a supportive legal and policy environment.

In Vietnam, research on university mergers has grown in recent years and now provides an emerging academic and policy foundation. Early contributions include works by Son et al. (2019) and Son (2020), which combined international theoretical perspectives with an assessment of domestic applicability. Son et al. (2019) systematically categorized concepts such as "mergers, consolidations, and alliances", analyzed international models, and proposed a merger roadmap tailored to Vietnam's institutional conditions. Son (2020) provided in-depth case studies of France and China, focusing on post-merger governance and academic strategies, highlighting lessons on flexible legal frameworks, autonomy, and innovation-oriented development. Policy-oriented discourse in Vietnam aligns with this academic trend. Mergers can streamline the system, consolidate resources, and improve international competitiveness, while cautioning against legal, managerial, and cultural barriers in the absence of a coherent implementation roadmap.

Recent policy developments further reflect the institutionalization of merger strategies. The Government of Vietnam's Decree No. 125/2024/NĐ-CP (Government of Vietnam, 2024) and Decision No. 452/QĐ-TTg on national higher education planning (Prime Minister of Vietnam, 2025) mark a transition from academic discussion to concrete policy action. The Ministry of Education and Training has outlined a roadmap for restructuring public higher education institutions through strategic consolidation. International reports, particularly from the World Bank (Parajuli et al., 2021), have influenced domestic policy by highlighting systemic fragmentation as a major barrier to efficiency and international competitiveness, recommending consolidation, enhanced autonomy, and targeted post-merger investment.

Overall, Vietnamese scholarship on university mergers addresses three main themes: (i) synthesizing and contextualizing international experiences, (ii) analyzing national legal and policy frameworks, and (iii) evaluating existing domestic models, including national universities, regional universities, and merger plans within the national higher education network. Although the volume of research remains limited, this foundation supports Vietnam's transition from conceptual reflection to structured implementation – similar to early reform phases observed in many advanced systems.

Synthesizing the literature, three key conclusions can be drawn:

1) *Theoretical contributions* provide multidimensional analytical frameworks that explain both organizational dynamics and national policy contexts of university mergers.
2) *Empirical international evidence* shows that mergers are strategically effective when paired with governance reform and sustained policy support.
3) *Vietnam's research and policy landscape* indicates a shift from awareness and conceptualization toward structured policy planning, supported by clearer regulatory and strategic frameworks.

4. Research Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design combined with comparative analysis to examine successful university merger models worldwide and assess their applicability to the Vietnamese context. This approach is suitable for the nature of university mergers, which represent complex organizational transformations influenced by institutional environments, national policy frameworks, and the strategic development trajectories of individual higher education institutions. The methodological framework consists of three components:

1) *Theoretical analysis*: applying three major theoretical lenses – organizational change theory, the resource-based view, and new institutionalism – to explain the motivations, mechanisms, and enabling conditions of university mergers.
2) *Case study analysis*: focusing on representative international merger models in the United Kingdom, Finland, France, and China, covering both advanced and emerging higher education systems.

3) *Policy and contextual analysis*: comparing international experiences with Vietnam's legal, policy, and governance frameworks to assess the feasibility of adaptation and identify context-appropriate pathways.

Scope and Units of Analysis

International scope

The study examines four emblematic merger cases:

- *University of Manchester* (United Kingdom) – a full organizational merger model;
- *Aalto University* (Finland) – a multidisciplinary innovation-driven merger;
- *University of Paris-Saclay* (France) – an alliance-to-merger model implemented through a phased integration process; and
- *Shanghai Jiao Tong University* (China) – a merger aligned with national higher education development strategies.

Domestic scope

The analysis focuses on Vietnam's public higher education sector, particularly groups of institutions targeted for restructuring under national policies:

- *National universities*: Vietnam National University, Hanoi, and Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City – multi-campus and multidisciplinary systems established through consolidation.
- *Regional universities*: The University of Danang and Thai Nguyen University – models of geographically based institutional linkage with potential for deeper integration.
- *Leading universities*: Institutions with strong academic capacity (e.g., Hanoi University of Science and Technology, National Economics University, University of Economics Ho Chi Minh City, Hanoi National University of Education, Ho Chi Minh City University of Education), which are potential candidates for strategic alliances or mergers.
- *Local public universities*: Provincial universities characterized by small scale, fragmented resources, and overlapping academic programs, identified as the primary focus of the 2025–2030 merger and consolidation roadmap.

