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Leadership styles of Vietnamese higher education leaders: Transformational, transactional, or laissez-faire

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ABSTRACT

Significant reforms are currently underway in Vietnamese higher education since it is in the phase of transformation to improve the higher education system. In implementing higher education reforms, leaders play a key role. This paper reports on phase one of a multi-method research: a quantitative approach using the multifactor leadership questionnaire to investigate the Vietnamese higher education leaders' leadership styles (i.e., transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership) to support the quality improvement in Vietnamese higher education. The multifactor leadership questionnaire was administered to 190 senior managers in nine State institutions in the Mekong Delta in Vietnam. The psychometrics of the multifactor leadership questionnaire for the Vietnamese sample confirmed the reliability and validity of the instrument with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.78. A principal component analysis was conducted, and all factor structures were stable and consistent. The findings from the multivariate analysis of variance showed that the leadership styles of Vietnamese higher education leaders were significantly different based on the educational background, but not on their gender. The descriptive statistics analysis on the demographic items indicated a trend that transformational and transactional leadership were more preferable than laissez-faire leadership in higher education leaders' performance.

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1 INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT OF VIETNAMESE HIGHER EDUCATION

Vietnamese higher education (HE) is in the phase of transformation to reform the education system. In this process, institutional leaders have emerged as powerful platforms for supporting the reforms. Tran and Nguyen (2011) also suggested that the

transformation of Vietnamese institutions requires a crucial role by institutional leaders.

After three decades of the Renovation (Doi Moi) Policy and the adoption of the 2005 Education Law, the Vietnamese HE has witnessed a massive growth in the State and private universities and colleges (MOET, 2005; Oliver, 2006; Dao and Hayden, 2010). Given the rapid expansion con-

founded by the government lead HE reforms, there has been exponential growth in HE service providers. To embrace the government HE reform, there is a need for leaders who appreciate contemporary university leadership practices to help implement the Doi Moi and improve the quality of the HE system. Vietnamese HE reform is raising questions for many institutional leaders. Institutional leaders' perceptions and leadership styles regarding managing and supporting staff are critical for strengthening the Vietnamese HE sector (Basham, 2010; Ngo, 2010; Tran *et al.*, 2011). However, under management of Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), HE leaders' power and flexibility in the State sector are quite limited compared to leaders in the private sector. For instance, the power of hiring, firing, or increasing staff salary in State institutions is very much restricted, because HE leaders in the State sector have to follow the general framework regulated by MOET, whereas leaders in the private sector have more autonomy concerning these issues.

Being influenced by the Communist party allegiance and market-oriented quality improvement, the contingent reward for innovative leaders in Vietnam is mostly restrained. The exchange of value process between institutional leaders and their staff is regulated in the Education Law. In other words, all of the recognition and rewards for staff achievement has to follow the regulations of Education Law; and HE leaders are hard to go beyond this mandate. In fact, HE leaders in the State sector are usually bound by the State guidelines and are constrained in rewarding their staff if their people make a great contribution. This is because rewarding excellent performance is not stipulated in the framework, and academics are expected to perform to the best of their ability at all times as part of their existing reward and incentive systems; recognition for incentivizing behaviour is not mentioned in the HE framework.

Although leadership practice of Vietnamese HE leaders can play a significant role in addressing the issue of supporting the reforms; studies in leadership styles of institutional leaders are very limited and nearly absent in the literature. Very few scholarly articles, journals or research discusses leadership styles of Vietnamese HE leaders. Basham (2010) and Ngo (2010) addressed that leadership styles and strategies strongly influence the effectiveness of their leadership in the academy. However, unlike many Western countries, in Vietnam, because all the State universities are in the management of MOET, many HE leaders are hesitant in making independent decisions to improve the

quality of education services of their institutions (Dao and Hayden, 2010). Therefore, the current paper reports on phase one of a multi-method study which investigated leadership styles of Vietnamese HE leaders to support the reforms with a focus on State HE institutional leaders and to what extent they are inclined to adopt transformational leadership in their practice. Meanwhile, phase two of the study which will be reported in a separated paper, investigated the Vietnamese HE leaders' priorities towards the quality improvement principles outlined by MOET. A qualitative approach using ranking scales and descriptive statistics was employed in this phase. The qualitative ranking scale results showed that Vietnamese HE leaders prioritised MOET's principles at high, moderate, and low levels. Non-significant differences were found in the ranking priorities of Vietnamese HE leaders based on demographic data.

