

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROJECT HARMONY TO QUANG BINH UNIVERSITY IN THE IMPLEMENTING OF INTERNATIONALISATION STRATEGIES

Ý NGHĨA CỦA DỰ ÁN HARMONY
ĐỐI VỚI TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC QUẢNG BÌNH
TRONG VIỆC THỰC HIỆN CHIẾN LƯỢC QUỐC TẾ HÓA

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ABSTRACT: *The author analyzes the significance of the HARMONY project in building the internationalization strategies, which is about developing the International Relations Office (IRO), establishing International Project Office (IPO) and International Student Office (FRIENDS TEA HOUSE). In addition, the paper explores the current practice of QBU internationalization strategy implementation compared to other partner country institutions in the project. Finally, some recommendations are given about what QBU could probably take into consideration in the implementation of the internationalization at Home in the future.*

Keywords: *Internationalization strategy, HARMONY, International Relation Office (IRO) International Project Office (IPO).*

TÓM TẮT: *Tác giả bài báo phân tích ý nghĩa của dự án HARMONY trong việc xây dựng chiến lược quốc tế hóa giáo dục tại Trường Đại học Quảng Bình (QBU). Đó là việc phát triển Văn phòng Hợp tác quốc tế đã có (IRO), thành lập Văn phòng Dự án quốc tế (IPO) và Bộ phận hỗ trợ sinh viên quốc tế. Bài viết cũng đánh giá thực trạng của việc thực hiện chiến lược quốc tế hoá giáo dục đại học tại QBU, so sánh với các trường đại học thành viên khác của dự án và đề xuất khuyến nghị về những vấn đề mà QBU cần xem xét cho sự phát triển quốc tế hoá giáo dục tại Trường trong thời gian tới.*

Từ khóa: *Chiến lược quốc tế hóa, HARMONY, Văn phòng Hợp tác quốc tế (IRO), Văn phòng dự án quốc tế (IPO).*

1. INTRODUCTION

In the globalization context, international cooperation seems not to have been promoted as much widely and strongly before in every aspect of life such as society, governments, politics, economics and education issues between countries from different continents. The relationship between the European Union (EU) and Asia is of global significance and

the ties are likely to increase in the coming years. As reported in an EU publication, Asia, with roughly 60% of the world population, accounts for 35% of the EU's exports (€618bn) and 45% of the EU's imports (€774bn) [1]. For both Europe and Asia, growing global interdependence is an opportunity for increased cooperation, for peaceful political cooperation, fair and stronger economic relations,

comprehensive societal dialogue and collaboration on international and regional security. Europe and Asia, together, can be the engines of a more cooperative approach to world politics, global stability and regional economic prosperity.

In the international collaboration of education, there has been an inevitable issue of promoting Internationalization of their educational markets, which has posed pressure for higher education institutions to actively engage in internationalization initiatives and Information and Communications Technology (ICT) “digitalization”, serving as an effective tool for supporting and coordinating their international activities [2]. The effective ICT implementation will play a significant role in the enhancing the internationalisation of higher institutions because along with other factors such as speed, cost-saving, transcendence of time and distance, and opportunities for cross-cultural learning, it “enables extension of international relationships, helps adoption of quality international standards and strengthens ties with institutions abroad” [2]. It is said that higher education is expected to be the “industry of the future” [2] in the new economy where the development of human capital and innovative knowledge production will cater for building better economic performance. In order to make a further step change in that cooperation and to unlock opportunities within the global economy, the EU and Asia should ensure efficient and sustainable connectivity. Connectivity contributes to economic growth and jobs, global competitiveness

and trade, and people, goods and services to move across and between Europe and Asia.

In Vietnam, the internationalization of higher education is currently a topic of interest to many higher education institutions and researchers. Most Vietnamese universities like Da Nang University and Quang Binh University put the building and developing the internationalization of higher education strategies on the top priorities. For Quang Binh University, becoming one of 11 member universities participating in HARMONY, the Higher Education Internationalization project, Erasmus program sponsored by The European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA), EU Commission in 2021 is considered as one of the most significantly important events in implementing the strategies of internationalization of education at QBU in the period 2021-2025.

In this study, the author will provide readers with the overview of the HARMONY project and the description of the QBU internationalization situation in the period 2015-2020 in terms of achievements and limitations. It is expected that readers can gain a general understanding of the rationale of the HARMONY project and its significance to developing QBU internationalization strategies in the next time.