Temporal scope

The study covers the period from 2000 to 2025 – a phase marked by the rapid global expansion of university mergers and Vietnam's initial movement toward the restructuring of higher education systems.

Unit of analysis

The study concentrates on merger-related organizational processes, governance reforms, institutional strategies, and post-merger impacts on academic performance.

Data Collection and Analytical Procedures

The research relies primarily on secondary data, including:

1) International academic literature (Eastman & Lang, 2001; Harman & Harman, 2003; OECD, 2019; Pinheiro et al., 2016).
2) Vietnamese studies and policy analyses (Son et al., 2019; Son, 2020; policy commentaries).
3) Legal and policy documents, such as Decree No. 125/2024/NĐ-CP (Government of Vietnam, 2024) and Decision No. 452/QĐ-TTg (Prime Minister of Vietnam, 2025), which establish Vietnam's higher education restructuring framework.
4) Reports from international organizations, including the World Bank (Parajuli et al., 2021) and OECD (2019).

Data were analyzed through a three-step process:

1) *Content analysis*: coding documents into thematic categories (merger motivations, policy frameworks, governance structures, outcomes).
2) *Comparative analysis*: identifying similarities, differences, and contextual adaptability between international models and Vietnam's institutional conditions.
3) *Synthesis and interpretation*: integrating findings with the theoretical framework to determine key success factors and develop context-specific policy recommendations.

Methodological Limitations

This study relies primarily on secondary data, which may not fully capture quantitative dimensions such as financial impacts or post-merger changes in international rankings. Additionally, differences in governance structures across countries require careful contextual adaptation when drawing lessons for Vietnam. Nevertheless, the selected methodological approach provides a robust analytical basis for understanding merger processes and informing policy design in Vietnam's higher education restructuring.

5. Findings and Analysis

Successful University Merger Models Worldwide

University mergers have been adopted by many countries as a strategic instrument to build large, research-intensive institutions capable of competing globally. Analysis of representative cases in the United Kingdom, Finland, France, and China revealed four distinct merger models that illustrate different strategic orientations, institutional frameworks, and governance approaches.

Full organizational merger – University of Manchester (United Kingdom)

In 2004, the University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology and the Victoria University of Manchester merged to create a single large-scale university with the aim of strengthening international standing and optimizing resource use. The merger extended beyond administrative consolidation and was guided by a unified long-term strategic vision supported by strong stakeholder alignment. Following the merger, the University of Manchester rapidly became one of the world's leading research universities, enrolling more than 40,000 students and attaining high positions in global rankings. Its success can be attributed to three factors: (i) a clear long-term development strategy; (ii) a streamlined and unified governance model; and (iii) substantial financial support from the United Kingdom government.

Multidisciplinary innovation-driven merger – Aalto University (Finland)
Finland implemented a distinctive approach by merging three institutions – the Helsinki University of Technology, the Helsinki School of Economics, and the University of Art and Design Helsinki – in 2010 to establish Aalto University. The goal was to create a multidisciplinary university capable of linking technology, economics, and design to drive national innovation. The Finnish government supported the merger through a strong legal framework, significant financial investment, and high institutional autonomy. Within a decade, Aalto University became one of Europe's leading young universities in innovation and interdisciplinary research, demonstrating that mergers aligned with a redefined academic mission can generate strategic breakthroughs.

Alliance-to-merger model – University of Paris-Saclay (France)
France adopted a phased and flexible merger approach, beginning with an academic alliance among *grandes écoles* (great schools), research institutes, and public universities in the Île-de-France region. In the initial stage, member institutions maintained relative autonomy while sharing research infrastructure, academic programs, and collaborative networks. Gradual integration followed, culminating in the official establishment of the unified University of Paris-Saclay in 2020. This model is notable for its flexible sequencing and strong state coordination. The French government provided financial investment, established the legal framework, and mediated institutional interests. Within a few years, Paris-Saclay entered the global top 20, demonstrating the effectiveness of a phased alliance-to-merger strategy.

