



Cultural Foundations for Reform: The Role of School Culture in Vietnamese Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

The culture of educational institutions plays a pivotal role in the ongoing reform of higher education in Vietnam. It functions not only as a motivational force for both faculty and students but also as a foundation for establishing core values, behavioral standards, and a supportive learning environment. A robust and positive school culture significantly contributes to the enhancement of teaching and learning quality, while simultaneously promoting students' holistic development across moral, intellectual, physical, and aesthetic dimensions. Fostering such a culture necessitates active collaboration among educational institutions, families, and the broader society in shaping and nurturing the character of the younger generation. This paper seeks to elucidate the multifaceted role of school culture in Vietnam's higher education reform, focusing on four key dimensions: school culture as an objective of reform, school culture as a driving force for change, school culture as a regulatory mechanism in the reform process, and school culture as a core criterion in evaluating and guiding reform initiatives in contemporary Vietnamese higher education.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education constitutes a critical pillar of national education systems in the contemporary global context. In Vietnam, higher education has consistently been prioritized by both the Communist Party and the State, yielding notable achievements that have significantly contributed to human resource development across various revolutionary periods. In the current phase of national renewal, education and training, particularly higher education, are regarded as a "top national policy" with educational investment viewed as an investment in the country's long-term development. Given its strategic role within the national education framework, Vietnam's higher education system is now confronted with an urgent need for comprehensive reform. This reform must address fundamental aspects such as educational goals, content, curricula, pedagogical methods, and implementation strategies. The Resolution of the 13th National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam underscores this imperative, stating: "Continue to comprehensively reform educational and training objectives, content, curricula, methods, and approaches in a modern and internationally integrated direction, fostering comprehensive human development to meet new requirements in economic, social, and scientific-technical development and adapt to the Fourth Industrial Revolution" (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2021, p. 136).

Despite significant progress over more than four decades of reform, Vietnam's higher education system continues to encounter various limitations and challenges. As such, reforming higher education remains a central objective within the broader agenda of national transformation. Within this context, school culture emerges as a vital element, playing a decisive role in shaping and supporting the success of higher education reform efforts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Across both global and Vietnamese scholarship, culture, and particularly school culture, has become a central theme in discussions about educational development. Research conducted within cultural studies and educational sciences consistently affirms that school culture constitutes a foundational condition shaping the trajectory of higher education reform in Vietnam. Domestic studies approach this issue from diverse methodological angles, yet converge on the recognition that cultural infrastructures within universities strongly influence the effectiveness and sustainability of reform initiatives.

The work *Managing School Culture* underscores that the cultivation of school culture extends far beyond the creation of a supportive academic environment; it encompasses leadership practices, institutional arrangements, and long-standing scholarly traditions. Loc and Hien (2019) argue that university leaders play a pivotal role in upholding shared values and fostering conditions conducive to innovation in teaching and research. Similarly, *Building School Culture Today* identifies core dimensions of school culture, behavioral norms, organizational practices, and academic culture and maintains that institutions with robust cultural foundations are better positioned to advance educational renewal (Thiep, 2018). While *Building School Culture in General Education – Theory and Practice* primarily targets the general education sector, its practical

recommendations on cultural development offer relevant insights for higher education reform (Thuy, 2018).

Other studies emphasize communication and behavioral culture as determinants of academic quality. Ngan (2011), along with Binh and Ai (2022), demonstrates that nurturing constructive communication patterns within universities enriches the learning environment and supports the modernization of pedagogical approaches. Research on organizational culture also points to its decisive role: Loc (2009) and Huan (2007) show that institutions with cohesive organizational cultures are more capable of navigating structural change, enhancing governance, and improving the quality of training programs critical factors as Vietnamese universities pursue deeper international integration.

