

Multicultural Education in Higher Education in Vietnam

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Abstract Multicultural education is undoubtedly essential in giving equal educational opportunities to all students and in helping them prepare for the workplace in a globalized and multicultural world today. This article reports major findings from a study conducted with 1850 respondents (23 educational managers, 169 lecturers, 1658 students) who have been working and studying at different universities in major cities in Vietnam. It found that multicultural education objectives and issues were not clearly enunciated by all the investigated universities. Despite acknowledging the values of multicultural education, not all administrators, lecturers, and students were fully aware of the objectives, multicultural topics and approaches in conducting multicultural education. There exists great disparity between current practices and innovative requirements in Vietnamese educational policies. This conundrum demands more input from Vietnamese universities, especially in providing administrators and lecturers with global knowledge and skills regarding multicultural education.

Keywords: multicultural education, Vietnamese university, higher education, Vietnam

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1. Introduction

Multiculturalism is a necessary corollary of the integration and globalization process, and this has required schools and universities to conduct dedicated multicultural education in order to help their students to become active global citizens. Research has highlighted the importance of multicultural education for people of different backgrounds to have a better mutual understanding [1-6]. Multicultural education is expected to help the young generations of a nation to enhance cultural awareness, respect the cultures of others, as well as reduce prejudice, conflicts, and discrimination [6]. This may create "unity in diversity" [7], leading to social stability and development.

Located in Southeast Asia with a population of almost 100 million, Vietnam is known as a multicultural nation, with 54 ethnic groups, each with its own language and cultural values. According to Vuong and colleagues (1996), the geographical position of Vietnam strengthens the opportunity for its citizens to interact with a variety of cultures around the world. Further, due to historical political upheavals, Vietnamese culture has been influenced strongly by Ancient China, France, America, and Russia [8].

In 1986, after decades of wars and poverty, Vietnam launched the policy of economic innovation (*Đổi mới*), moving from the command economic model of the former Soviet Union to a market-oriented economy. In 2006,

Vietnam became a member of the World Trade Organization leading to a rapid increase in Vietnam's development in different socioeconomic aspects over the last decade.

There have been a variety of advantages in the implementation of multicultural education in a globalized world. Vietnam's integrated policies have led to many opportunities for young generations to broaden their cultural horizons. The advancement of digital media has allowed them to access and interact with a variety of cultures worldwide, and at the same time, to exhibit and expand Vietnamese cultural values and characteristics. Students at universities are young people who are willing to learn new things, especially new cultural values. Undoubtedly, globalization has created significant opportunities for intercultural interactions, but it has also caused the invasion of more dominant cultures and the loss of local cultures [9]. Young people may incline to absorb new cultures without critical reflection. There has been a tendency to admire dominant cultures, and ignore their own traditional cultures.

Multicultural education has begun to be addressed at schools and universities in current educational reforms in Vietnam, aiming at equipping graduates with knowledge and skills for the nation's integration into a globalized world. Multicultural skills, creativity, foreign language proficiency, and technological competencies have been determined by Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) as key competences that schools and universities

have to address [10,11]. As required by MOET, multicultural education becomes essential and needs to be addressed in Vietnamese universities, as it helps students to develop multicultural competences which the workplace now expects from graduates. To implement reformed educational requirements regarding multicultural education, it is crucial to conduct exploratory investigations into its current practice in Vietnamese universities. Findings from such a study could help Vietnamese universities in identifying any gap between their current practices and MOET's innovative requirements as well as social demands, and to suggest possible ways for the improvements of multicultural education in Vietnamese universities.

2. Content

2.1. Multicultural Education and Pedagogical Approaches

Multicultural education is generally considered by researchers as an approach to teaching and learning that values cultural pluralism in a globalized and interdependent world [1]. It aims to avoid assimilation, but respect for others' cultures based on the understanding of the uniqueness in every language, religion, and social customs. In the educational field, multicultural education focuses on promoting equity and equal opportunities for students from varying cultural groups through a variety of strategies [6].

