

From Cooperation to Integration? The Limits of Internationalization in Vietnamese Higher Education

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Abstract

This paper examines the trajectory of higher education internationalization in Vietnam since the *Đổi Mới* reforms (1986), with the aim of clarifying the extent to which the system has transitioned from “international cooperation” to “system-level integration”. Drawing on theoretical frameworks of internationalization and globalization in higher education, and employing document and policy analysis, the study found that Vietnam has achieved significant progress in expanding the scale and diversifying the forms of internationalization. This is reflected in the growth of joint training programs, the expansion of English-medium instruction, and increased international research collaboration. However, the process continues to face structural constraints, including limited university autonomy, insufficient governance and financial capacity, and uneven quality of academic staff. Notably, a considerable gap persists between policy orientation and actual implementation, alongside a continued dependence on international models and standards. These factors give rise to developmental paradoxes such as “rapid expansion without depth” and “formal integration without structural transformation”. Based on these findings, the paper argues for a reconceptualization of internationalization toward a system-integrated approach, emphasizing a shift from passive reception to proactive co-creation. Such a transformation is essential for advancing comprehensive reform and ensuring the sustainable development of Vietnamese higher education in the context of globalization.

Keywords: global integration, higher education, internationalization, Vietnam.

1. Introduction

In the context of deepening globalization, the internationalization of higher education has become an inevitable trend, reflecting the increasingly close interconnections between national education systems and the global academic space. According to classical approaches, internationalization is not merely the expansion of cross-border cooperative activities but also entails the integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the core functions of higher education, including teaching, research, and community engagement (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Knight, 2004, 2012). Meanwhile, under the pressures of global competition, higher education systems are increasingly operating within a “global knowledge market”, characterized by clear

stratification and inequalities among countries (Marginson, 2006; Marginson & Wende, 2007). This trend is further evidenced by international comparative indicators on student mobility, educational investment, and levels of internationalization across nations (OECD, 2019).

In Vietnam, the internationalization of higher education has been closely associated with the Đổi Mới (Renovation) process initiated in 1986, during which the Party and the State gradually opened the education system to regional and global integration (Communist Party of Vietnam, 1986, 1996). This process was institutionalized early through the Law on Education (1998), which established the initial legal foundation for expanding international cooperation and developing the education system toward integration (National Assembly, 1998). Key policy instruments, such as the Education Development Strategy for 2001–2010, Resolution No. 14/2005/NQ-CP, and, notably, Resolution No. 29-NQ/TW, explicitly identified internationalization as a driver for improving quality and enhancing the competitiveness of higher education (Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam, 2013; Government of Vietnam, 2005; Prime Minister, 2001). In parallel, the legal framework for higher education has been progressively refined through successive laws and amendments, emphasizing institutional autonomy and international integration (National Assembly, 2012, 2018, 2025).

In practice, Vietnam has achieved notable progress, including the expansion of international partnerships, the development of joint training programs, the promotion of English-medium instruction (EMI), and the attraction of international students (Ly & Marginson, 2018; Ryu & Nguyen, 2021; Trang, 2020). Nevertheless, a growing body of literature indicates that internationalization in Vietnam continues to face significant limitations, including dependence on imported models, constrained institutional capacity, and a persistent gap between policy intentions and implementation (Hai et al., 2019; Tuyet, 2014; World Bank, 2020).

Against this backdrop, this paper poses a central question: Has Vietnamese higher education truly transitioned from “international cooperation” to “global integration”? By integrating international theoretical frameworks with an analysis of the Vietnamese context, this study seeks to elucidate the structural constraints of internationalization and to propose policy directions for the next phase of development.

2. Theoretical Framework and Research Methodology

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in classical theoretical approaches to the internationalization of higher education, combined with a critical perspective on globalization and academic competition. First, Jane Knight, Canadian scholar and one of the most influential researchers in the field of the internationalization of higher education, defined internationalization as the process of integrating international, intercultural, and global dimensions into the purposes, functions, and delivery of higher education (Knight, 2004, 2012). This approach emphasizes the systemic and embedded nature of

internationalization, moving beyond isolated cooperative activities. Complementing this perspective, Altbach and Knight argued that internationalization is driven by multiple rationales—academic, economic, political, and cultural—while also reflecting asymmetries of power within the global higher education system (Altbach, 2002; Altbach & Knight, 2007).