International scholarship provides complementary perspectives that broaden the conceptual and practical understanding of school culture in reform processes. Kennedy (2012), analyzing faculty autonomy and academic obligations in Western systems, raises important considerations for building a more autonomous academic culture in Vietnam. Leadership-focused studies by Peterson and Deal (2009), Hinde (2010), and Stolp (2005) highlight how strategic cultural leadership promotes collaboration, creativity, and shared commitment to educational quality, qualities essential for reform-oriented universities. Farmer (1990) further stresses that organizational culture is a determinant of effective change management in higher education, offering useful analytical tools for Vietnamese educational leaders. Likewise, Amiel and Jacobs (2000) emphasize the necessity of governance structures that strengthen academic culture, guiding professionalizing university management in the Vietnamese context.

Taken together, these bodies of research affirm that school culture is not merely an accompanying feature of university life but a driving force shaping the direction and depth of reform in Vietnamese higher education. A strong academic culture empowers faculty and students to realize their creative capacities, nurtures institutional autonomy, and reinforces social responsibility. While cultural development is widely acknowledged as essential, gaps persist regarding concrete frameworks and operational strategies for embedding school culture into higher education reform efforts. Vietnamese universities thus face the imperative of translating cultural principles into actionable policies that can catalyze institutional transformation rather than treating culture as a peripheral concern. Integrating insights from both domestic research and international experience will be crucial for designing models of university culture that support a modern, dynamic, and innovative higher education system.

METHODS

Grounded in the worldview and methodological orientation of dialectical and historical materialism, this study employs a scientific and objective framework for examining and interpreting the research problem. Within this overarching paradigm, a combination of specific methodological tools is applied to ensure analytical rigor and a comprehensive treatment of the subject matter. The integrated use of analytical and synthetic reasoning enables the study to

examine individual components in depth before constructing broader conceptual conclusions. Inductive procedures are used to derive general patterns from empirical observations, while deductive reasoning draws on established principles to illuminate particular cases. Comparative and contrastive methods further clarify convergences and divergences across relevant phenomena, and the interplay between logical structure and historical development is taken into account to ensure coherent, law-governed interpretation. Techniques of abstraction and generalization are also employed to refine conceptual categories and strengthen the systematization of key ideas.

Methodologically, the article combines a humanistic philosophical lens with an educational science perspective. This dual approach not only illuminates the theoretical dimensions of the topic but also underscores its practical relevance for educational practice and policy. Through this integrated framework, the study offers scientifically grounded arguments while contributing to the development of reflective understanding and critical thinking within the field.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Concept of Culture, School Culture, and University Culture

Although culture has been defined in many ways across disciplines and scholarly traditions, most interpretations converge on a core idea: culture embodies the processes through which human beings cultivate values, refine behavior, and create conditions for an improved quality of life. Approached from a value-centered perspective, culture may be viewed as the comprehensive set of material and intangible achievements accumulated by humanity over time, reflecting the developmental level of both individuals and society at different historical stages.

Culture expresses itself through diverse systems, activities, and symbolic forms. Its multiplicity, rooted in differences of scale, tradition, identity, and modes of expression, is not merely a descriptive feature but a prerequisite for growth and innovation. Cultural diversity nurtures creativity, strengthens social vitality, and contributes to the progress of political, economic, scientific, and educational domains. Within this broad spectrum, the present analysis focuses specifically on school culture and its relevance to contemporary higher education reform in Vietnam.

School culture refers to the integrated whole of a school's material conditions and spiritual life, embodied in its vision, mission, educational philosophy, strategic goals, core values, leadership styles, management practices, and interpersonal relationships. These components collectively generate a shared set of norms and expectations that guide the behavior of the school community. Building on the general concept of culture, school culture can be understood as the ensemble of pedagogical, scientific, and value-based contributions created by members of the institution in support of its teaching, learning, and research functions.

University culture represents a more specialized form of school culture, shaped by the unique academic mission of higher education institutions. It comprises systems of values, beliefs, and behavioral norms that inform the thinking and actions of faculty, staff, students, and other stakeholders. University

culture evolves over long periods, gradually forming the distinctive identity of each institution. In this sense, university culture may be defined as a historically developed constellation of shared values and practices that underpin the university's academic ethos, reinforce its collective identity, and orient the institution toward fulfilling its educational and training mission.

