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Innovation in Higher Education Governance Toward a Modern and Professional University Governance Model for Sustainable Development and International Integration: A Case Study of Thu Dau Mot University

Tạ Thị Thanh Loan

Thu Dau Mot University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

ABSTRACT: The transformation of higher education governance has become a critical issue in the context of globalization, digital transformation, and the knowledge-based economy. Universities are increasingly required to adopt modern governance models that enhance institutional autonomy, accountability, innovation, and international collaboration. This study analyzes the requirements for innovation in higher education governance toward a modern and professional governance model that supports sustainable development and international integration. The research applies qualitative methods, including document analysis and case study approaches. A conceptual framework for modern university governance is proposed, integrating key elements such as university autonomy, professional governance systems, digital transformation, stakeholder engagement, and internationalization. Thu Dau Mot University in Vietnam is examined as a case study to illustrate governance reform practices in an emerging higher education institution. The findings indicate that governance innovation contributes significantly to institutional development, educational quality improvement, and international cooperation. However, challenges remain in terms of managerial capacity, financial sustainability, and international competitiveness. The study suggests that universities should strengthen governance structures, enhance digital governance, promote international partnerships, and develop professional management capabilities to achieve sustainable development and global integration.

KEYWORDS: higher education governance, university autonomy, governance reform, internationalization, sustainable development, digital governance

I. INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions play a crucial role in the development of knowledge economies and innovation-driven societies. Universities are no longer merely institutions for teaching and research but have become central actors in economic development, technological innovation, and social transformation. As globalization intensifies and knowledge becomes a key driver of competitiveness, higher education institutions must continuously adapt their governance structures to meet emerging challenges. In recent decades, higher education governance has undergone significant transformations worldwide. Universities are increasingly required to adapt to rapid technological development, global competition, and evolving societal demands. These pressures have encouraged institutions to transition from traditional centralized administrative models toward more flexible, participatory, and accountability-oriented governance structures.

Traditional governance systems in many universities were largely bureaucratic and centralized. These systems focused primarily on administrative control rather than strategic leadership and institutional autonomy. However, contemporary higher education systems increasingly require governance models that are flexible, transparent, and responsive to societal needs.

Governance reform has therefore become a major priority in many national higher education systems. Modern university governance emphasizes institutional autonomy, accountability, strategic leadership, stakeholder participation, and evidence-based decision-making. These principles are essential for improving the quality of education, strengthening research performance, and enhancing universities' global competitiveness.

In Vietnam, higher education reform has accelerated significantly in recent years. The revised Law on Higher Education (2018) introduced important governance reforms, including expanded university autonomy and stronger roles for university councils. These reforms aim to create more flexible and efficient governance systems in Vietnamese universities. The reform of

higher education governance has become a key policy priority, particularly following the implementation of the Higher Education Law and its amendments promoting institutional autonomy. Universities are expected to enhance internal governance mechanisms, improve accountability, strengthen stakeholder participation, and align institutional strategies with national socio-economic development goals.

Despite these policy changes, many universities still face significant challenges in implementing modern governance models. Issues such as limited management capacity, insufficient financial resources, and weak international collaboration continue to affect institutional performance.

Within this context, Thu Dau Mot University has emerged as an illustrative case of governance reform among public universities in Vietnam. Established in the rapidly developing province of Binh Duong, the university has undertaken a series of reforms to modernize its governance system, improve decision-making processes, and enhance institutional performance.

This case study examines the governance reform process at Thu Dau Mot University, focusing on the transformation of governance structures, leadership practices, decision-making mechanisms, and stakeholder engagement. The study also analyzes the challenges faced during implementation and evaluates the outcomes of the reform efforts. This study aims to analyze the key requirements for governance innovation in higher education institutions and propose a conceptual framework for modern university governance. Additionally, the study examines governance reform practices at Thu Dau Mot University as a case study to illustrate how governance innovation can contribute to institutional development and international integration.

The purpose of this case study is threefold:

1. To analyze the governance structure and management model of Thu Dau Mot University prior to reform.
2. To examine the strategies and processes implemented to reform university governance.
3. To evaluate the impacts and lessons learned from the reform process.