3. RESEARCH CONTENT

3.1. Overview of HARMONY

3.1.1. Rationale of the HARMONY project

HARMONY proposal was developed in response to initialed “EU Strategy on Connecting Europe and Asia” (Joint Communication/Brussels, 19.9.2018

JOINT(2018)31 final). [2].

The HARMONY project aimed to address the issues of higher education internationalization in each institution of eleven partner countries. It was also built to meet the needs of the international collaboration strategies of the participant countries. The HARMONY project was declared to suit the policies of the partner countries and the policies of the EU in the higher education internationalization. How the objectives of the HARMONY project are consistent with the PCs policies under the project implementation will be clarified in the following.

3.1.2. HARMONY aims and specific objectives

Addressing needs of the PCs specified in the PCs description of current internationalization practice, the present project proposal is aiming at three following objectives:

- To outline PC HEIs' internationalization landscapes and to identify levels of integration of international and intercultural dimensions into PC HEIs' formal and informal curriculum. Taking into consideration the absence of the legal framework in the IoHE (International of Higher Education) at national and institutional levels in PCs the main focus will be dedicated to the capacity building of the key-actors, policy-makers on the EU experience in the development of IoHE strategies and regulations on standards for IaH (Internationalisation at Home) implementation, in particular, which will have a direct impact on internationalization of formal and informal curriculum of PC HEIs [4]. Analysed state

of the art concerning IoHE, organized National Conferences in each PC will facilitate the elaboration of Recommendations for Policy development on IoHE with main focus on IaH.

- To improve PC HEIs' capabilities for internationalization through staff training and by translating general awareness of the IaH concept into streamlined institutional strategies and Action Plans. To the development and implementation of effective institutional internationalization strategies will be paid the second attention during the project life time and achieved by increasing understanding of the comprehensive IoHE at university level by Workshops, Training sessions at EU partner universities on designing of the strategies and elaboration of indicators, guideline, etc. as a result the Institutional Strategies of I-tion & Mobility (including IaH action plan) at each PCs university will be elaborated and adopted at each PCs partner HEIs [2].

- To build students' intercultural knowledge and sensitivity to cultural diversity by transforming PC HEIs' International Relations Offices (IROs) into vibrant multicultural focal points. [2] Enhancing institutional capacities for effective participation in large-scale international collaborations will change the situation by increasing scope and quality of international partnerships, management of ICM and increasing the participation in EU mobility schemes and large-scale research programs, developing infrastructure to support campus diversity and assisting international students. The project is built around the concept of IaH that shifts

institutions' focus of attention from outbound mobility to virtual mobility and on-campus intercultural engagement (through the FRIENDS Teahouses) for the benefits of non-mobile students' global competence and employability. In the long run, PC HEIs students and graduates' enhanced employability will contribute to increasing PC HEIs competitiveness too.

During the implementation of project activities and project management will probably come to the certain situations which will contribute to the expansion of the set goals. A set of goals, which are currently appointed, represent the minimum of those who want to implement the PCs partners. The consortium was set up in a way to ensure the effective implementation of the participation of public universities and the state institutions. If there be changes in the situation in individual activities/work packages they will have to be reconciled with the project activities and approved by the PCB in accordance with the proposed allocation of resources. If such changing situations contribute even more innovative character, they will represent the added value.

3.2 The current practice of QBU internationalization compared to other HARMONY partner country institutions, the achievements and limitations

3.2.1. The practice of QBU Internationalization strategies compared to other HARMONY partner country institutions

In Vietnam, there are two universities joining the HARMONY project from 2021-2024 that are Danang University and

Quang Binh University. When developing the HARMONY proposal, the proposers took several issues of each partner country into account. There was the literature of the research, the governmental and non-governmental organizations' documents and the SWOT analysis and the several problems and needs of Partner Countries (PCs) institutions which were clearly identified.

As a partner country, QBU was required to complete a survey form with some questions to answer related to the current situation of internationalization implementation at the institution. The data and the report of the current practice of QBU internationalization strategies of QBU was sent to the coordinating university of the HARMONY project and analyzed then was reported in the detailed proposal of the HARMONY project. The following summary of the current practice of QBU internationalization strategies from 2015-2020, the achievements and limitations will be presented based on the report in the detailed proposal of the HARMONY project and the data collected from questionnaires filled by QBU managers, researchers and administrative staff. The data is also usefully utilized for doing the report and building up the profile of QBU internationalization at the national level.