At the macro level, the work of Simon Marginson provides an important analytical framework for understanding global competition and the stratified structure of higher education. From this perspective, internationalization does not occur within a neutral space but is shaped by a “center-periphery” order, in which developing countries often occupy dependent and receptive positions (Marginson, 2006; Marginson & Wende, 2007). This perspective is particularly relevant for analyzing the Vietnamese case, where internationalization functions both as a development strategy and as a process that may entail risks of dependency on external models and standards (de Wit, 2011; Huang, 2007).

In addition, this study draws on analytical frameworks concerning the forms and levels of internationalization, including “internationalization at home” and “cross-border education”, as well as the transition from cooperation to integration (Qiang, 2003). In the Vietnamese context, recent studies indicate that internationalization is primarily manifested through joint training programs, EMI, and international research collaboration, yet remains limited in terms of institutional depth (Ly & Marginson, 2018; Ryu & Nguyen, 2021).

2.2 Research Methodology

Methodologically, this study adopted a qualitative approach, combining document analysis and policy analysis. The data corpus consists of three main categories: (i) international theoretical literature on the internationalization of higher education; (ii) scholarly studies on Vietnam; and (iii) a body of policy documents issued by the Communist Party and the State concerning higher education and international integration (Central Committee, 2013; Communist Party of Vietnam, 1986, 1996; National Assembly, 2012, 2018, 2025). Content analysis was employed to identify key themes, trends, and the gap between policy discourse and implementation practices.

In addition to the qualitative approach outlined above, the study was designed as a country case study, treating Vietnam as a representative case of higher education internationalization in a developing country context. This design enabled the integration of global theoretical frameworks with local realities, thereby highlighting the context-specific characteristics of internationalization (de Wit, 2011; Marginson & Wende, 2007).

Regarding data selection, this study employed purposive sampling to ensure both theoretical relevance and policy-grounded validity. The selection focused on three complementary sources over the period 1986–2025. First, high-impact international scholarship was used to establish the conceptual and analytical framework of higher education internationalization. Second, official reports and statistical summaries

produced by Vietnamese government agencies were incorporated to reflect practical developments, implementation outcomes, and sectoral trends. Third, key legal and policy documents issued by the Vietnamese government were included to trace the evolution of institutional frameworks and policy orientations. This triangulated approach enabled the study to connect global theory with policy, practice, and governance realities, thereby ensuring a balanced integration of analytical depth and contextual specificity.

Data analysis was conducted through qualitative content analysis in combination with policy discourse analysis. Specifically, the study employed coding techniques to identify key themes such as “forms of internationalization”, “university autonomy”, “endogenous capacity”, and “system-level integration”, thereby revealing patterns and trends across the dataset (Qiang, 2003; Ryu & Nguyen, 2021). At the same time, the comparison between policy discourse and actual implementation helped to illuminate the gap between intended objectives and realized outcomes—a central issue in the internationalization of higher education in Vietnam.

This methodological approach enabled the study to describe the current state of internationalization in Vietnamese higher education as well as to explain its structural constraints within the broader context of contemporary globalization.

3. Findings

3.1 Expanding Internationalization: From Academic Cooperation to Diverse Modes of Implementation

Since the Đổi Mới (Renovation) reforms in 1986, the internationalization of Vietnamese higher education has shifted from a relatively closed system to one characterized by multidimensional cooperation with the region and the world. Initially, internationalization was primarily manifested through bilateral academic cooperation programs and development assistance. Over time, however, it has evolved into a diverse ecosystem of activities, reflecting the increasingly deep integration of the higher education system (Ryu & Nguyen, 2021; Trang, 2020). This transformation aligns with Knight’s (2004, 2012) framework, in which internationalization is understood not merely as external activities but as the integration of international dimensions into all core functions of the university.

One of the most visible manifestations is the rapid growth of international joint training programs. Vietnam currently hosts nearly 400 joint training programs with approximately 140,000 enrolled students, demonstrating the rapid expansion of internationalized education at scale (Ministry of Education and Training, 2024). These programs are commonly implemented through dual-degree arrangements, credit transfer schemes, or in-country delivery in partnership with foreign institutions, thereby diversifying learning opportunities and enhancing educational quality (Ly & Marginson, 2018). These programs are unevenly distributed across partner countries, with the United Kingdom (101 programs), the United States (59), and France (53) dominating the landscape, indicating a concentration of partnerships with core higher education systems (Nghia, 2024). This trend is also confirmed by recent reports, which

indicate a significant increase in the number of joint programs and EMI offerings in Vietnam, reflecting institutional efforts to expand internationalization at the university level (Giang, 2025). At the policy level, Vietnam has actively expanded international cooperation, with 47 international agreements in education signed since 2023, including 18 treaties and 29 cooperation agreements (Ministry of Education and Training, 2024). According to a World Bank report (2020), such programs not only enable students to access international standards but also create pressure for domestic improvements in curricula and pedagogical approaches. However, this development is markedly stratified, concentrated primarily in leading and prestigious universities, while many other institutions continue to face difficulties in establishing and sustaining international partnerships (Hai et al., 2019).