By examining this case, the study contributes to a better understanding of governance transformation in Vietnamese higher education institutions and provides practical insights for other universities undergoing similar reforms.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Higher Education Governance

Higher education governance refers to the structures, policies, and processes used to guide decision-making and management within universities (Salmi, 2009). Effective governance ensures that universities operate efficiently while fulfilling their missions in teaching, research, and community service.

According to Altbach et al. (2018), successful higher education governance models typically include three major components: institutional autonomy, strong leadership and management capacity, and adequate financial resources.

Scholars emphasize that governance is one of the most important determinants of university performance. Universities with effective governance systems tend to achieve better academic outcomes, stronger research productivity, and higher global rankings.

Modern governance models typically involve decentralized decision-making, institutional autonomy, strategic leadership, and stakeholder participation. These governance characteristics allow universities to respond more effectively to changing economic and social conditions.

University Autonomy and Accountability

University autonomy has been widely recognized as a critical factor in improving the quality and efficiency of higher education systems. Autonomous universities have greater flexibility in curriculum design, faculty recruitment, and financial management. However, autonomy must be accompanied by accountability mechanisms to ensure transparency and responsible management of public resources (OECD, 2019).

However, autonomy must be accompanied by accountability mechanisms. Universities must ensure transparency in financial management, quality assurance, and institutional performance. Accountability mechanisms include accreditation systems, performance evaluation, and public reporting.

Balancing autonomy and accountability is therefore a key challenge in modern higher education governance.

In the Vietnamese context, autonomy reforms aim to empower universities to make strategic decisions while maintaining accountability to the government and society.

Internationalization of Higher Education

Internationalization is considered a key strategy for improving the quality and reputation of universities. Knight (2012) defines internationalization as the integration of international and intercultural dimensions into teaching, research, and

institutional management. Internationalization has become an essential strategy for universities seeking to enhance academic quality and global competitiveness. Internationalization includes student mobility, faculty exchange, international research collaboration, and joint academic programs.

Universities that actively promote international collaboration, student mobility, and joint research projects often achieve higher academic visibility and global competitiveness.

Digital Transformation in University Governance

Digital transformation is reshaping higher education systems worldwide. Universities are increasingly adopting digital technologies to improve governance efficiency and academic delivery.

Digital governance includes the use of integrated management systems, data-driven decision-making, digital learning platforms, and online administrative services. These technologies help universities improve operational efficiency and enhance student learning experiences.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study adopts a qualitative research design to analyze governance innovation in higher education institutions.

Two main research methods were applied:

Document Analysis

Relevant academic literature, policy documents, and institutional reports were reviewed to identify key governance concepts and reform trends in higher education.

Case Study

Thu Dau Mot University was selected as a case study to analyze governance reform practices in a Vietnamese public university. Institutional reports, strategic plans, and publicly available documents were examined to understand governance transformation within the university.

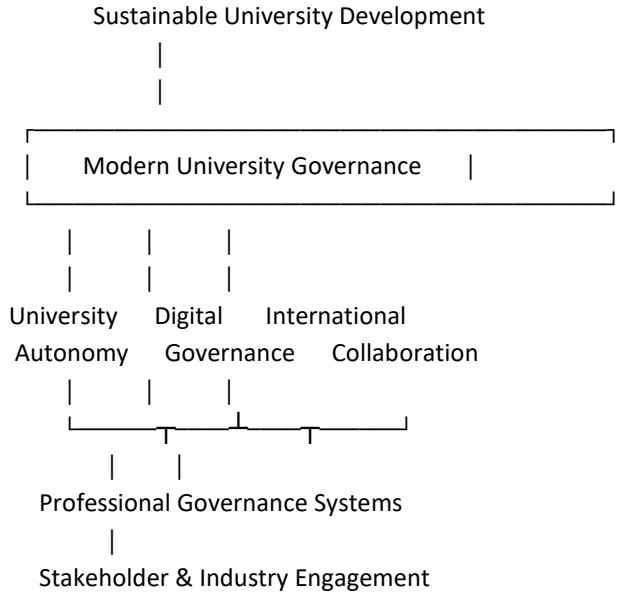
The case study method allows the research to explore governance innovation in a real institutional context.

Conceptual Framework of Modern University Governance:

Based on the literature review, this study proposes a conceptual framework for modern university governance that integrates five key components:

- University autonomy
- Professional governance structures
- Digital governance and data-driven management
- Stakeholder engagement and university–industry collaboration
- Internationalization of higher education

These components interact to create a governance system that supports sustainable institutional development.