National strategy-driven merger – Shanghai Jiao Tong University (China)
China has integrated university mergers into its national higher education development strategy. Since the late 1990s, Shanghai Jiao Tong University has undergone multiple rounds of consolidation and expansion to become one of China's top research universities. The Chinese government provided substantial financial support and implemented comprehensive governance reforms, granting high academic autonomy while maintaining centralized strategic coordination. This case illustrates that mergers can yield substantial benefits when embedded in a coherent national strategy supported by long-term investment and institutional reform.

Synthesis of international success factors
Across these international models, five core factors consistently determine the success of university mergers:

1) A unified strategic vision shared by all stakeholders.
2) A flexible, integrated, and efficient governance system.
3) Substantial and sustained financial investment.

4) A stable institutional and legal environment.
5) Effective coordination of organizational cultures and the development of a new academic identity.

These elements enabled the merged universities to rapidly become national “knowledge flagships”, strengthening research capacity, attracting top talent, and enhancing global competitiveness.

University Merger and Higher Education Restructuring in Vietnam

Policy context and national directions on mergers

In Vietnam, the policy orientation toward restructuring the higher education system through institutional mergers has been clearly articulated in high-level policy documents, most notably the Politburo’s Resolution No. 71-NQ/TW on comprehensive and fundamental reform of education and training. Building on this direction, the Government issued Decree No. 125/2024/NĐ-CP, which stipulates the conditions and procedures for merging and consolidating higher education institutions (Government of Vietnam, 2024), and Decision No. 452/QĐ-TTg, approving the national higher education network plan for the period 2021–2030, with a vision to 2050 (Prime Minister of Vietnam, 2025). These policies aim to streamline the system, expand institutional scale, and enhance the competitiveness of Vietnamese higher education institutions.

Existing merger models in Vietnam

Over the past two decades, Vietnam has experimented with several merger and organizational linkage models within the higher education sector. These efforts have primarily focused on four groups of institutions: national universities, regional universities, key universities, and local public universities. Although the level of integration differs across groups, all models reflect an overarching policy ambition to streamline the system, improve governance effectiveness, and build universities capable of achieving international competitiveness.

1) National university model: Vietnam National University, Hanoi (VNU-Hanoi) and Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City (VNU-HCMC)

The national university model represents the highest-level strategic consolidation in Vietnam, originating in the early 1990s to establish flagship institutions for high-quality research and training. Each national university consists of multiple multidisciplinary member universities that retain relative legal autonomy but operate under the coordination of a centralized university council and executive board. The strengths and limitations of this model are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2 – Strengths and limitations of the national university model

No.	Strengths	Limitations	Overall assessment
1	Large scale with concentrated human, infrastructural, and academic resources	Governance remains loosely connected; many academic and administrative activities continue to be carried out independently by member universities	The national university model represents an important institutional innovation in Vietnam. However, to achieve outcomes comparable to successful international models – such as the University of Manchester or the University of Paris-Saclay – more profound reforms are required, particularly in governance integration, strategic academic planning, financial coordination, and unified branding.
2	Beneficiary of special regulatory mechanisms with higher levels of autonomy than regular public universities	Lack of a unified development strategy, leading to fragmented resource allocation	
3	Strong academic reputation and high social prestige, providing a foundation for developing into large multidisciplinary research universities	Limited post-merger synergy; actual performance has not matched institutional potential	

2) Regional university model – The University of Danang and Thai Nguyen University

This model was established to improve the effectiveness of public higher education governance at the regional level, while expanding access to high-quality higher education in areas beyond the two main metropolitan centers (Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City). Member institutions possess distinct disciplinary strengths and are expected to form an interregional training and research ecosystem. The strengths and limitations of this model are presented in Table 3.