According to Banks (1995), multicultural education implies three main elements: an idea/concept, an educational reform, and a process. The concept of multicultural education supports the philosophical idea that "all students should have equal opportunities to learn regardless of the racial, ethnic, social-class, or gender group to which they belong to" ([1]; p. 361). As an educational reform, multicultural education is referred to as innovative approaches at schools in order to provide equal opportunity in learning for all students. Multicultural education is also seen as a continuing process, since one of its major goals is to maintain ideal values such as justice, equality, and freedom within schools. As it is less likely to totally achieve such values, schools and universities are required to constantly work toward them, making multicultural education an ongoing process.

Bank also proposed five dimensions of multicultural education, including content integration, the knowledge construction process, prejudice reduction, an equity pedagogy, and an empowering cultural schools and social structure [1]. This framework suggests multicultural contents as well as approaches to conduct multicultural education in schools or universities, as outlined below.

+ *Content integration* refers to approaches which teachers use in order to integrate knowledge about cultures of different groups within their subject areas or disciplines. Teachers may consider and make use of opportunities such as: providing relevant examples from different cultures to illustrate key concepts; or preparing to teach units that fully address the cultures of students across the age-appropriate curriculum (i.e. discussing the food, music, history, and belief systems).

Multicultural contents can also be integrated in extracurricular activities. This, however, involves a variety of educational forces within and outside schools or universities, resources, programs.

+ *The knowledge construction process* refers to teaching activities that help students to understand knowledge in context. A constructivist approach considers knowledge as constructed within an individual's mental schema [12], and therefore influenced by the author's cultural perspectives, values, and attitudes. For that reason, it has been argued that critical analysis of an example, or scientific theory should be based on the context. Banks (1995) argued that multicultural education is not a simple process of including ethnic content into curriculum. Rather, it involves interacting and challenging current students' beliefs and forming appropriate attitudes and behaviors toward the minority or traditionally prejudiced groups.

+ *Prejudice reduction* refers to strategies that teachers use in order to help students to develop appropriate attitudes towards members of different groups through eliminating students' negative preconceptions about a ethnic and developing cultural tolerance.

+ *An equity pedagogy* is considered by Banks as a core principle in the multicultural education process, referring to strategies and activities used by teachers in order to implement educational equity and equality for all students regardless of their cultural background. These strategies may include maintaining equal status for group interactions in classrooms; valuing students' previous experience, encouraging critical thinking, respecting cultural identity. According to Todor (2015), multicultural education must adopt the student-centered approach, which encourages the use of students' living contexts and cultural backgrounds as learning opportunities and promoting critical thinking and diverse opinions.

+ *An empowering school culture and social structure* refers to creating a school culture that encourages equal status and chances for success to every student. This dimension requires administrators, teachers, students to change their beliefs and behavioral patterns to create such a culture, and involves changes in curriculum, teaching and assessment methods accordingly.

In short, multicultural education refers to a reformed educational approach which involves a variety of practices in curriculum and classrooms to enhance students' multicultural awareness, attitude, and behaviors and to maintain equity and equality in schools or universities [6]. Multicultural education could be conducted by integrating multicultural content within subjects or disciplinary areas; implementing equity pedagogy, prejudice elimination; and building the school and institutional culture [1,13] in order to help students to develop their cultural awareness, respect, tolerance, and behaviors to become global citizens.

2.2. Research Design

This study was driven by the major research question: *what is the practice of multicultural education in higher education in Vietnam?* We aimed to investigate perceptions of educational managers, lecturers, and students on what multicultural education is, and how important

multicultural education is to students in the 21st century in Vietnam. More importantly, we explored how Vietnamese universities are currently implementing multicultural education through examining universities' educational objectives, content, methods, and results. We also aimed to propose possible implications and recommendations to Vietnamese universities based on analysis of the findings.