2 LEADERSHIP IN VIETNAMESE HIGHER EDUCATION

The reform of national and institutional governance in Vietnamese HE is strongly influenced by HE leaders and their leadership practices. One of the features of leadership is noted as leaders preferred ways of performing his/her role. This is often noted as leadership styles (Antonakis *et al.*, 2004). Every leader has their own leadership style, and sometimes there is a combination of styles in their leadership as long as they find the appropriateness and effectiveness for their organisation (Avolio and Bass, 2004). To understand how leadership may be operationalized by leaders generally and in particular by Vietnamese HE leaders, the following section will analyse and discuss the strengths and weaknesses of selected theory and note their appropriateness to the Vietnamese HE circumstances.

2.1 Transformational leadership

Transformational leadership has captured the attention of many scholars' interests (Sarros and Santora, 2001; Antonakis *et al.*, 2004; Basham, 2010; Northouse, 2010), and has emerged as the central model in leadership research. Bryman (2007) described transformational leadership as part of the 'new leadership' paradigm, which gives more attention to the charismatic and affective elements of leadership. Northouse (2010, p. 171) defines "transformational leadership is a process that changes and transforms people. It is concerned with emotions, values, ethics, standards and long-term goals, where the focus on changing human values which in turn will improve the organisational practices". As a consequence of this broader focus, Burns (1978) argues that transformational

leadership is complex and potent. A transformational leader looks for potential motives in followers, seeks to satisfy higher needs, and engages the full person of the followers. It is argued that transformational leadership is better matched with the need of transforming leaders' and followers' beliefs about how to provide HE leadership in a rapidly expanding and quality driven reform in the HE sector. Additionally, Avolio (1999) and Avolio and Bass (2004) state that transformational leadership is also concerned with improving the performance of followers (staff) and developing followers (staff) to their fullest potential. It is different from the contingency theory and transactional leadership; both of which focuses more on tasks. Transformational leadership considers investment in human resource to stimulate organisation reform, which in turn targets the tasks. In fact, leaders will transform followers by engaging in transformational leadership behaviours (Bass, 1985; Sashkin, 2004).

In their design of the multifactor leadership questionnaire (MLQ) instrument to measure leadership styles, Avolio and Bass (2004) explain that transformational idealised influence (attributes and behaviours) refers to leaders who are admired, respected and trusted people. These leaders consider followers' needs over their own needs. They also share risks with followers and are consistent in conduct with underlying ethics, principles, and values. Inspirational motivation refers to leaders who talk and behave in a positive manner about the future with their followers. They provide meaning and challenge to their followers' work, whereas intellectual stimulation refers to the ways that leaders stimulate their followers' effort to be innovative and creative. They question assumptions, reframe problems, and approach old situations in new ways. Besides, individual consideration refers to leaders who pay attention to each person's need for achievement and growth by acting as a coach and mentor. They usually spend time teaching, coaching, and treating others as individuals rather than just as a member of the group.

Furthermore, the strengths of transformational leaders include attributes to learn, includes having the perspective to see that change is needed and what the consequences may be for continuing the same practices (Basham, 2010). Swail (2003, p. 12) also supports this statement by stating that transformational leaders who develop and communicate a vision and a sense of strategy are those who "find clear and workable ways to overcome obstacles and are concerned about the quality of the services their organisation provides, and inspire other members to do likewise." For these strengths of trans-

formational leadership, Gous (2003) states that transformational leadership is essential in HE so that continuous adaptation can be accommodated to meet the evolving demand for the economic and academic environment. This is very applicable to the current development in the HE sector in Vietnam where the HE services are being challenged to be more responsive to the labour market demand to support the economic and social demand of the country. Leaders who encourage and support transformational leadership tend to share power, by delegating responsibilities and engaging a larger number of stakeholders. They are also willing to learn from others thus establishing systems to receive feedback from other within the organisation and including their clients. Transformational leaders are sensitive to each team member's needs for achievement and growth.

In the changes of Vietnamese HE circumstance, the changes are complex, and it is not just about making necessary changes but to the whole culture of the HE sector (Dao and Hayden, 2010). Therefore, transformational leadership seems to be the most appropriate approach for State institutional leaders to support the reforms.

2.2 Transactional leadership

Transactional leadership is the process of exchanging values between leaders and their followers for the common good (Burn, 1978, 2012). Transactional leadership differs from transformational leadership in that the transactional leader does not individualise the needs of subordinates or focus on their personal development.

Transactional leadership is quite clear about requirements and rewards for subordinates. Although punishments are not mentioned, they are well understood, and formal systems of discipline are commonly in place (Basham, 2010). Basham (2010) believes that there are both strengths and weaknesses in the transactional approach. For instance, although transactional leadership can be described as aiming towards an exchange of valued outcomes, all exchanges frequently are not equivalent (Dienesch and Liden, 1986; Kuhnert and Lewis, 1987; Bass and Bass, 2008). In Vietnamese HE, rewarding excellent individuals for their contribution strictly follows MOET's framework in State colleges and universities. As a result, the reward most of the time is not equivalent to the individual's contribution. Similar is the case of punishment in Vietnamese HE system. At this point, rewarding and punishing norms seem to be out of transactional leaders' authority in the Vietnamese context.