Table 3 – Strengths and limitations of the regional university model

No.	Strengths	Limitations	Overall assessment
1	Contributes to the development of major training and research hubs in the central region and the northern midland and mountainous areas	Governance remains fragmented; autonomy continues to be oriented toward individual member institutions, with no substantive unified strategy	Regional universities have the potential to evolve into large university clusters and serve as regional anchor institutions. However, to transition from a loose linkage model to a substantive merger model, reforms are needed in central governance, unified strategic planning, and the establishment of stable financial mechanisms.
2	Provides an institutional framework for inter-university collaboration and resource sharing in training and research	Limited financial resources and public investment have resulted in uneven development across member institutions	
3	Represents a potential "pre-merger" model for developing large-scale universities in the future	Lacks a unified academic brand and has yet to achieve national or international prominence	

3) Key university group – Hanoi University of Science and Technology, National Economics University, University of Economics Ho Chi Minh City, Hanoi National University of Education, Ho Chi Minh City University of Education

This group comprises large universities with strong academic reputations and growing research orientations. Although they have not undergone formal organizational mergers, they are considered promising candidates for future consolidation or strategic alliances aimed at forming leading university clusters. Their strengths and limitations are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4 – Strengths and limitations of the key university group

No.	Strengths	Limitations	Overall assessment
1	Strong research and training capacity, with high standing in Vietnam's higher education system	Currently operates independently with limited mechanisms for sustainable inter-institutional collaboration	With appropriate policies and support mechanisms, this group could serve as the core for developing major research university clusters, similar to models such as Aalto University or Shanghai Jiao Tong University.
2	Well-developed infrastructure, high-quality academic staff, and numerous internationally accredited programs	Traditional governance mindsets may impede the transition toward integrated or merged models	
3	Capable of leading sectoral or disciplinary clusters and potential merger pathways	Financial and autonomy mechanisms remain insufficiently flexible to position them as strong national research leaders	

4) Local public universities – institutions governed by provincial authorities

This group constitutes the largest segment of Vietnam's higher education system. Many of these institutions operate on a small scale, possess fragmented resources, exhibit limited academic quality, and often duplicate training programs. The Government has identified this group as the primary focus of the 2025–2030 merger roadmap, aiming to streamline the system and improve the efficiency of public investment. The strengths and limitations of this model are presented in Table 5.

Table 5 – Strengths and limitations of local public universities

No.	Strengths	Limitations	Overall assessment
1	Broad geographic distribution and an important role in supplying human resources for local development	Small scale with limited research and training capacity, making it difficult to compete independently	This group represents the most urgent target for merger initiatives due to its contribution to system fragmentation. However, to avoid superficial or purely administrative mergers, consolidation must be accompanied by governance restructuring, redefined educational missions, and clear functional stratification.
2	Advantages in spatial development due to large land reserves and potential for campus expansion	Facilities and academic staff do not yet meet the standards of research-oriented universities	
3	Potential to become components of regional or sector-based university clusters, contributing to collective strength	The capacity to integrate into merger models depends heavily on central financial policies and institutional support	

General Observations

1) Vietnam exhibits a multilayered landscape of university merger and consolidation models, reflecting significant differences in institutional status, size, function, and capacity across institution types.
2) National and regional university models remain largely organizational linkages rather than substantive strategic mergers, falling short of international benchmarks.
3) Key universities have the potential to lead future merger initiatives if supported by adequate policy and financial mechanisms.
4) Local public universities are the core priority for system restructuring but require institutional reform and governance redesign to ensure meaningful outcomes.
5) The substantial disparity among institution groups highlights the need for a national higher education stratification strategy (research–applied–community), ensuring that mergers follow differentiated, purpose-driven trajectories instead of uniform implementation.

Vietnam's domestic merger models are still in the early stages of development. While a favorable institutional foundation exists, considerable gaps remain in governance, financing, and strategic development when compared with successful international models. Future merger initiatives must clearly define the roles, positions, and objectives of each institutional group, avoiding a "one-size-fits-all" approach. Key advantages and challenges in the early phase of domestic mergers are outlined in Table 6.