To answer the research questions, we used both quantitative and qualitative methods to collect data. We first employed formal written surveys to investigate the practice of multicultural education in Vietnam through the perspectives of 1850 respondents (23 educational managers, 169 lecturers, 1658 students) who have been working and studying at higher education in eight major cities in Vietnam: Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh city, Hue, Da Nang, Can Tho, Hai Phong, Thai Nguyen, and Tay Nguyen. We also conducted classroom observations, and in-depth interviews with 50 participants (5 educational managers, 10 lecturers, 35 students)

2.3. Findings

2.3.1. Perceptions of Educational Managers, Lecturers, and Students on Multicultural Education

More than half of the respondents (58.58 % lecturers; 56.62% educational managers, and 50.30 % students) stated that multicultural education was to “*help students to not only understand and accept cultural differences and tolerance, but also preserve their own cultures*”. However, there was still a relatively high quantity of participants who considered multicultural education as “*making students to understand about the culture of others*” (25.42% lecturers; 26.39 % educational managers, and 33.92% students); “*making students to understand about the culture of other ethnics within Vietnam*” (16 % lecturers, 16.99 % educational managers, and 15.78% students). The above percentages reveal that multicultural education was not perceived uniformly by all respondents in this study and it may suggest the need for enhancing understanding about the multicultural education concept.

Data also revealed that most respondents were aware of the necessity for multicultural education for students, with 57.90% of the total selecting “very necessary”, 29.82% considering it as “necessary”; only 12.28% selected “less necessary”, none answered “not necessary”. It appeared that educational managers, lecturers and students in this study highly appreciated the importance of multicultural education for their students. The results showed a positive attitude towards multicultural education by almost all the participants.

2.3.2. Practices in Implementing Multicultural Education in Vietnamese Higher Education

2.3.2.1. Multicultural education in institutional educational objectives

We explored whether multicultural education has been clearly and comprehensively integrated in universities' educational objectives. Results are shown in [Table 1](#).

Out of 1850 respondents who completed the survey, 997 (57.41%) said that multicultural education was part of their universities' educational objectives. Some of those

lecturers and educational managers further commented that although the multicultural education objective was stated in their universities' overall objectives, it was “too general”, and “unrelated to regions or a particular studying major”.

Table 1. Multicultural education in universities' educational objectives

Respondents	Multicultural education stated as an educational objective			
	Yes		No	
	Quantity	Percent	Quantity	Percent
Educational managers	14	60.87	9	39.13
Lecturers	98	57.99	71	42.01
Students	885	53.38	773	42.59
Total	997	57.41	853	42.59

The 42.59% of participants who answered “No” for the survey question revealed that multicultural education has not been sufficiently addressed in the educational objectives of some universities in Vietnam. Some students claimed that they “have not heard of the multicultural education objective, but there were actually some extracurricular activities related to multiculturalism, such as art performances on folk songs and fashions of different ethnics”.

2.3.2.2. Content of multicultural education

We examined multicultural content that is currently taught in Vietnamese universities. [Table 2](#) illustrates the results

Table 2. Multicultural content in Vietnamese universities

Respondents	Specific multicultural contents have been conducted			
	Yes		No	
	Quantity	Percent	Quantity	Percent
Educational managers	16	69.57	7	30.43
Lecturers	108	63.91	61	36.09
Students	1135	68.46	523	31.54
Total	1259	67.31	591	32.69

Of the respondents, 67.31% thought that their universities had incorporated specific content regarding multicultural education. However, when questioned further, some lecturers and students added that multicultural content was still “unsystematic” and “irrelevant”. They indicated that more focus was on preservation of Vietnamese traditional values and traditions, whereas characteristics of other cultures seemed not to be considered. Further, imparting cultural knowledge was emphasized more than forming appropriate attitudes and behaviors towards multiculturalism.

The majority of respondents agreed that “enhancing students' understanding about their “own culture” was conducted most frequently (60.11%); which was followed by “Enhancing students' understanding about “cultural diversity within their own country” (54.64%) and “Enhancing students' understanding about cultures of other countries” (51.29%). Noticeably, the content of “educating cultural tolerance” was implemented in the investigated universities at the least frequent level, with only 38.27% respondents who considered the content at the “usually” level.