In parallel, EMI has become a key instrument of internationalization in Vietnam. The implementation of EMI aims not only to attract international students but also to enhance the global competencies of domestic students (Ly & Huong, 2018). Nevertheless, research indicates that EMI generates significant tensions related to the language proficiency of both faculty and students, as well as concerns over the potential marginalization of Vietnamese in academic contexts (Ly & Huong, 2018). This reflects a broader paradox commonly observed in developing countries, where internationalization is often associated with the adoption of linguistic and epistemic norms from global academic centers (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Huang, 2007).

Beyond teaching, international research collaboration and academic exchange have also expanded considerably. Vietnamese universities are increasingly participating in regional and global research networks, while simultaneously increasing international publications and collaborative scientific projects (Ryu & Nguyen, 2021). For example, the International University (Vietnam National University – Ho Chi Minh City) has established partnerships with leading institutions such as UNSW, Monash University, and the University of Houston (Ministry of Education and Training, 2024). As noted by Marginson (2006), such participation forms part of competition within the global “knowledge market”, where higher education institutions seek to enhance their academic reputation and standing. However, Vietnam’s research capacity remains limited compared to that of more developed countries, resulting in a degree of dependence on international partners in shaping research agendas and allocating resources (World Bank, 2020). Recent analyses further highlight that internationalization in Vietnamese higher education continues to face multiple challenges, including language barriers, uneven quality of partnerships, and resource constraints, highlighting the urgent need to shift from quantitative expansion to qualitative depth (Giang, 2025).

Importantly, the expansion of internationalization cannot be separated from the guiding and enabling role of the State. This role was established early in the development of the legal framework for education, beginning with the Law on Education (1998) and subsequently reinforced through later policy documents (Government of Vietnam, 2005; National Assembly, 1998). Key policy instruments, such as the Education Development Strategy for 2001–2010, Resolution

No. 14/2005/NQ-CP, and Resolution No. 29-NQ/TW, have explicitly identified internationalization as a central pillar for enhancing quality and fostering integration in higher education (Central Committee, 2013; Government of Vietnam, 2005; Prime Minister, 2001). In addition, policies on international integration in education, such as Decision No. 2448/QĐ-TTg, have established a legal framework and encouraged higher education institutions to proactively expand international cooperation (Prime Minister, 2013). The legal framework for university autonomy has also been progressively refined, enabling institutions to operate more flexibly in implementing internationalization activities (National Assembly, 2012, 2018).

Nevertheless, despite the significant expansion in both scale and forms, internationalization in Vietnam remains uneven across institutions. Leading universities—particularly national universities and selected research-oriented institutions—possess clear advantages in terms of resources, partnership networks, and governance capacity, thereby playing a leading role in driving internationalization. In contrast, many local or smaller institutions continue to face constraints in accessing international resources, resulting in widening disparities within the system (Hai et al., 2019; World Bank, 2020). This reflects an internal stratification of Vietnamese higher education in the context of globalization, consistent with broader analyses of inequality within the global higher education system (Marginson & Wende, 2007). This disparity is also reflected in the concentration of over 600 foreign-invested education projects, primarily located in major urban centers such as Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City (Nghia, 2024).

In sum, the internationalization of Vietnamese higher education has evolved from isolated academic cooperation to a diversified set of implementation modes, strongly supported by state policies. However, this expansion has largely been quantitative in nature, while significant limitations persist in terms of quality, capacity, and equity, thereby calling for a transition toward a deeper and more substantive phase of development in the future.

3.2 Institutional Constraints and Endogenous Capacity Limitations

Despite notable progress in the scale and forms of internationalization, Vietnamese higher education continues to face significant structural barriers, particularly related to governance institutions and endogenous capacity. These limitations not only reduce the effectiveness of internationalization policies but also hinder the transition from “cooperation” to substantive “integration”.