The Role of School Culture in the Reform of Higher Education in Vietnam Today

In the context of Vietnam's ongoing higher education reforms, university culture, representing the most distinctive and advanced layer of the national education system, emerges as a decisive factor shaping both the direction and effectiveness of institutional transformation. As a multidimensional construct, university culture functions simultaneously as a *developmental goal*, a *motivating force*, a *regulatory mechanism*, and a *core criterion* through which reform outcomes are evaluated.

To begin with, school culture constitutes one of the fundamental goals of higher education reform. Emphasizing the transformative power of culture, President Hồ Chí Minh famously affirmed that "culture lights the way for the nation." This understanding is embedded in Resolution No. 33-NQ/TW of the 11th Central Committee, which underscores that culture must form "the solid spiritual foundation of society" and serve as a vital internal strength for achieving sustainable development and safeguarding national identity (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2014, p. 47). The same resolution highlights culture not only as a value to be protected but also as an essential force driving progress, placing it on equal footing with the political, economic, and social spheres (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2014, p. 48). From this perspective, culture embodies the comprehensive cultivation of human potential, physical, intellectual, and moral, toward the ideals of truth, goodness, and beauty. Its ultimate aim is to enhance human dignity and well-being through a balanced, inclusive, and sustainable quality of life across generations.

Within the higher education setting, university culture must therefore reflect both material conditions and spiritual values that align with the institution's mission, vision, and long-term objectives. It shapes the thinking, attitudes, and behaviors of university members, forming a distinctive institutional identity and setting each institution apart from others. By providing shared understandings and guiding norms, university culture influences virtually all domains of academic activity, orienting faculty, staff, and students toward collective goals and strengthening their motivation to pursue them. It also reinforces the core values that underpin the university's development philosophy and strategic direction.

As institutions tasked with preserving, transmitting, and advancing cultural and intellectual heritage, universities rely on culture as a strategic resource. A strong cultural foundation ensures stability, continuity, and resilience conditions essential for sustaining teaching, research, and community engagement. In this sense, culture is not merely an attribute of a university; it defines the very nature of the institution as a cultural entity.

During periods of reform, universities must continue nurturing their cultural mission by disseminating knowledge, fostering creativity, and contributing to social progress through education and research.

This viewpoint resonates with the argument advanced by Thuy, who maintains that “culture determines the longevity of an organization and holds particular significance for universities, where cultural identity is more intrinsic than in any other type of institution” (Thuy, 2018, p. 38). Entrusted with the responsibility of training high-quality human resources for national industrialization and modernization, universities inherit and renew national cultural traditions while simultaneously absorbing cultural and intellectual achievements from the global community. Through this dynamic, higher education institutions shape future generations who will continue cultivating and innovating culture.

Importantly, university culture plays a regulatory role by clarifying organizational structures, guiding content and direction, and coordinating the activities of all stakeholders. It ensures democratic participation, equality, and voluntary commitment in academic and creative work. These cultural characteristics enable universities to become genuine centers of knowledge production, ethical formation, and human development spaces that cultivate intellectual vitality and humanistic values. In doing so, university culture contributes directly to building educational outcomes that align with Vietnam’s broader goals for sustainable and inclusive national development.

School Culture as the Driving Force of Higher Education Reform

School culture, understood as a system of values continuously created, practiced, and transmitted across generations of university members, constitutes an essential source of motivation for institutional development. Among the many factors influencing university reform, culture is distinctive: it operates as an intangible yet profoundly influential force that shapes internal dynamics more deeply than external structural conditions. Through shared values and norms, school culture enables members to clearly grasp institutional goals, strategic orientations, and their own professional identity. This clarity fosters a sense of responsibility and encourages meaningful engagement in creative academic and organizational activities.