In comparison with other universities from India and Bangladesh, the two Vietnamese institutions share some weakness in management processes of internationalization of education and research. However, the specific needs and problems of each institution clearly

analyzed in the HARMONY project proposal are relatively different and varied. There are two universities from Bangladesh that are P5-DIU/BD, P6-ULAB/BD; three universities from India that are P9-VIT/IN, P10-NMIMS/IN, P11-UoH/IN. In Bangladesh, P5-DIU/BD showed non-neglectable numbers of student mobilities and exchange of knowledge. [2]. The need for virtual exchange is primary for facilitating a meaningful intercultural experience, exchange of the knowledge, development of what have been recognized as employability skills such as digital competence (the ability to communicate and collaborate effectively online), foreign language competence, communication skills, media literacy and the ability to work in a diverse cultural context. P6-ULAB/BD showed weak knowledge and experience in ERASMUS+ program. The problem is relevant to all PC HEIs involved. According to European Commission statistics, Bangladesh has less than 10 CBHE projects (selected in 2015-2017) from all 177 CBHE projects for ASIA (selected in 2015-2017). Regarding student and staff mobility, Bangladesh is in the last position from all Asian countries, with mobility flows to EU countries [2]. Related to Jean Monnet Projects, out of a total of 966 successful applications to Jean Monnet between 2014 and 2017, 21 are Asian projects and no one is managed by an institution from Bangladesh or other PC HEIs from HARMONY consortium. Figures speak for themselves about the knowledge and experience of an ERASMUS+ Program.

In India, P9-VIT/IN has a need and support required to build students' intercultural knowledge and sensitivity to cultural diversity by transforming the International Relations Office (IRO) into a vibrant multicultural focal point. Staff and researchers have a weak knowledge about European Research Area, in general, and Horizon 2020 program, in particular. Within a short time of becoming a University in 2001, VIT has risen to the expectations of Government organizations, research institutes, mission-critical organisations like Defence establishments, the Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO) and Atomic Research Centres. VIT also offers consultancy services worth more than 2.2 million to the Defence Research and Development Laboratory. Controversial is the fact that VIT didn't ever join the Horizon 2020 program even though they are so strong in the research area [2]. P10-NMIMS/IN declared extremely low student and staff mobility figures of non-mobile exchange with no access to global skills & knowledge. The problem is relevant to all PC HEIs involved. In ASEAN region, most efforts for student mobility have been streamlined through programmes like AIMS (Asia International Mobility for Students), UMAP (University Mobility in Asia and the Pacific) and SHARE (a program of European Union Support to Higher Education in the ASEAN Region) whose collective long-term goal is the ASEAN HE area integration in view of ASEAN Economic Community's single market development. AIMS targets exclusively elite students and in 2012-17 only 1200

student mobilities were carried out. UMAP's impact is even more subtle with 380 student mobilities conducted in 2011-15 [2]. In light of ASEAN population and the total number of approx. 2300 HEIs across the region, AIMS and UMAP figures speak for themselves. SHARE program (2015-18) is EU supported and includes inter alia a mobility strand. In P11-UoH/IN, there is a need and support required to consolidate university integrative function by development and implementation of meaningful, transparent and far-reaching institutional strategies, policies and measures that will ensure a long-term systematic and strategic approach to the internationalization of PCs higher education and research, facilitate international relations across Asian universities and raise the quality and scope of EU-Asia partnerships [2]. Presently there is a limited exchange of students (mobility) between UoH and Asian Universities at the master and Ph.D. level, although the University has been a member of the SII program started by the MHRD, Government of India and has a good reputation ranked around 600 in the World QS rankings.

Through the evaluation of the HARMONY project researchers, 'the actual internationalization activities in Vietnam are narrow, fragmented, inconsistent, inefficient across different institutions'. The two partner universities in Vietnam P7-UD/VN and P8-QBU/VN shares the similarity in the weak institutional management processes of internationalization of education and research in general and IaH, in particular

and the needs consolidate university integrative function by development and implementation of institutional strategies on IoHE. However, the specific problems lying under the internationalization action and plan are slightly different. P7-UD/VN needs to improve the unbalanced mobility flows of students and the decrease of international exchange students, from 110 students in 2018 to 70 students in 2019. Whereas, P8-QBU/VN needs to build up the institutional capacity on international relations and research project management so that the institution would probably increase the number of cooperation agreements with universities from other parts of the world, especially from EU Countries. At P8-QBU/VN there is an urgent need of improving the ability and the level of English language of students and staff, promoting the small number of mobility flows incoming and outgoing students and staff, especially developing the knowledge and experience in international projects.