In the current Vietnamese HE sector, leaders are required to manage and implement the State-approved mandate as the context is highly structured by policies and procedures. The authority to reward or punish followers of Vietnamese leaders strictly follows the State regulations. Unlike leaders in private institutions, leaders in State institutions do not have enough power to reward or punish their followers, despite the fact that rewards and punishments do exist in the system with specific regulations regarding how to implement them. Leaders in the State sector can only enforce what is stipulated by the State rules. There are legal guides on how to reward or punish staff in the Vietnamese State document system. Hence, when issues arise that may not be covered in the regulations, it creates confusion for leaders in the State sector. They are usually slow in reacting to these situations and make their subordinates dissatisfied. The current extensive use of transactional leadership in the State sector in Vietnamese HE seems to be inappropriate for the common goals of reforming and improving the quality of HE in Vietnam.

2.3 Laissez-faire leadership

Different from transformational and transactional leadership, laissez-faire leadership is recognised as a passive leadership style. Avolio and Bass (2004) describe laissez-faire leadership as a risk, avoidant leadership behaviour. A leader who is described as laissez-faire leader usually avoids getting involved when important issues arise. This type of leaders is often absent when needed, and avoid making a decision. These leaders frequently delay responding to urgent questions as well. Laissez-faire leadership style is also marked as a general failure to take responsibility for managing (Eagly *et al.*, 2003). In examining laissez-faire leadership in many organisations, Avolio and Bass (2004) found that strong negative associations with effectiveness and satisfaction were repeatedly obtained when

leaders were rated as frequently using a laissez-faire style of leadership. Similarly, Lowe *et al.* (1996) did the first meta-analysis of the literature and confirmed the negative effectiveness of laissez-faire style. Additionally, Foschi (1992, 2000; cited in Eagly *et al.*, 2003) states that leaders, especially women leaders, who manifested ineffective styles such as laissez-faire leadership may be deselected from leadership more quickly than their male counterparts. This has particular implication for the Vietnamese HE sector, which the majority are male leaders.

In sum, laissez-faire leadership exhibits a frequent absence and lack of involvement during critical junctures and lacks any concerted strategic effort. This type of leadership is also described as the least effective leadership style and rarely gets supported from followers in their organisations. Dao and Hayden (2010) found that Vietnamese HE leaders exhibit laissez-faire leadership style as they are slow to react and avoid responsibilities, and very hesitant in making decision. In the current context of Vietnamese HE, when MOET pilots the national HE system to conventional high-quality standards with many changes under the reform, laissez-faire leadership is inappropriate in stimulating MOET's strategies to be successful.

3 METHODOLOGY

The quantitative approach using principal components analysis statistics was applied as data analysis for the nine-factor MLQ. The nine factors are also the nine variables. These are investigated and matched to each leadership style (transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership). This paper reports a phase one analysis of a multi-method study which used a quantitative approach to explore the leadership styles of Vietnamese HE leaders and the extent to which they are inclined to adopt transformational leadership to support the reforms.

Table 1: The nine-factor leadership model

		Factors	Number of Items
Leadership Styles	Transformational Leadership	Idealised Influence Attributes (IIA)	4
		Idealised Influence Behaviour (IIB)	4
		Inspirational Motivation (IM)	4
		Intellectual Stimulation (IS)	4
		Individual Consideration (IC)	4
	Transactional Leadership	Contingent Reward (CR)	4
		Management-by-Exception Active (MBEA)	4
	Laissez-Faire Leadership	Management-by-Exception Passive (MBEP)	4
	Laissez-Faire Leadership	Laissez-Faire (LF)	4

The MLQs constructed by Bass and Avolio, fitted the task best as it aligns with key factors in trans-

formational leadership. The study used nine factors, including 36 items in an MLQ-short version.

The factors are idealized influence attributed (IIA), idealized influence behaviours (IIB), inspirational motivation (IM), intellectual stimulation (IS), individual consideration (IC), contingent reward (CR), management-by-exception active (MBEA), management-by-exception passive (MBEP), and laissez-faire (LF). Each leadership scale comprises of four items. Table 1 presents a construct of MLQ model.