Table 6 – Advantages and challenges of university merger models in Vietnam (early phase)

No.	Advantages	Challenges
1	A clear legal framework and strong national strategic direction	Post-merger governance remains fragmented and lacks coherence; mechanisms for decentralization and accountability are not fully developed
2	The existence of initial merger models (national and regional universities) provides early institutional foundations	Limited financial resources and constrained public investment
3	Ongoing expansion of university autonomy, creating favorable conditions for post-merger development	Organizational culture differences across institutions pose challenges to integration

Comparison between Vietnam's Practices and International Models

Compared with successful international models, Vietnam's merger process benefits from an increasingly clear institutional framework but lacks integrated strategies for governance and financial consolidation. While merger models in the United Kingdom, Finland, France, and China are closely linked to substantial financial investment, governance reform, and international brand positioning, Vietnam's models remain largely confined to administrative restructuring. The most significant gap lies in the degree of strategic cohesion and institutional autonomy following mergers. International universities typically transition rapidly to unified and flexible governance structures, whereas Vietnamese universities continue to experience fragmented authority divided between the overarching university entity and its member institutions. This structural fragmentation represents a critical barrier to post-merger development and long-term institutional competitiveness.

Synthesis of Key Findings

Based on the analysis, three major conclusions can be drawn:

- *University mergers serve as a global strategic instrument* for expanding institutional scale, strengthening research capacity, and enhancing international visibility. Their success requires a combination of a clear long-term strategy, effective governance, and strong institutional support. Internationally successful models consistently integrate mergers with comprehensive governance reform, long-term strategic planning, and substantial financial investment.
- *Vietnam is entering the initial phase of a more intentional merger process,* supported by emerging institutional foundations. However, the legal framework remains underdeveloped, and there is a lack of large-scale, empirically successful merger models. To achieve meaningful outcomes, Vietnam must strengthen post-merger governance mechanisms, increase financial investment, and cultivate unified academic identities within merged institutions.
- *A significant gap persists between policy objectives and implementation realities,* particularly in areas related to post-merger governance and development investment. The core challenge for Vietnam does not lie in the policy intentions themselves but in execution – especially regarding autonomy, governance integration, and sustained development financing after mergers.

These findings provide a foundation for identifying the key determinants of successful mergers and assessing how international models may be adapted flexibly to Vietnam's higher education restructuring process.

6. Discussion and Policy Recommendations

Discussion

University mergers as a global strategic trend

International experience demonstrates that university mergers are not merely temporary solutions for system consolidation but long-term strategic instruments designed to enhance national competitiveness in higher education and scientific research. Exemplary cases such as the *University of Manchester* (United Kingdom), *Aalto University* (Finland), the *University of Paris-Saclay* (France), and *Shanghai Jiao Tong University* (China) illustrate that successful mergers are consistently associated with a clear national strategy, substantial financial investment, comprehensive governance reform, and the repositioning of academic missions within the global landscape. Across these models, several common elements can be identified, as summarized in Table 7. These elements have enabled merged universities to rapidly become national "knowledge flagships", driving knowledge-based economic growth and strengthening national capacities for innovation.

Table 7 – Common characteristics of successful international university merger models

No.	Key element	Explanation
1	A clear and unified strategic vision	Merger processes are designed as multi-year roadmaps built on broad stakeholder consensus
2	Substantial financial investment	Required to strengthen research, teaching, infrastructure, and governance capacity post-merger
3	Deep governance reform	Includes executive consolidation, enhanced academic and financial autonomy, and adoption of modern university governance models
4	Creation of a new academic identity	Implemented through interdisciplinary missions, curriculum internationalization, and global brand positioning
5	Strong state support	Ensures a stable legal framework, financial mechanisms, and long-term policy direction

The gap between international models and Vietnam's current practices

The analysis in Section 5 shows that Vietnam has taken important initial institutional steps, including the issuance of Decree No. 125/2024/NĐ-CP (Government of Vietnam, 2024) and Decision No. 452/QĐ-TTg (Prime Minister of Vietnam, 2025) and the implementation of the national higher education network plan for 2025–2030. However, compared with international models, domestic merger initiatives remain largely at the level of administrative consolidation and have yet to produce research-intensive university clusters with international influence. This gap is evident in three main aspects:

- First, post-merger development strategies remain unclear: Most domestic models – including national universities, regional universities, and local public universities – do not yet possess unified strategic visions. Member institutions continue to operate with considerable independence, preventing the formation of synergistic academic ecosystems.