First, the level of university autonomy in Vietnam remains constrained, despite important legal reforms. The Law on Higher Education (2012) and its 2018 amendment have expanded institutional autonomy, particularly in academic, organizational, and financial domains (National Assembly, 2005, 2012, 2018, 2025). However, in practice, many universities remain subject to tight control by state authorities, especially in strategic decisions such as program approval, student admissions, and international partnerships (Hai et al., 2019). For instance, among 408 undergraduate joint programs, only 186 are autonomously approved by institutions,

while 222 require approval from the Ministry of Education and Training (Nghia, 2024). As noted by Varghese and Martin (2014), this condition of “formal autonomy” is common across many Asian systems, where institutional reforms have not fully kept pace with the demands of globalized higher education. Consequently, universities often lack flexibility and responsiveness in an increasingly competitive international environment.

Second, the governance and financial capacities of higher education institutions remain insufficient to meet the demands of international integration. Many Vietnamese universities have yet to develop modern governance systems aligned with international standards, particularly in areas such as quality assurance, strategic management, and financial administration (World Bank, 2020). Although Vietnam has attracted 605 foreign investment projects in education with a total capital exceeding USD 4.57 billion, these resources remain unevenly distributed across institutions (Nghia, 2024). Recent policy-oriented analyses also highlight persistent constraints in institutional capacity, resource allocation, and uneven implementation of internationalization strategies across institutions (Giang, 2025). Heavy dependence on state funding, coupled with limited revenue from research and international collaboration, constrains long-term investment in internationalization activities. As Marginson (2006) argued, in the context of global competition, financial and governance capacity are critical determinants of institutional positioning; thus, these limitations restrict the ability of Vietnamese universities to participate on equal footing in the global “knowledge market”.

Third, the quality and capacity of academic staff remain uneven, posing a significant barrier to internationalization. Although the number of faculty members holding doctoral degrees and possessing international experience has increased, this human capital is concentrated primarily in a small number of leading institutions (Ryu & Nguyen, 2021). Between 2013 and 2022, Vietnam sent 11,657 individuals abroad for study, including over 4000 doctoral candidates, yet this human capital remains concentrated in a small number of leading universities (Nghia, 2024). Many faculty members still face limitations in foreign language proficiency, research skills, and engagement in international academic networks, which in turn affects the quality of teaching and research in an internationalized environment (Ly & Marginson, 2018). This also undermines the effectiveness of EMI programs and international research collaborations.

Another critical issue is the considerable gap between policy orientation and actual implementation. This gap can be partly explained by the prolonged process of legal reform, in which governance and organizational frameworks were established as early as the Law on Education (2005) but have not been fully translated into effective implementation mechanisms in practice (National Assembly, 2005). Policy documents such as Resolution No. 29-NQ/TW and national education development strategies emphasize the role of internationalization as a driver of reform (Central Committee, 2013; Prime Minister, 2001). However, the implementation of these policies often encounters challenges due to limited resources, ineffective coordination mechanisms,

and weak implementation capacity at the institutional level (Trang, 2020). As de Wit (2011) suggested, this is a common challenge in higher education internationalization, where strategic goals are not always fully operationalized into concrete actions.

Finally, the internationalization of Vietnamese higher education remains significantly dependent on external partners and models. Many joint training programs, EMI initiatives, and research projects are designed based on standards and content imported from developed countries, while adaptation to the local context remains limited (Huang, 2007; Tuyet, 2014). According to Altbach and Knight (2007), this phenomenon reflects asymmetrical structures in the global higher education system, where developing countries tend to act as recipients rather than producers of knowledge. In the Vietnamese context, this not only increases the risk of dependency but also raises challenges for maintaining academic identity and pursuing autonomous development pathways.

Overall, institutional constraints and limitations in endogenous capacity constitute major barriers to the internationalization of Vietnamese higher education. These challenges not only diminish the effectiveness of international cooperation activities but also impede deeper integration into the global higher education system, thereby underscoring the urgent need for institutional reform and capacity-building in the next phase.

3.3 From Cooperation to Integration? Gaps and Developmental Paradoxes

One of the central issues in the internationalization of Vietnamese higher education today is the gap between “international cooperation” and “system-level integration”. Conceptually, international cooperation is often understood as the establishment of bilateral or multilateral relationships for academic exchange, program transfer, or collaborative research. In contrast, system-level integration requires a deeper level of engagement, including active participation in global knowledge networks and the restructuring of core university functions in accordance with international standards (Knight, 2004, 2012; Qiang, 2003). As argued by Altbach and Knight (2007), this distinction reflects two levels of internationalization: from instrumental activities to structural transformation.