3.1 Sample

Nine colleges and universities in the Mekong Delta region of Vietnam participated in this study. Most of them are three-year and four-year colleges, except for one university, which offers six-year programs. The institutions are located mostly in Can Tho City and surrounding Provinces in the Mekong Delta. A total of 207 senior managers and leaders in State colleges and universities took part in the survey of this study. They hold positions of Dean, Vice Dean of the Faculty/College/School, Director, Vice Director of the Centre, Head, Vice Head of the Office/ Unit, and President, Vice President of the Institution. Targeting this group is essential as they are the key decision makers, and their leadership style and perception of MOET’s principles are keys to making the reform successful. A total of 190 (of which 78 female) leaders participated in this study. Their educational background varied from Bachelor degree (39 participants) to Master degree (121 participants) and Doctoral degree (25 participants). Through screening data, 8.2% of the incomplete survey and untrustworthy responses were cut off, which left 190 responses in the final sample, calculating at 91.8% rate of return.

3.2 Procedure

This study used the self-administered and anonymous surveys to collect data. A clear instruction and sample items allow respondents to complete the questionnaire without supervision. On average, it took approximately thirty to forty-five minutes to fully complete the survey. The demographics and

the MLQ survey were presented in one set of documents. That way the researcher can readily recognise the survey’s sections to be completed by the same participant so that the administration of the data and interpretation about the relationship between their leadership and perceptions about leadership factors can be made logically and coherently.

3.3 Analysis

The MLQ analysis firstly undertook a principal component analysis (PCA) to confirm the validity of the MLQ instrument. The PCA was used to determine whether the data from sample sets confirmed the nine-factor model of leadership. In this current study, the PCA was constructed at both item and factor level. The MLQ factors included IIA, IIB, IM, IS, IC, CR, MBEA, MBEP, and LF variables. Since the factor structure was stable with the new sample, the multivariate analysis of the variance (MANOVA) was used to analyse how the demographic variables interacted with the leadership styles. The study explored demographic data to test the impact of gender and educational background variables and leadership styles of Vietnamese HE leaders.

4 RESULTS

The results of the analysis are reported in two parts; first, the robustness of the MLQ is determined through item reliability analysis and MLQ factor internal consistency analysis. The overall Cronbach’s alpha was 0.813 whereas; the individual Cronbach’s alpha of each item is all over 0.80. As a rule of thumb Cronbach’s alpha above 0.70 is considered satisfactory (George and Mallery, 2003). The internal consistency analysis of MLQ at factor level was determined by a series of scale reliability. At this level, MLQ survey within nine factors presented Cronbach’s alpha at a satisfactory rate, 0.732. The Cronbach’s alpha for each factor is in the range of 0.67 – 0.77.

Table 2: Internal consistency and reliability of the MLQ nine-factor survey

Factors	Number of items	Cronbach’s alpha (α)
Idealised Influence – Attributed (IIA)	4	0.693
Idealised Influence – Behaviour (IIB)	4	0.712
Inspirational Motivation (IM)	4	0.668
Intellectual Simulation (IS)	4	0.705
Individual Consideration (IC)	4	0.689
Contingent Reward (CR)	4	0.693
Management-by-Exception-Active (MBEA)	4	0.689
Management-by-Exception-Passive (MBEP)	4	0.735
Laissez-faire (LF)	4	0.774
Overall Cronbach’s alpha		0.732

Principal components analysis was used for testing the psychometric properties of measurement instruments and confirming the correlation of MLQ nine-factor. The instrument’s construct validity was tested in several studies in the Vietnamese context (Luu, 2010; Dao and Han, 2013) and produced stable results to demonstrate that the Vietnamese version of MLQ nine-factor was valid, and respondents fully understood the items even when they were translated into Vietnamese.

Second, a MANOVA within the subscales of demographic data constituted the independent variables, including gender and education background. A one-way MANOVA was conducted to identify the impact of gender, and education on MLQ factors.

The MLQ allows the researcher to measure the leadership styles that are employed by participants. However, the MLQ is not designed to label a leader as a solely transformational, transactional, or laissez-faire leader. Rather, it is more appropriate to identify a leader as more transformational than the norm or less transactional than the norm (Avolio and Bass, 2004). In this current study, the norms indicated by the MLQ’s manual were used to determine where participants fell on each factor and their overall leadership style.

To measure participants’ leadership styles’ inclination, the analysis firstly grouped items by the factor (see the MLQ manual for classification of items

and factors); then calculated an average score for each factor. For instance, the items which are included in the individualised influence attributed (IIA) are items 10, 18, 21, and 25. The scores for each participant were added for these items and divided by the total number of responses for that item. See Table 1 for the classification of factors and leadership styles.