This framework suggests that sustainable university development depends on integrated governance reforms across institutional, technological, and international dimensions.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Key Requirements for Modern University Governance

Strengthening Institutional Autonomy

Institutional autonomy is essential for enabling universities to respond effectively to changing academic and labor market demands. Universities must have the authority to make strategic decisions regarding academic programs, faculty recruitment, research priorities, and financial management.

Developing Professional Governance Systems

Modern governance requires professional leadership structures, including effective university councils, strategic planning systems, and transparent decision-making processes.

Universities should also invest in developing professional administrative staff with strong management skills.

Promoting Digital Governance

Digital technologies play an increasingly important role in modern university governance. Integrated management systems, digital learning platforms, and institutional data systems allow universities to improve decision-making and operational efficiency.

Strengthening University–Industry Collaboration

Universities must actively collaborate with industry partners to ensure that academic programs align with labor market needs and technological developments.

Industry partnerships also provide opportunities for applied research and innovation.

Expanding International Collaboration

International partnerships allow universities to enhance research capacity, improve academic quality, and strengthen global visibility.

Universities should promote joint research projects, international student exchanges, and collaborative academic programs.

B. Governance Reform at Thu Dau Mot University

1. Background of Thu Dau Mot University

Institutional Context

Thu Dau Mot University is a public university located in Binh Duong province, one of Vietnam's most dynamic economic regions. The university was established with the mission of providing high-quality human resources to support the province's rapid industrialization and modernization.

Since its establishment, the university has experienced rapid expansion in terms of student enrollment, academic programs, and infrastructure. The institution offers a wide range of undergraduate and postgraduate programs in fields such as education, economics, engineering, information technology, social sciences, and humanities.

However, like many emerging universities in Vietnam, Thu Dau Mot University initially adopted a traditional governance model characterized by centralized decision-making, hierarchical administrative structures, and limited institutional autonomy. While this model was suitable during the early stages of development, it gradually became inadequate in responding to the increasing complexity of higher education management.

The growing demands for quality assurance, international collaboration, digital transformation, and research development required the university to adopt a more modern and flexible governance framework.

Governance Structure Before Reform

Before the governance reform process began, the university's management system largely followed the traditional administrative model common in Vietnamese public universities.

Key characteristics of the governance structure included:

Centralized Decision-Making

Most strategic and operational decisions were concentrated at the top management level, particularly the Rector and the executive board. Faculties and departments had limited autonomy in academic and financial matters.

Administrative Orientation

The governance system focused heavily on administrative procedures and compliance with government regulations rather than strategic planning and performance management.

Limited Stakeholder Participation

Decision-making processes often involved a small number of administrators, with limited input from faculty members, students, or external stakeholders such as industry partners.

Fragmented Coordination

Communication and coordination among different departments and units were sometimes inefficient, leading to delays in decision-making and implementation.

These limitations highlighted the need for governance reform to enhance institutional efficiency, transparency, and responsiveness.

2. Drivers of Governance Reform

The governance reform at Thu Dau Mot University was driven by several internal and external factors.

National Higher Education Reform Policies

The Vietnamese government has introduced a number of policies promoting university autonomy and governance reform. The revised Higher Education Law emphasizes:

Institutional autonomy

Accountability and transparency

Establishment of university councils

Decentralization of decision-making

These policies encouraged universities to restructure their governance models and adopt more modern management approaches.

Regional Development Demands

Binh Duong province is one of the leading industrial hubs in Vietnam, attracting significant foreign investment and requiring a highly skilled workforce. As the province's key higher education institution, Thu Dau Mot University faces strong expectations to:

Provide high-quality human resources

Support local innovation and research

Collaborate with industry partners

Effective governance is essential for fulfilling these expectations.

Internal Institutional Needs

Internal factors also played an important role in initiating governance reform.

These included:

- Rapid expansion of academic programs
- Increasing student enrollment
- Growing demand for research activities
- Need for internationalization
- Pressure to improve educational quality

The existing governance system was not sufficiently flexible to support these developments, prompting the university leadership to initiate reform initiatives.

3. Governance Reform Strategies

To address these challenges, Thu Dau Mot University implemented several key governance reform strategies.