In a higher education environment increasingly characterized by competition, accountability, and responsiveness to labor market demands, the formative power of culture becomes even more significant. School culture provides direction and serves as the normative foundation upon which universities identify appropriate development models and cultivate institutional distinctiveness. These cultural foundations differentiate one institution from another, contributing to a healthy competitive landscape within the higher education sector. In this sense, school culture acts as a stabilizing and empowering platform that strengthens a university’s capacity to fulfill its mission. It supports comprehensive education by nurturing competencies, personal qualities, and culturally grounded relationships across the academic community.

School culture exerts a profound influence on teaching quality, training outcomes, and the overall effectiveness of educational activities. It shapes institutional reputation and brand identity, critical factors in attracting qualified faculty, motivated students, and meaningful partnerships. By cultivating norms of behavior, communication, and professional conduct, school culture creates a coherent value system that adapts to the requirements of educational reform and broader global trends. This cultural strength enhances institutional resilience, guides members in navigating emerging challenges, and contributes to building a strong, credible academic identity.

As a developmental force, school culture unlocks and amplifies the creative potential of faculty, staff, and students. It fosters a dynamic and supportive academic environment, enabling universities to carry out their core functions effectively. In today's knowledge-based society, the sustainable advancement of higher education institutions depends less on physical or financial resources than on the cultural depth and humanistic values embodied by their members. Creativity, ethical commitment, aesthetic sensibility, and intellectual integrity are cultural attributes that empower individuals and teams to innovate. While intellectual development can occur in many settings, meaningful institutional reform cannot be achieved without culture as an engine of transformation.

A positive, progressive, and healthy school culture nurtures trust, openness, collegiality, and sincerity. It promotes a democratic and psychologically safe environment that encourages cooperation, mutual support, and strong academic relationships. These interactions build cohesive academic communities whose collective strength drives institutional development. The emotional bonds and shared commitments generated through this cultural cohesion create an internal synergy essential for achieving sustainable reform.

Such a cultural environment also instills pride, honor, and a sense of purpose among university members by affirming their work as part of a humane and intellectually meaningful mission. This inspires dedication and creativity qualities indispensable in education, where human development is both the means and the end. Members may accept modest material conditions if they can work in an environment that respects dignity, values contribution, and supports personal growth. Conversely, institutions that neglect cultural development undermine their own educational mission, as no university can achieve excellence without a solid moral and cultural foundation.

In sum, a humane, democratic, and scientifically grounded university culture serves as a powerful driver of higher education reform. It encourages faculty, staff, and students to innovate and realize their full potential while performing their responsibilities. In Vietnam's current reform context, school culture must operate as the convergence of accumulated values, intellectual traditions, emotional bonds, and ethical standards. Only by leveraging culture as a source of transformation can universities meet reform demands, enhance educational quality, and contribute effectively to national development and long-term sustainability.

School Culture as the Regulatory System of Higher Education Reform

School culture functions as a regulatory system that shapes, moderates, and harmonizes the development of higher education institutions. Through its system of norms, values, rules, public opinion, and traditions, school culture influences every dimension of university life. It reinforces positive tendencies while helping to prevent, correct, and neutralize limitations and undesirable influences arising from both internal mechanisms and external pressures. In doing so, school culture contributes to the refinement of individual character, orienting members toward the enduring values of truth, goodness, and beauty. In particular, amid the distortions produced by market forces, school culture operates as a “spiritual safeguard,” a form of moral “immunity” that protects university members from anti-cultural tendencies that may infiltrate thought and behavior.

Within the university environment, school culture shapes cognitive styles, perspectives, and patterns of action. It fosters shared orientations for problem-solving, decision-making, and evaluation, thereby creating consensus in selecting directions for institutional development. Acting as a cohesive force, school culture binds members together into a unified community capable of fulfilling academic and social responsibilities through cooperation and mutual support.