Once the average of each leadership style (i.e., transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership) was calculated, a one-way MANOVA was re-run to test whether demographic variables (i.e., gender, and educational background) impacted on Vietnamese HE leadership styles. The Levene’s test of equality of error variances tested the homogeneity of variance assumption and confirmed the variances between these sub-groups were not equal, and the test did not violate the homogeneity of variance assumption for the MANOVA. In this analysis, the quantitative results using MANOVA compared the variance on each leadership style based on demographic data. This analysis was the initial quantitative analysis on leadership styles of Vietnamese HE leader. Therefore, an additional descriptive analysis contributed to a comprehensive understanding of overall Vietnamese leader’s leadership inclination. In performing MANOVA in the new groups of demographic items (including gender), findings are reported in Table 3.

Table 3: The multivariate analysis of variance test of demographic variables on leadership styles of Vietnamese HE leaders

Effects	Pillai’s Trace Value	F Value	Hypothesis df	Error df	P Value	Observed power
Gender	0.024	1.545	3.0	186	0.204	0.403
Education	0.046	2.907	3.0	181	<u>0.036</u>	0.686

As stated above, a one-way MANOVA was conducted to test the hypothesis that there would be a significant difference between gender (male, female), education (Bachelor, Master, Doctor) on the nine factors of the MLQ. It was unexpected that the multivariate test statistics were not significant for any of the demographic groups; but the observed powers of these tests were quite low (40.3% - 68.6%). This can be interpreted to suggest that there were still 59.7% and 31.4% chances for the multivariate test statistics in gender and education to be significant. The power of the test may be increased when the sample size is increased (O’Keefe, 2007). Furthermore, increasing the sample size provides more chances to detect differences between sub-groups that impacted the nine leadership factors. Overall, the power of the test to detect differences is increased when a larger sam-

ple size is investigated, and this is discussed in the next section.

To ensure that the statistical MANOVA test did not violate the assumption of homogeneity of variance, the Levene’s test of equality of error variance tested the homogeneity of variances of each dependent measure in this study. While the homogeneity of variances assumes that dependent variables exhibit equal levels of variance across the range of predictor variables, the Levene’s test should be insignificant to confirm that the homogeneity of variance was not violated. In other words, the dependent variables (nine MLQ factors) do not have equal variance. The finding showed that Levene’s test is insignificant for most of the dependent measures, except for the IIA factor. Therefore, the study confirmed that the homogeneity of variance assump-

tion was not violated, and dependent variables do not have equal variances, except the IIA.

As shown in Table 3, the gender analysis revealed an insignificant difference in the leadership styles of Vietnamese leaders, but significant difference was found a base on the educational background. Specifically, a statistically non-significant MANOVA effect was obtained, Pillai's Trace = 0.024, $F(3, 186) = 1.545$, $p > 0.05$. The multivariate effect size was estimated at 0.403, which implies that 40.3% of the variance in the canonically derived dependent variable was accounted for by gender. By contrast, a statistically significant MANOVA effect was obtained in the educational background. Pillai's Trace = 0.046, $F(3, 181) =$

2.907, $p < 0.05$. The multivariate effect size was estimated at 0.686, which implies that 68.6% of the variance in the canonically derived dependent variable was accounted for by educational level. Therefore, it is possible to suggest that gender does not influence on the leadership styles of Vietnamese HE leaders in the Mekong Delta region of Vietnam, but their educational background does.

Then, a descriptive statistics analysis on the mean and standard deviation (SD) of demographic variables was analysed to compare the leadership styles preferences of Vietnamese leaders. Table 4 presents the average scores and descriptive statistics of leadership styles of Vietnamese HE leaders.

Table 4: The average score and descriptive statistics on the mean and standard deviation of leadership styles

		Transformational Leadership Mean (SD)	Transactional Leadership Mean (SD)	Laissez-Faire Leadership Mean (SD)
Average Score (75 th Percentile)		3.10	3.38	1.6
Demographic Items				
Gender	Male	2.89 (0.39)	3.05 (0.50)	1.36 (0.62)
	Female	2.90 (0.39)	3.03 (0.45)	1.29 (0.46)
Educational Background	Undergraduates	2.75 (0.38)	2.88 (0.51)	1.20 (0.60)
	Postgraduates	2.93 (0.38)	3.08 (0.45)	1.31 (0.55)

Table 4 showed that at 75th percentile, the average score of participants who are inclined to use transformational leadership is 3.10 on the 4.0 scale. This means that 75% of participants scored lower, and 25% scored higher than 3.10. Similarly, the transactional leadership average score is 3.38 (over 4.0) at 75th percentile. This also means that 75% of participants scored lower, and 25% scored higher than 3.38. What is interesting in this data is that the average score of participants who were inclined to use laissez-faire leadership is very low (1.6 over 4.0, at 75th percentile). This result showed that the majority of participants did not use a laissez-faire leadership style in their practice, since 75% of participants rated lower than 1.6, and only 25% of participants rated higher than this score.