In the Vietnamese case, internationalization largely remains at the level of cooperation, as evidenced by the rapid expansion of joint training programs, EMI, and international research collaboration. However, these activities have not yet led to fundamental changes in the operational structure of the higher education system. This results in a paradox of “rapid expansion but limited depth”, where the number of internationalization activities has increased significantly, yet their substantive impact on the quality of teaching, research, and governance remains constrained (Ryu & Nguyen, 2021; World Bank, 2020). Despite the large number of joint programs and international agreements, the average number of international students per institution remains relatively modest, at approximately 39 students per year (Ministry of Education and Training, 2024).

Another paradox is the condition of “formal integration without structural transformation”. Many higher education institutions have adopted international elements, such as English-medium programs, international accreditation, or partnerships with foreign institutions. However, these elements often function as external add-ons rather than being sustainably embedded within institutional systems (Ly & Marginson, 2018). As de Wit (2011) noted, this reflects a form of symbolic internationalization, where activities are implemented primarily to enhance institutional image rather than to generate substantive transformation. In this context, reforms in governance, finance, and academic structures – prerequisites for genuine integration – remain slow and uneven (Varghese & Martin, 2014).

These paradoxes can be further explained from the structural perspective of the global higher education system. According to Marginson (2006), this system is highly stratified, with core countries shaping knowledge and standards, while peripheral countries primarily act as recipients. In such a context, internationalization in Vietnam risks becoming a form of “dependent integration”, where international models and programs are adopted without sufficient local adaptation (Huang, 2007; Tuyet, 2014). Empirical evidence reinforces this pattern: among more than 400 joint training programs, partnerships are concentrated with countries such as the United Kingdom (101 programs), the United States (59), and France (53), alongside over 600 foreign-invested education projects largely located in major urban centers (Nghia, 2024). This concentration reflects asymmetrical knowledge flows and uneven access to global resources. Consequently, internationalization not only constrains endogenous innovation but also deepens institutional disparities within Vietnam’s higher education system.

From these analyses, it is evident that the internationalization of Vietnamese higher education requires redefinition. Rather than approaching internationalization as a set of cooperative activities, it should be reconceptualized as a process of systemic transformation, in which international dimensions are organically integrated into the entire structure and functions of the university (Knight, 2012). This shift necessitates changes not only at the policy level but also at the institutional and academic cultural levels. In particular, Vietnam needs to move from a model of “passive reception” to one of “active co-creation” in internationalization. This involves strengthening independent research capacity, participating in shaping international programs and standards, and developing contextually appropriate models of internationalization (Ly & Marginson, 2018). At the same time, it is essential to balance global integration with the preservation of academic identity, avoiding uncritical convergence toward externally imposed models (Altbach, 2002).

In summary, the gap between cooperation and integration in the internationalization of Vietnamese higher education reflects deeper structural constraints within the system. Bridging this gap requires a new approach in which internationalization is not only an objective but also a driving force for comprehensive higher education reform in the context of globalization.

4. Discussion

The findings presented in Section 3 reveal a dual-faceted picture of the internationalization of Vietnamese higher education: on the one hand, a rapid expansion in scale and forms (Section 3.1), and on the other, structural constraints related to institutions and endogenous capacity (Section 3.2), resulting in a significant gap between cooperation and integration (Section 3.3). This discussion aims to further interpret these findings in relation to international theoretical frameworks, while also clarifying their implications for higher education reform in Vietnam.

First, the expansion of internationalization in breadth but not in depth reflects a common characteristic of higher education systems in developing countries. As shown in Section 3.1, Vietnam has achieved notable progress in terms of the number of joint programs, the implementation of EMI, and international research collaboration. However, according to Knight's (2004, 2012) framework, internationalization should involve the integration of international dimensions into the core functions of the university, rather than remaining at the level of supplementary activities. This suggests that internationalization in Vietnam is still oriented more toward "external internationalization" than "internal integration". This lack of depth helps explain why many internationalization activities have not led to substantial improvements in teaching and research quality.

Second, the institutional and endogenous capacity constraints analyzed in Section 3.2 indicate that internationalization cannot be separated from reforms in university governance. Although the legal framework for university autonomy has improved (National Assembly, 2012, 2018, 2025), its implementation remains constrained, resulting in a condition of "incomplete autonomy". According to Varghese and Martin (2014), institutional autonomy is a prerequisite for effective participation in the global higher education environment, as it enables universities to act flexibly in forming partnerships, developing programs, and mobilizing resources. In the Vietnamese context, the lack of substantive autonomy not only limits innovation but also weakens the endogenous drivers of internationalization.