Furthermore, school culture plays a regulatory role in harmonizing behaviors, preventing conflicts, and managing tensions that may arise in academic and administrative processes. It sustains a democratic, collaborative, and supportive environment for teaching, learning, and working. In moments of institutional difficulty, whether strategic, operational, or ethical, school culture serves as a stable foundation, both intellectually and emotionally, enabling the university to mobilize collective wisdom and make well-grounded decisions. It provides the ethical and normative framework necessary for maintaining organizational stability, integrity, and sustainable development.

As a moral and professional compass, school culture helps members define motivations, adjust attitudes, and cultivate work ethics consistent with institutional expectations. It strengthens responsibility, respect for rights and obligations, and the aspiration for self-realization in carrying out the university’s mission. These cultural foundations play an indispensable role in contributing to the broader reform agenda of higher education.

In the context of globalization, international integration, and the rapid advancements associated with the Fourth Industrial Revolution, cultural subjects within universities must transform perception and cognition into concrete action. They must demonstrate adaptive capacity, innovative thinking, and practical competence in an increasingly complex and unpredictable environment. As Duong (2013, p.11) insightfully notes: “If industrial civilization created a society that could be predicted to a certain extent, then the civilization of informatics, with modern information and communication technology, has made the new environment increasingly complex, uncertain, and constantly changing, forcing individuals to transform themselves to adapt and innovate”.

This observation highlights the imperative that university culture itself must evolve continuously. Only a dynamic and responsive cultural system can ensure that higher education institutions remain resilient, capable of navigating uncertainty, and prepared to meet the rapidly changing demands of contemporary society and the ongoing reform of higher education.

School culture as a core criterion of higher education reform

In the process of higher education reform—particularly within the framework of university autonomy school culture emerges as a foundational criterion for assessing institutional development and the effectiveness of educational transformation. This reform requires all university stakeholders to comply with legal regulations, institutional rules, cultural and ethical standards, political principles, and academic norms. These requirements together create an essential environment for fostering cooperation, mutual learning, and continuous improvement in the quality and effectiveness of education and training.

As such, the values embedded in school culture exert broad and deep influence on the reform process. School culture serves as a key evaluative criterion of educational transformation, expressed through the following dimensions:

First, school culture is a fundamental requirement for enhancing the quality of teaching and research. Amid rapid scientific and technological advances, the rise of the knowledge economy, and intensifying globalization and international integration, academic activities that integrate both teaching and research represent essential functions of a university. The principles of school culture must be deeply rooted in the academic environment, shaping what is known as scientific or academic culture. According to Nguyet (2013), academic culture refers to “the values present in a university’s scientific activities, concretized into standards, rules, and regulations that are recognized and adhered to, ensuring the quality of scientific activities from research to teaching and learning.” Loc and Hien (2019) further argue that scientific culture consists of three key components: standards for scientific research, requirements for individuals participating in scientific activities, and values regulating interactions within the scientific community (p.123).

A strong scientific culture thus underpins high-quality academic activities and constitutes an essential condition for fulfilling the university’s educational mission.

Second, school culture strengthens the professional autonomy of lecturers and scientific staff. Professional autonomy refers to the ability of lecturers and researchers to self-direct their expertise and career development through lifelong learning. As Hue (2012) emphasizes, autonomy highlights responsibility, critical thinking, and self-direction within cooperative and participatory relationships. This view underscores the alignment of autonomous behavior with values such as accountability, collaboration, and a positive outlook on life. Given the high level of scholarly engagement and the emphasis on academic freedom in higher education, lecturers must cultivate autonomy characterized by

intellectual independence, critical thinking, depth of expertise, and the capacity to evaluate and improve their academic work.

In the context of globalization and the knowledge economy, where human resources determine the competitiveness of nations, developing a high-quality academic workforce is a strategic priority. The 13th National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam reaffirmed this by emphasizing: “Along with highlighting the position, role, and social responsibility of educators, it is essential to strongly reform policies on incentives, focusing on building a qualified teaching and educational management workforce as a key step” (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2021, p.138).