Overall, these results indicated that Vietnamese HE leaders are inclined to adopt transformational leadership and transactional leadership in their practice more than the laissez-faire leadership style. Although the number of HE leaders who had the average score higher than 3.1 and 3.4 for transformational leadership and transactional leadership, respectively only obtained 25% in the sample, there was an inclination to adopt transformational leadership and transactional leadership in HE leaders' practice. By contrast, Vietnamese HE leaders were not inclined to use a laissez-faire leadership style. In this study, the majority of Vietnamese HE lead-

ers self-reported that they adopt a transformational or transactional style of leadership.

The descriptive statistics on the mean and SD of demographic items in Table 4 clearly showed a trend of employing transformational and transactional leaderships in Vietnamese HE leaders' practice in more detail. Although there was a slight difference in the means and SD of demographic sub-groups, the inclination of employing transformational and transactional leadership was apparent (mean = 2.75–3.10). Similarly, a slight difference was shown in the mean and SD of laissez-faire leadership style (1.20–1.36). This also means that Vietnamese HE leaders' perspectives on employing laissez-faire leadership were slightly different. Laissez-faire leadership was less preferable than the other two leadership styles.

In sum, the findings from the MANOVA analysis showed that the leadership styles of Vietnamese HE leaders were not largely different based on their gender. However, leaders with different educational backgrounds were inclined to adopt different leadership styles. The descriptive statistics analysis on the demographic items indicated a trend that transformational and transactional leadership were more preferable than laissez-faire leadership in HE leaders' performance.

5 DISCUSSION

5.1 Leadership practice and gender of Vietnamese HE leaders

As stated and analysed in the literature above, transactional leadership seems to be the most popular leadership style in Vietnamese HE, particularly in the State sector, as it is highly structured and leaders are required to manage and implement the State approved mandate. However, MOET's reform agenda and strategies require leaders to be more inclined towards the transformational leadership style to support the reforms and transform the Vietnamese HE system fully.

The findings validated that the MLQ instrument is appropriate for investigating leadership styles of Vietnamese HE leaders. The study showed that the psychometric of the MLQ instrument is robust at both item and factor level. The multivariate analysis of variance tested the hypothesis that there is any significant difference between the demographic data (i.e. gender and education) and the nine factors in the MLQ instrument. However, there was no significant difference found as expected.

In the literature of leadership practice, many researchers have employed the MLQ instruments to explore leadership styles and effectiveness (Jung and Sosik, 2002; Barbuto *et al.*, 2007; Bryman; 2007; Basham, 2010) and have demonstrated the effectiveness of the MLQ. In the Vietnamese context, the MLQ was used by Luu (2010), Dao and Han (2013), and Ho (2013). These authors determined that the MLQ is appropriate for researching leadership styles in Vietnam, confirming face validity of the instrument for the study reported here. However, none of these studies focused on leadership in the Vietnamese HE sector, which may be considered as a gap in the literature on HE. The findings from this study are broadly consistent with the literature that the MLQ is valid and robust in the Vietnamese context, and contributes to the literature of leadership in HE as a valid instrument to investigate leadership styles and practices in Vietnamese HE.

Transformational leadership underpins this study with the assumption that it is the best option for supporting the reforms of the Vietnamese HE system – which relate to HE structure; the qualities of staff, including values and work ethics, and the administration system – to achieve international recognition. Therefore, the analysis of the leadership styles using MLQ based on gender and educational background of Vietnamese leaders aims to identify the differences in their leadership to understand the extent to which they are inclined to adopt

the transformational leadership style in their practice. The following discussion interprets Vietnamese HE leaders' leadership practice by gender and educational background.

Historically, leadership in Vietnamese HE has been dominated by males who themselves have highly authoritarian leadership styles. Since the increased involvement of females in leadership roles, it is possible that gender may impact on leadership styles and effectiveness. In most leadership and management studies, there is a significant difference between male and female leaders in their leadership styles (Hugh, 2005; Kotur and Anbazhagan, 2014). Research has shown that female leaders tend to exhibit more transformational leadership behaviour than male leaders (Rohmann and Rowold, 2009). Contrary to other studies, this current study found that there is no significant difference between male and female leaders in their leadership styles. This finding is consistent with the findings from Alhourani's (2013) study, which argued that gender does not impact on leadership effectiveness in the Lebanese and Egyptian contexts. Alhourani (2013) investigated the leadership style of males and females and concluded that there was no significant difference between the two groups of leaders in the three universities in Lebanon and Egypt.