3.2.2. *Achievements*

In this part, the achievements P7-QBU/VN has gained during the implementation of the internationalization strategies up to 2020 will be presented as the evidence for the general evaluation and appreciating the great effort of QBU managers and staff. The accomplishment of the internationalization strategies will be categorized in mainly in the institutional aspects:

- In terms of the International projects, in the period 2015-2021, QBU has made great efforts to participate in 2 small projects sponsored by Regional English Language

Officers (RELOs) and apply for some international projects and programs. As a result, in 2018 the university successfully applied for the 2-year English Access Microscholarship Program sponsored by the U.S through the USA Embassy. In 2020, QBU became a partner country of the project HARMONY, Erasmus Program sponsored by EACEA, EU Commission. In 2021, QBU successfully applied for the 2-year English Access Microscholarship Program sponsored by the U.S through the USA Embassy for the second time. With the mentioned projects, QBU has got its very first experience in implementing the international projects sponsored by US and EU. This can be considered as one of the great opportunities in internationalization strategies implementation of the institution [3].

- In terms of the international cooperation activities and exchange programs for lecturers and students, QBU has strengthened and developed relationships with prestigious educational and training institutions in Thai, Korean, Japanese, US, Polish, and Taiwan universities. QBU has made great efforts in encouraging research groups to actively seek research cooperation programs and projects with foreign countries, encouraging lecturers to look for scholarships and funding to study and improve their professional qualifications and attract overseas Vietnamese intellectuals to cooperate with the University and people trained in advanced countries to work [3]. The international cooperative programs are diverse and colorful with joint training programs with

universities in Thailand under the 2 + 2 or 3 + 1 model; language and cultural exchanges for lecturers and students with universities in South Korea, Japan, Thailand, China, Taiwan; apprenticeship in Thailand and Taiwan; microscholarship of English Access for students' improvement of English skill. QBU also focused on building and developing a team of highly qualified scientific staff for ICD activities to implement ICD in the context of mutually beneficial cooperation for development in the current context of multilateralization. The emphasis is also put on improving the English website and actively promoting and communicating about the University, the situation of socio-economic development, potential strengths, historical traditions, culture and people of Quang Binh.

3.2.3. *Limitations*

Besides the achievements that P7-QBU/VN has gained during the implementation of the internationalization strategies up to 2020, some limitations should be carefully considered for better improvement of internationalization in the next period. The analyzing of the limitations will be referred from the institutional aspects and the individual researchers, teachers, trainers aspects.

- Institutional aspects: One disadvantage is that QBU has got its first experiences in implementing international projects, therefore, it has not built up supportive regulations and rules. There is no project office that is in charge of managing and supporting the project activities. In terms of internationalization strategies and policies, the currents have

not worked efficiently enough to promote internationalization mobility, increase the MOU number signed with many international higher institutions around the world, and develop the international collaboration programs. In recent years, the internationalization actions of QBU seem to meet more challenges due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

- Individual aspects (researchers, teachers, trainers). There are some considerations in the individual aspects including the language barriers; staff interest and involvement; professional development opportunities. As can be seen in QBU, researchers/teachers/trainers faced the challenges in second language communication since QBU lecturers have made efforts to improve their English skill but the effectiveness is still not high. In addition, the limitation is shown in the encouragement for staff interest, involvement and professional development when there are not many chances provided for teachers with international studying and working experiences and when the staff themselves are not active and not well-prepared enough to seek these kinds of chances.

3.3. The significance and benefits of the HARMONY project to QBU internationalisation strategies implementation from the perspective of a partner country.

Innovation in the project applies fully to the work package 2 and 3, and covers three levels: national, institutional, individual. However, in this part, the author will only convey what benefits QBU can potentially get from the perspective of a partner country of the institutional and

individual levels.

At the very first thing, QBU will have a chance to get access to a new theory of HE internationalization which is called IaH. The perception of HEI is going to be reframed and the concept of IaH will be developed. It is expected that the HARMONY project will give QBU great support in improving the internationalization strategies and internationalization action plan in the next period. By switching the focus from outbound mobility to systematic institutional efforts for improving non-mobile students' global skills in domestic environments, IaH creates a paradigm shift and introduces an egalitarian community spirit where internationalization is not a privilege of the few any more but an asset all students can benefit from [4].