Establishment of the University Council

One of the most significant reforms was the establishment of the University Council, which serves as the highest governing body responsible for strategic decision-making and institutional oversight.

The University Council includes representatives from:

- University leadership
- Academic staff
- External stakeholders
- Local authorities
- Industry partners

The council plays a crucial role in:

- Approving strategic development plans
- Supervising university management
- Ensuring accountability and transparency
- Representing stakeholder interests

This reform marked a shift from a purely administrative model toward a governance model that emphasizes shared decision-making.

Decentralization of Academic Management

Another key reform was the decentralization of academic management.

Faculties and departments were granted greater autonomy in areas such as:

- Curriculum development
- Research planning
- Academic collaboration
- Teaching innovation

This decentralization allowed academic units to respond more quickly to changes in educational needs and labor market demands.

Strategic Planning and Performance Management

The university introduced a strategic planning framework to guide institutional development.

Key components included:

- Long-term development strategies
- Annual operational plans
- Key performance indicators (KPIs)
- Periodic performance evaluations

This approach helps align the activities of different units with the university's overall mission and vision.

Digital Transformation in Governance

Digital technologies have been increasingly integrated into the university's governance system.

Examples include:

- Digital management platforms
- Online administrative systems
- Learning management systems
- Data-driven decision-making tools

These technologies improve efficiency, transparency, and communication across the institution.

Strengthening Stakeholder Engagement

Governance reform also involved expanding stakeholder participation in university decision-making processes.

Key stakeholders include:

- Faculty members
- Students
- Alumni
- Industry partners
- Local government

Regular consultation mechanisms, advisory boards, and collaborative projects help ensure that the university's policies and programs are aligned with societal needs.

4. Challenges in Implementing Governance Reform

Despite significant progress, the reform process has faced several challenges.

Institutional Culture

One major challenge is the persistence of traditional administrative culture.

Some staff members may be accustomed to hierarchical decision-making and may initially resist changes that require greater accountability or shared governance.

Capacity Building

Effective governance reform requires strong leadership and management capacity.
Training programs are needed to help administrators and faculty members develop skills in:

- Strategic planning
- Performance management
- digital governance
- stakeholder engagement

Regulatory Constraints
Although national policies support university autonomy, certain regulatory frameworks still limit the flexibility of public universities in areas such as finance, staffing, and program development.
These constraints may slow down the implementation of governance reforms.

5. Outcomes of Governance Reform

Despite these challenges, governance reform at Thu Dau Mot University has produced several positive outcomes.
Improved Decision-Making Processes
The establishment of the University Council and the decentralization of authority have enhanced the transparency and inclusiveness of decision-making processes.
Enhanced Institutional Efficiency
Digital management systems and clearer organizational structures have improved administrative efficiency and coordination among different units.
Stronger Academic Development
Greater autonomy for faculties has encouraged innovation in curriculum design, teaching methods, and research activities.
Increased External Collaboration
Stronger engagement with industry and local stakeholders has expanded opportunities for internships, applied research, and technology transfer.

6. Lessons Learned

The case of Thu Dau Mot University provides several important lessons for higher education governance reform.
Leadership Commitment
Successful reform requires strong commitment from university leadership to drive institutional change.
Participatory Governance
Inclusive decision-making processes can enhance institutional legitimacy and stakeholder support.
Capacity Development
Continuous professional development is essential for building effective governance systems.
Alignment with National Policy
Governance reforms should align with national higher education policies while adapting to local institutional contexts.

V. CONCLUSION

Governance innovation is essential for higher education institutions seeking sustainable development and international integration. Modern university governance requires autonomy, accountability, professional management systems, digital transformation, and strong international collaboration. Governance reform has become an essential component of higher education transformation in Vietnam. As universities face increasing demands for quality, accountability, and innovation, effective governance systems are critical for institutional success.

The case of Thu Dau Mot University illustrates how a public university can implement governance reforms to modernize its management structures, enhance stakeholder participation, and improve institutional performance.

Although challenges remain, the reforms have contributed to more transparent decision-making, greater academic autonomy, and stronger connections with regional development needs. This case study highlights the importance of leadership, institutional capacity, and supportive policy frameworks in facilitating governance reform in higher education. The experiences of Thu Dau Mot University may serve as a valuable reference for other universities seeking to strengthen their governance systems in an increasingly complex and competitive educational environment.

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