- Second, governance mechanisms are not substantively integrated: Key decisions related to academic programs, human resources, finance, and research are still made at the unit level. This fragmentation limits coordination efficiency and hinders the optimal allocation of institutional resources.
- Third, financial investment for mergers remains limited: While countries such as the United Kingdom, France, Finland, and China rely heavily on state investment as a "development catalyst", Vietnam has so far provided only basic support, insufficient to create the transformative momentum required for post-merger development.

As a result, despite having an emerging institutional framework, Vietnam's current merger models have not yet generated significant breakthroughs in academic quality or institutional competitiveness.

Key success factors in the Vietnamese context

Based on the comparison between international experiences and domestic realities, five groups of factors determine the likelihood of successful university mergers in Vietnam, as presented in Table 8.

Table 8 – Key success factors for university mergers in Vietnam

No.	Success factor	Requirements
1	A unified post-merger strategy	Each merger model must articulate a clear shared vision regarding mission, development goals, and academic positioning. Such a strategy cannot be imposed top-down; it must be built on internal consensus.
2	Reform of university governance models	A shift is required from loose linkage structures to integrated, flexible governance, with a unified university council, clear decentralization mechanisms, and transparent accountability systems. This is the most critical distinction between successful international models and current Vietnamese practices.
3	Financial resources and strategic investment	Mergers cannot succeed solely by combining existing facilities and staff. The State must provide strategic investment packages for infrastructure, research, governance reform, and internationalization. Public–private resource mobilization may be an effective solution for ensuring long-term sustainability.
4	Human resource development and organizational culture	Mergers are not only structural consolidations but also processes of integrating academic cultures. A long-term human resource development strategy, innovation incentives, and a cohesive working environment are essential for creating a shared academic identity.
5	Supportive institutional frameworks	The government must maintain stable, long-term policies that encourage innovation in higher education. The legal framework should grant post-merger institutions high levels of autonomy and reduce administrative dependence.

Applicability of international models to the Vietnamese context

Not all international models can be fully replicated in Vietnam. Differences in institutional arrangements, financial mechanisms, levels of autonomy, and organizational cultures require Vietnam to select context-appropriate models and apply them flexibly. Specifically:

- *The full-merger model (United Kingdom)* may be applicable to groups of key universities located in major urban centers—institutions with large scale, strong academic capacity, and high potential for international integration.
- *The alliance-to-merger model (France)* is suitable for national universities and regional universities, which already possess organizational linkages. A phased merger process can reduce administrative pressure and help balance internal interests.
- *The national strategy-driven model (China)* is compatible with Vietnam's overall policy context. If Vietnam adopts a "flagship university strategy" linked to knowledge-based economic development, university mergers can become an effective policy tool.

The critical requirement is to design a merger roadmap tailored to each institutional group rather than applying a uniform model across the system.

Challenges and potential risks

Although university mergers provide substantial opportunities for system enhancement, they also carry significant risks if not carefully designed and implemented:

- *Organizational culture conflicts*: Institutions with long-standing histories and distinct identities may experience value clashes after mergers, affecting faculty morale and student experience.
- *Fragmented authority*: Without unified governance, mergers may lead to bureaucratic expansion, resulting in lower efficiency than before consolidation.
- *Insufficient post-merger resources*: Without substantial investment, mergers risk becoming superficial administrative combinations rather than generating real added value.
- *Loss of academic identity*: Poorly planned mergers may dilute unique institutional strengths, weakening competitiveness at both national and international levels.

For these reasons, independent monitoring and evaluation mechanisms must be established to ensure that mergers proceed in the right direction and yield substantive outcomes.

Future research and policy directions

Based on the research findings, several future research and policy directions can be identified:

1) Develop post-merger governance frameworks tailored to each institutional group.

2) Conduct quantitative studies on financial and academic performance after mergers to provide empirical evidence for policy evaluation.
3) Design organizational culture development strategies for merged universities to ensure long-term sustainability.
4) Implement a national higher education stratification strategy, clarifying merger roles and trajectories for national universities, regional universities, key universities, and local public institutions.
5) Establish independent monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to assess the real effectiveness of merger policies over time.

The discussion above provides sufficient grounds to affirm that university mergers represent a strategic trajectory for higher education development. However, for mergers to produce meaningful outcomes, Vietnam must transition from "administrative linkage" models to strategic consolidation and modern governance. Success will depend on strategic vision, governance reform, financial investment, academic culture development, and a stable institutional environment. A flexible adaptation of international models will help Vietnam shorten the gap with advanced global higher education systems.