The second novelty applied in HARMONY is that QBU will have the holistic approach to IaH that is perceived as a combination of diverse but complementary measures [6] for intervention into QBU Internationalization formal and informal curriculum. The comprehensive IaH infrastructure built in HARMONY through the International Boost Camp, FRIENDS Teahouses and the subsequent extended stakeholder networks enhances QBU students' experience and builds complex skills much needed in a globalized world.

The HARMONY project puts great importance on extra-curricular learning (through FRIENDS Teahouses & validation of prior experiential learning) [2]. There will be a notion transferring of IaH in the way that students learn outside

the classroom at least as much as in formal settings is considered another novel concept of HARMONY applied in QBU.

Thematic content: The main innovative themes the project deals with include intercultural awareness, cross-cultural dialogue in academia, talent management and global competence, creativity, student engagement, stakeholder management in HE [2]. The global competence and ability of QBU staff and students will be added to the university value, making a great contribution to the HEI development of QBU.

Pedagogical methods: QBU will be able to gain more experiences in building extra curriculum and informal training program as HARMONY implements an array of innovative training and learning methods, namely virtual mobility, blended learning, validation of prior learning, peer-to-peer learning, mentoring, design thinking, simulation [5]. Through students' digital stories, QBU students are expected to get support for their learning through active self-reflection and self-evaluation.

Technology: HARMONY is designed to maximize the benefits of ICT. QBU has a great opportunity to promote its virtual connection in education through the HARMONY project. Also, QBU students and staff will revise key knowledge areas and will exchange their knowledge with other cultures without borders.

3.4. The suggested solutions for better improvement of QBU internationalization implementation in the period 2021-2030

The recommendations will be made covering the aspects of QBU internationalization implementation in

terms of international relation management promoting, project office developing and internationally students network enhancing at the institutional and individual levels:

- **Institutional levels:** In order to support for the international projects implementation, the development of IPO should be taken into the consideration. It is recommended that the regulations and rules of IPO should be drafted and put in effect as soon as possible. The IPO management will be useful and effective in the way that all the implemented project activities will be under the management of the IPO including the major content issues and financial matters. Additionally, there is an urgent need to update the internationalization policies and strategies that can bring about more chances to the lecturers and students to be engaged in an international learning environment.

- **Individual levels:** The problem mainly lies in the quality of the human resource including working capacity limitation and language barriers. Firstly, the profession of staff needs to be improved including their English skill, computer literacy and expertise. Teachers and trainers need more training to gain the ability to build up a cooperative program, need to acquire skill to manage and coordinate the project, can be more active to propose project ideas and seek outside funds. Secondly, QBU staff needs to have more chances to study more about the internationalization trend of the higher education institutions in the world. In another aspect, in order to improve the staff interest and involvement, raising awareness of the employees about the

significance of promoting international relations and a specific guideline is really necessary to help QBU lecturers and staff get access to the working path of building international collaboration programs.

4. CONCLUSION

Along with training programs and research development, internationalization of HEIs can be considered as one of the most vital elements of each institutional development. There have always been changes in every industry of the world, and it is inevitable for the education sector especially in the pandemic situation. Therefore, each HEI, despite a strong or weak one, needs to update the internationalization policies and strategies in order to meet the requirements of the changes and new situations. For Vietnam in general and QBU in particular, the heading way is so striking and challenging that for the radical development, the institution will have to make a significant swift change in internationalization and other aspects as well.

As there is still a big research gap on internationalisation in Vietnam in general

and QBU in particular, there will a high need for QBU to make a better preparation for internationalization process by carrying out more reasearch and studies on HEI at the campus and learning from the internationalization experiences of many other countries in the world such as China, Korea, USA and Europe. Similar lessons can be gained from the practice of Internationalization taken at other Vietnamese university such as Vietnam National University, National Economics University, University of Economics Ho Chi Minh City and Danang University so on. Some points should be taken into consideration for QBU to attract international students are, “to focus on factors that attract students such as: job opportunities after graduation; international standard learning environment; receive support and advice when needed; live in a safe, multicultural environment, participate in extracurricular activities; scholarship support; tuition fee policy; support employment and have a policy of caring for students after graduation” [7].

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