Cultivating a progressive and ethical school culture is therefore crucial for enhancing the professional autonomy of lecturers and researchers, enabling them to contribute effectively to higher education reform.

Third, school culture shapes and refines students’ personalities. The cultural environment of higher education institutions plays an essential role in shaping students not only in terms of knowledge and skills, but also in terms of worldview, ideals, competencies, and character, aligning with the dual mission of national development and defense. The shift from a “knowledge-heavy” to a “competency- and personality-oriented” educational philosophy highlights the importance of school culture in fostering holistic student development. Through campus life and academic culture, students learn to identify their strengths and limitations, leading to greater self-awareness, self-regulation, and self-improvement. As central agents in the university environment, students also contribute to shaping a dynamic and healthy academic culture, thereby reinforcing school culture and advancing reform. This process reflects the cultural essence of Vietnamese education, combining national traditions and ethical values with global cultural achievements, grounded in Marxist-Leninist philosophy and Ho Chi Minh’s ideology.

Fourth, school culture guides the university’s community service mission. Community service encompasses activities that generate economic, political, cultural, social, and environmental benefits for society. Universities today are not only centers of education but also hubs of research, innovation, and technology transfer – contributing directly to sustainable development. The 1998 UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education affirmed that higher education plays a vital role in sustainable development and social progress (Hang & Le, 2009). Meanwhile, the International Commission on Education for the 21st Century highlighted four pillars of learning - Learning to know, Learning to do, Learning to live together, and Learning to be and clarified higher education’s specific functions, including preparing future researchers and educators, providing specialized training to meet socio-economic needs, expanding lifelong learning opportunities, and promoting international cooperation through research networks and intellectual exchange (Loc & Hien, 2019, p.130).

Within this ecosystem, lecturers and researchers must demonstrate not only academic expertise but also a strong sense of “social responsibility as intellectuals” (Loc & Hien, 2019, p.133).

Thus, school culture helps ensure that universities fulfill their community mission while contributing to social advancement.

Fifth, school culture supports global cultural development and integration. As social institutions, universities create knowledge, preserve cultural heritage, and transmit the cultural values of both the nation and humanity. The mission of university education extends beyond equipping students with knowledge and skills; it also involves contributing to humanity's intellectual achievements, promoting cultural development, and upholding the core values of truth-seeking, respect for truth, and creativity.

Academic freedom is essential in this process, serving as the basis for university autonomy and generating an intellectually vibrant academic environment in which creativity and innovation flourish. Kennedy (2012) emphasizes that universities are agents of both cultural transmission and cultural transformation, and that their survival depends on fostering a thriving intellectual community.

In Vietnam's ongoing higher education reform, developing a distinctive university brand must balance traditional cultural identity with global integration, aligning with contemporary trends in world higher education. International cooperation, therefore, must be guided by the school culture's goals, values, content, programs, and educational methods so that universities can integrate globally without losing their cultural integrity.

CONCLUSIONS

The construction of a strong university culture is an essential requirement within the broader strategic development of higher education institutions. It is intrinsically connected to each university's mission and vision, and functions as a key indicator of institutional identity, branding, and professionalism in the higher education landscape. For universities to achieve sustainable development, it is imperative to cultivate a positive and healthy academic culture that effectively contributes to the training and advancement of human resources aligned with the evolving needs of society. To this end, all cultural actors within the university, administrators, faculty, students, and staff must acknowledge their roles and responsibilities in shaping the institution not only as an academic entity but also as a cultural and social organization. A university should serve as a hub of education, intellectual innovation, democratic practice, and the promotion of humanistic values. The development of a strong university culture is a long-term, dynamic process that demands sustained commitment. It requires continuous investment of time, intellectual effort, and strategic vision from institutional leadership and stakeholders in order to formulate and implement the most effective pathways for institutional growth and transformation.

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