Policy Recommendations

Recommendations for improving institutional and legal frameworks

First, a national strategy for university mergers and higher education restructuring should be developed, positioning mergers as a key policy instrument to enhance the international competitiveness of Vietnam's higher education system. This strategy must clearly define:

- Priority groups of higher education institutions targeted for the merger roadmap (national universities, regional universities, key universities, and local public universities).
- Appropriate merger models for each group (full mergers, phased consolidation, strategic alliances, and other hybrid models).
- Post-merger strategic goals, including whether institutions will evolve into multidisciplinary research universities, innovation-driven universities, or application-oriented universities according to the national stratification framework.

Second, the legal framework must be refined to ensure clarity, transparency, and flexibility, enabling higher education institutions to proactively implement merger processes. Key actions include:

- Reviewing, revising, and supplementing Decree No. 125/2024/NĐ-CP to clarify procedures and establish criteria for evaluating merger effectiveness.
- Issuing detailed implementation guidelines on organizational restructuring, rights and obligations of units after mergers, and transitional governance arrangements.
- Developing special legal mechanisms for strategically merged universities – similar to the governance and legal models applied to Aalto University or the University of Paris-Saclay.

Third, long-term policy stability and consistent state commitment are crucial for successful university mergers. As mergers require extended transformation periods, policies must be predictable and coherent over at least 10 to 15 years to ensure continuity and confidence among participating institutions.

Recommendations for reforming post-merger governance models

One of the most decisive success factors observed in international models is the reform of governance following the merger – not merely administrative consolidation. Therefore, Vietnam should consider the following measures:

- *Establish unified governance structures:* Merged institutions must operate under a powerful, functionally effective university council responsible for system-wide strategic coordination. Member institutions should gradually transition from semi-autonomous units to functional units within an integrated university structure.
- *Increase academic and financial autonomy:* Post-merger universities must possess sufficient authority to make timely and flexible decisions in training, research, international cooperation, recruitment, and resource allocation.
- *Reform internal organizational structures:* Universities should adopt functional governance models similar to the University of Manchester, avoiding multilayered bureaucratic structures and minimizing administrative redundancy.
- *Build transparent accountability systems:* Clear accountability should be ensured through internal audit mechanisms, public reporting requirements, and periodic performance evaluations.

Recommendations on financial policy and strategic investment

No successful university merger internationally has occurred without substantial financial investment. The Government of Vietnam must therefore clearly define a strategic financial policy framework:

- *Establish a national university merger support fund:* The fund should target priority institutions for consolidation during 2025–2035 and ensure resources for organizational restructuring, infrastructure development, research investment, and upgrading governance systems.
- *Implement flexible post-merger financial mechanisms:* Merged universities should benefit from stable medium-term budget commitments (5–10 years) and be authorized to mobilize external resources, undertake project-based investments, and engage in public–private partnerships.
- *Create incentives for private and international investment:* Particularly in research and innovation projects, academic infrastructure development, and the establishment of interdisciplinary programs.

This strategic financial model may draw inspiration from Finland's investment approach during the establishment of Aalto University – where large initial state funding served as a catalyst for transformation, followed by strong autonomy and public–private collaboration to ensure sustainable development.

Recommendations on human resource development and academic culture

University mergers are not only organizational decisions but also processes of academic cultural transformation. To ensure long-term sustainability, policy interventions must target both personnel and organizational development:

- *Develop a unified post-merger human resource strategy*, including recruitment standards, promotion criteria, evaluation frameworks, and incentive mechanisms that encourage creativity and innovation.
- *Establish academic leadership development programs* for mid-level and senior administrators, as leadership capacity is decisive for the effective governance of merged institutions.
- *Harmonize organizational cultures* among member institutions by fostering a collaborative environment, encouraging knowledge sharing, and reducing internal competition.
- *Strengthen talent attraction policies,* particularly for international experts and Vietnamese scholars abroad; larger and more prestigious post-merger universities will have a competitive advantage in recruiting high-quality human resources.