Moreover, limited financial and academic capacity further supports Marginson's (2006) argument regarding stratification in the global higher education system. As evidenced in Sections 3.1 and 3.2, internationalization activities are concentrated in a small number of leading universities, while many others are "left behind". This not only reflects internal inequalities within Vietnam's higher education system but also reproduces a center-periphery structure at the national level. In this context, internationalization risks exacerbating disparities rather than narrowing development gaps, unless appropriate regulatory and redistributive policies are implemented.

Another notable aspect concerns the developmental paradoxes identified in Section 3.3, particularly the condition of "formal integration without structural transformation". This can be interpreted through de Wit's (2011) concept of "symbolic internationalization", whereby internationalization activities are implemented primarily to enhance institutional image and reputation rather than to generate

substantive transformation. In Vietnam, the adoption of international programs, quality assurance standards, or EMI often resembles model transfer rather than context-sensitive adaptation. This results in a misalignment between the form and substance of internationalization.

Furthermore, dependence on international models and partners raises important questions about the epistemic autonomy of Vietnam's higher education system. As argued by Altbach and Knight (2007), internationalization in the context of globalization is often accompanied by the diffusion of academic norms from core countries. Without sufficient endogenous capacity, countries such as Vietnam may fall into a pattern of "passive reception", as discussed in Section 3.3. In addition to constraining innovation, it affects the development of a distinct national academic identity.

Based on these analyses, several key implications can be drawn. First, internationalization should be repositioned as a strategy for systemic reform rather than merely a tool for quality enhancement. This requires closer alignment between internationalization and policies on university autonomy, financing, and human resource development. Second, the focus should shift from expanding scale to enhancing the quality and depth of internationalization, particularly through the integration of international dimensions into teaching, research, and governance. Third, Vietnam needs to develop a model of "proactive co-creation" in internationalization, in which higher education institutions not only participate in but also contribute to shaping global standards and knowledge (Ly & Marginson, 2018).

Finally, this discussion highlights that the internationalization of higher education is not a linear process but a complex one shaped by multiple structural and contextual factors. For Vietnam, the transition from cooperation to integration is not merely about expanding international linkages but involves a comprehensive restructuring of the higher education system toward greater modernization, autonomy, and deeper integration into the global knowledge space.

5. Conclusion

This paper has examined the trajectory of higher education internationalization in Vietnam since the Đổi Mới reforms, thereby highlighting the shift from academic cooperation toward efforts at global integration. The findings indicate that Vietnam has made significant progress in expanding the scale and diversifying the forms of internationalization, as evidenced by the growth of joint training programs, the implementation of EMI, and the expansion of international research collaboration. These achievements are closely associated with the strong steering role of the State, manifested through an increasingly comprehensive system of policies and legal frameworks.

However, the study also demonstrates that the internationalization of Vietnamese higher education continues to face substantial structural constraints. Barriers related to university autonomy, governance capacity, financial resources, and the quality of

academic staff have limited the effectiveness of the integration process. In particular, the gap between policy orientation and actual implementation, together with dependence on international models and partners, has resulted in a form of internationalization that is often superficial, lacking depth and failing to produce fundamental systemic transformation. On this basis, the paper argues that internationalization in Vietnamese higher education remains largely at the level of “cooperation” rather than “system-level integration”. Paradoxes such as rapid expansion without sustainability and surface-level integration without structural change underscore the urgent need to redefine and restructure internationalization in the next phase.

From a policy perspective, this calls for a more comprehensive approach in which internationalization is closely integrated with university governance reform, the strengthening of substantive autonomy, and the development of endogenous capacity. At the same time, Vietnam needs to shift from a model of passive reception to one of proactive co-creation, engaging more deeply in shaping global standards and knowledge. Only under these conditions can internationalization become a genuine driver of innovation and sustainable development in higher education within the context of globalization.

Building on these findings, the internationalization of Vietnamese higher education should be reoriented toward greater depth and sustainability. First, the State should promote substantive university autonomy by reducing administrative intervention and granting institutions greater authority over academic, financial, and international partnership decisions. Second, priority should be given to strengthening endogenous capacity through investment in research, improving the quality of academic staff, and developing an academic ecosystem capable of participating on equal footing in global knowledge networks. Third, internationalization should move from a model of adoption to one of co-creation, in which Vietnamese universities not only implement but also contribute to shaping international programs, standards, and knowledge. Finally, regulatory policies are needed to mitigate inequalities among institutions, ensuring that internationalization does not exacerbate stratification within the higher education system.

6. References

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