This contradictory finding could be explained by the fact that recent urbanisation and globalisation and the increasing educational level of females in Vietnam could have influenced the results. The traditional view that Vietnamese women are less capable may not hold anymore (Druskat, 1994; Rohmann and Rowold, 2009). Also, the Vietnamese National Assembly has adopted laws on gender equality, while the Government has developed and effectively carried out several strategies, policies and programmes of action on the advancement of women and gender equality (Vietnamese Prime Minister, 2011). It is plausible that as result of these government-led interventions and the changing education levels, the status of Vietnamese women has been enhanced and gaps between male and female in all aspects of politics, society, economics and education have been narrowed. In the political field, in the Party's highest leadership body, the Politburo, the positions of Vice Chairwoman of the National Assembly and Vice State President are currently women. Hence, these national actions and policies of gender equality may be the key issues which influence the results of this study.

Additionally, Vietnamese women's qualifications and leadership positions in the Vietnamese aca-

demographic context have also been recently enhanced. The percentage of women in leadership and management has been increasing. Several women even hold the rector position in State universities (Funnell and Dao, 2013). Although the number of female rectors in Vietnamese HE is very low, the qualifications, academic status, and leadership positions of Vietnamese women show that they have begun to compete with men in the academic workplace. This academic status of Vietnamese women may be the reason for non-significant differences between male and female leadership practices in this study.

Since many policies and strategic programs now support and enhance the status of the Vietnamese woman, and advances have been made in women's education levels, the perception of female leadership has been changing in Vietnamese society. Women's ambitions to participate in and compete in the traditionally male-dominated arena of senior management in HE motivate their academic career, and drive their leadership style. Funnell and Dao (2013) reported that a female rector, rather adheres to a single style of leadership, she should combine her experiences through delegation. She could also be inclusive and collaborative in promoting participation, information sharing and team-building. The female rector can strengthen her leadership and professional skills by being active in professional, social and women's organisations. It is this perception of leadership that may explain the fact that no significant difference was seen between male and female leaders in their leadership styles in this study.

5.2 Leadership practice and educational background of Vietnamese HE leaders

Research focusing on the impacts of prior educational background on the leadership styles is limited in the literature (Barbuto *et al.*, 2007), and almost absent in the literature of Vietnamese HE leadership. Barbuto *et al.* (2007) and Sawati *et al.* (2013) demonstrated that leaders' prior educational levels did not have an impact on their influence tactics or leadership. Contrary to those findings, the findings from this study showed that Vietnamese HE leaders' prior educational background impacted their leadership styles.

In recent years, the national projects to enhance the quality of human resources, including enhancing educational background, have strongly influenced the desire of workers to improve their educational level. Particularly, human resources in HE are affected the most, since the Government requires the HE system to be responsible for training its leaders.

Therefore, the HE system has had to strengthen and enhance their human resources' educational level to implement MOET's goal: more effective leaders who are competent in their leadership and more inclined toward the transformational leadership style. For instance, to be eligible for opening a bachelor degree major by coursework, MOET (2011) requires the institution to have in their leadership team at least one person holding a doctorate, and three people in the teaching staff with master's degrees in that major. Consequently, the academic teaching staff are forced to enhance their educational background.

The findings from this study also showed significant differences in factors of transformational leadership and transactional leadership based on the educational background of Vietnamese HE leaders that can be interpreted as suggesting that Vietnamese HE leaders obviously have different perspectives on aspects of transformational leadership style, and are still influenced by transactional leadership. As mentioned above, transactional leadership is considered as the most common leadership style in the Vietnamese State sector of HE, as leaders are required to manage and implement the State-approved mandate. This suggests that the leaders' authority and discretion are quite limited in the State colleges and universities compared with the private sector. It is worth noting again that MOET manages the State sector very strictly with regulations. Therefore, MOET's tight management may influence leaders' perspectives and their leadership styles.

It suggests that monitoring staff deviances from standards, mistakes, errors and taking corrective actions (transactional leadership characteristics) may not be appropriate any longer in the Vietnamese HE context. With high demand from MOET to reform the educational system, leadership practice should be changed in the direction of reforming personnel issues to achieve common targets. Consequently, instead of monitoring followers' deviances from these targets, leaders should motivate, encourage, and mentor their followers to successfully lead them to the common goal. Overall, the Government's development strategies and control of the HE system strongly impact the findings of this study, which reflects the current context of Vietnam.