Recommendations for a phased implementation roadmap

To ensure effectiveness, the merger process must follow a focused, phased implementation roadmap rather than adopting a uniform model for all institutions:

- Phase 1 (2025–2030): Prioritize mergers among small-scale local public universities to streamline the network and reduce system fragmentation. Establish regional clusters and field-based alliances as transitional "soft merger" structures.
- Phase 2 (2030–2035): Advance strategic consolidation among key universities to form national research university clusters comparable to the University of Manchester model. Strengthen centralized governance, expand institutional autonomy, and implement strategic investment programs.
- Phase 3 (Post-2035): Integrate national and regional universities through alliance-based or partial merger models, progressing toward the formation of large-scale research university networks with international competitiveness. Enhance international programs, joint research initiatives, and global innovation networks.

Recommendations on monitoring, evaluation, and policy adjustment mechanisms

To prevent superficial mergers or operational failures, a robust independent monitoring and evaluation system is essential:

- Develop a comprehensive set of performance indicators to evaluate merger outcomes (institutional scale, training quality, research capacity, resource utilization efficiency, international reputation, etc.).
- Assign monitoring responsibilities to an independent agency or expert council to conduct periodic evaluations (every 3–5 years), ensuring objectivity.
- Allow flexible adjustment of merger models and timelines based on evaluation results.
- Ensure transparency by publicly disclosing merger processes and outcomes to build public trust and mobilize broader support.

University mergers constitute a complex policy process requiring the coordinated combination of national strategic vision, governance reform, financial investment, human resource development, and stable institutional design. International experience shows that with strong political commitment, adequate resources, and a clear roadmap, mergers can produce large, internationally competitive universities that act as national knowledge engines.

For Vietnam, the period 2025–2035 will be decisive in transitioning from a fragmented and small-scale system to a unified, autonomous, and globally competitive university structure. The comprehensive implementation of the policy recommendations outlined above will help narrow the gap with advanced higher education systems, optimize public investment, and lay a solid foundation for sustainable development in the knowledge era.

7. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that university mergers represent not only an organizational option but a long-term strategic pathway for transforming higher education systems in the context of global competition, rapid technological change, and increasing pressure for institutional efficiency. By comparing Vietnam's emerging merger initiatives with established models in the United Kingdom, Finland, France, and China, the analysis clarifies that the essence of successful mergers lies in strategic integration, coherent governance, and sustained investment rather than administrative consolidation alone. These international cases provide important analytical insights but cannot be applied mechanically to Vietnam; instead, their underlying principles must be adapted to domestic institutional realities.

Vietnam's progress in establishing an initial institutional framework – through key policy instruments such as Decree No. 125/2024/NĐ-CP and the national higher education network plan – marks an important foundation for deeper reforms. However, the study has also identified critical gaps that must be addressed if mergers are to create real academic value. These include fragmented authority, limited strategic alignment among member institutions, and insufficient post-merger financial commitment. Without confronting these structural constraints, mergers risk becoming symbolic rather than transformative.

The findings contribute theoretically by integrating perspectives from organizational change theory, the resource-based view, and new institutionalism into a unified analytical framework for examining university mergers in developing higher education systems. Practically, the study provides a differentiated set of policy directions that recognizes the heterogeneous nature of the Vietnamese system. National universities, regional universities, key universities, and local public institutions require tailored merger models, governed by flexible timelines and appropriate institutional design. This strategic differentiation is crucial to avoiding uniform top-down policies that fail to account for structural diversity.

Looking forward, successful mergers in Vietnam will depend on the ability to align strategic vision with governance reform, financial investment, and cultural integration. Building a shared academic identity is especially important as institutions transition from administrative linkage toward genuine consolidation. This transformation must be supported by long-term policy stability, transparent monitoring mechanisms, and a commitment to fostering innovation within merged institutions.

If implemented effectively, university mergers can enable Vietnam to develop large, research-oriented institutions capable of competing globally, contributing to national innovation capacity, and strengthening the country's transition toward a knowledge-based economy. Ultimately, the success of these reforms will hinge on Vietnam's capacity to adopt international lessons selectively while crafting merger pathways that are institutionally coherent, financially viable, and academically meaningful.

8. References

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