5.3 Inclination to adopt transformational leadership in Vietnamese HE leaders' practice

The study was designed to determine to what extent Vietnamese HE leaders are inclined to use transformational leadership in their practice, and

their perceptions of the transformational factors that underpin this study. As discussed above, the Vietnamese HE leaders' perspectives on transformational factors revealed significant differences based on educational background. Therefore, the following discussion interprets the implications of transformational in the Vietnamese HE context and considers its meanings about MOET's reform objectives.

As discussed above, transformational leadership in Vietnamese HE is believed to help the Government achieve its reform objectives. It can be interpreted from the findings that Vietnamese HE leaders have begun to adopt transformational leadership in their practice. Although this trend is not conclusive for the overall sample, significant differences in perspectives on transformational leadership were found in Vietnamese leaders with different levels of education.

The results of this study indicated that Vietnamese HE leaders' perspectives on transformational leadership differ significantly between leaders who hold an undergraduate degree (Bachelor) and leaders who hold postgraduate degrees (Master, Doctor). This can be explained by the fact that many Vietnamese HE leaders who hold postgraduate degree were trained in a university overseas, such as in the US, the UK, or Australia. In those countries, transformational leadership practice is more common than in Vietnam. These Vietnamese leaders have had more opportunities to work and communicate with people who are more inclined toward the transformational leadership style. Therefore, their perspectives on impacting other people, motivating their staff, and paying particular attention to their employees' needs and desires are quite different from those leaders trained in Vietnam.

In the context of Vietnamese HE, MOET (2013) requires leaders in the senior leadership and management positions to fully support the objective of reforming the education and training system, from the practice models to the teaching and learning pedagogies and ensuring there are enough human resource capacities in implementing this objective. This study found that the leaders who incline towards transformational leadership are more inclined to encourage their staff to achieve MOET's objectives because they are trusted leaders who will do the right thing and demonstrate ethical and moral conduct and high standards (Bass and Riggo, 2006). These leaders will assist MOET to achieve the common goals by their transformational leadership perspectives. Additionally, MOET indicated that one of the desired educational development strategies is the development of individuals and the

whole organisation. This requirement perfectly matches the motivation characteristic of a transformational leader, as Bass and Riggo (2006) state that leaders who have great inspirational motivation components will motivate and inspire their staff by clearly describing the meanings and challenges in their work. The findings showed that Vietnamese HE leaders perceive these factors in their leadership practice, although the leaders' perspectives still differ between those who hold postgraduate degrees and those who hold undergraduate degrees only. In sum, there is a trend to adopt the transformational leadership style among Vietnamese HE leaders. Although this trend is just beginning, the perception of how transformational leadership can support MOET's objectives is becoming more widespread among Vietnamese HE leaders.

Overall, it can be interpreted that Vietnamese HE leaders perceive and are inclined to adopt transformational leadership practices in their leadership. As transformational leadership is still a new concept to many Vietnamese leaders, it will take time for other leaders to adopt it. Additionally, the trend of adopting transformational leadership to support MOET's objectives is just the beginning. As Vietnamese HE is still in a transitional phase, perhaps in the next 5–10 years, when this study was repeated, there would be more leaders using transformational leadership in their practice to support MOET's reforms.

6 CONCLUSIONS

The impetus for this study was the higher education reform agenda (HERA): a vision for 2020 outlined by the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training. Since the Renovation Policy (Doi Moi), Vietnamese colleges and universities have been rapidly growing in size and diversity. The leadership and management plus quality of training provided by these institutions have become issues of concern for many stakeholders, including MOET. HERA aims to fundamentally and comprehensively reform and modernise the Vietnamese HE system. To successfully achieve these goals, senior leaders at the institutional level must play key roles. Thus, an understanding of institutional leadership styles and leaders' perceptions regarding MOET's reforms is critical for strengthening Vietnamese HE.

The validation of the MLQ instrument also determined that the MLQ is a useful tool for researching leadership behaviours and practices to enrich leadership literature in the Vietnamese context. Vietnamese HE leaders have begun to adopt transformational leadership in their practice. Although this trend is not conclusive for the overall sample, it

can be presumed that there is an emerging understanding of transformational leadership in Vietnam. In response to MOET's demands to transform the HE system, the emerging trend to adopt transformational leadership to support the reforms is positive. This supportive trend of HE leaders towards transformational leadership may assist MOET to achieve HERA objectives more quickly. However, since the HERA timeline was set out for 2020, this emerging trend to adopt transformational leadership at this stage (2015) may be considered a slow response for MOET's demands. Since the current study focused on the State sector, future research could include the private sector to determine if leaders in the private sector are more transformational in leadership. This data would allow for interesting comparisons to be made between differences that may be found among institutional leaders in both sectors. Since private institutions are more autonomous in finance, human resources, and curriculum, transformational leadership practice in the private sector may be more prominent.

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