It appeared that multicultural content implemented in Vietnamese universities was not very frequent, was incomprehensive, and at surface levels. This suggests the need for designing multicultural education programs rather than simply inserting ethnic content within curriculum.

2.3.2.3. Approaches in conducting multicultural education

We required the participants to rate levels of use of eight common approaches to multicultural education which might be used in their universities. Results are shown in Table 4.

Table 4 reveals that the investigated universities have mainly used the eight given approaches to implement multicultural education at the level of “sometimes”. Two methods which were employed most by Vietnamese universities appeared to be “integrating multicultural contents into various subjects”, with 48% respondents who chose the level of “usually” and “organizing art performance contests on different ethnicities” (43.45%). Other methods were all employed at relatively low rates. This demonstrated that approaches to multicultural education used in Vietnamese universities appear to be restricted.

2.3.2.4. Forces that participated in multicultural education

In Vietnamese universities, the following four forces

were encouraged to become involved in multicultural education: Youths and Student Associations; Lecturers; Experts (if invited); and Communities such as social organizations and local authorities. Of these, Youth and Student Association and Lecturers participated frequently in multicultural education for students, whereas invited experts and communities rarely participated in the process.

Most of the respondents appreciated the participation of Youth and Student association and Lecturers in multicultural education with 61.18% and 61.02% respectively. This result corresponds with the two most common approaches in implementing multicultural education in Vietnamese universities (Integrating multicultural contents into various subjects; Organizing art performance contests on different ethnicities). Effectiveness in the participation of experts and communities in multicultural education was evaluated as relatively low. Only 7.29% of the respondents selected “effective” for the participation of experts, while the percentage for communities was only 2.27%. Interviews with lecturers suggested possible reasons for this evaluation, including the universities’ lack of financial resources. As inviting experts often requires financial resources, experts were rarely invited to participate in multicultural education.

Table 3. Levels of implementing multicultural contents

No	Content of multicultural education	Levels of implementation					
		Usually		Rarely		Never	
		Quantity	Percent	Quantity	Percent	Quantity	Percent
1	Enhancing students’ understanding about their “own culture”	1112	60.11	558	30.16	180	9.72
2	Enhancing students’ understanding about “cultural diversity within their own country”	1011	54.64	564	30.48	275	14.86
3	Enhancing students’ understanding about the cultures of other countries	949	51.29	623	33.67	278	15.02
4	Educating cultural tolerance	708	38.27	780	42.16	362	19.56

Table 4. Approaches to implementing multicultural education in Vietnamese universities

Approaches	Levels of use					
	Usually		Sometimes		Never	
	Quantity	Percent	Quantity	Percent	Quantity	Percent
Integrating multicultural content into various subjects	888	48.00	934	50.48	28	1.51
Organizing art performance contests on different ethnicities	804	43.45	1010	54.59	36	1.94
A room equipped with documents and media for reading, researching about multiple cultures	585	31.62	1215	65.67	50	2.70
Organizing cultural clubs	455	24.59	997	53.89	398	21.51
Organizing contests engaging students in researching on different cultures	630	34.05	1095	59.18	125	6.75
Displaying documentary movies regarding different cultures	455	24.59	1054	56.97	341	18.43
Providing students with opportunities to interact and communicate with different cultures	485	26.21	1196	64.64	169	9.13
Organizing scientific workshops on different cultures	371	20.05	1336	72.21	143	7.92

Table 5. Effectiveness of forces that participated in multicultural education

Forces	Level of effectiveness					
	Effective		Less effective		Ineffective	
	Quantity	Percent	Quantity	Percent	Quantity	Percent
Youth and student association	1132	61.18	718	38.81	0	0
Lecturers	1129	61.02	731	39.51	0	0
Experts	135	7.29	1076	58.16	639	34.54
Communities	42	2.27	1113	60.16	695	37.56

3. Conclusion

Multicultural education is a crucial part in the curriculum of any school or university in order to ensure equity and equality, and to develop multicultural competence for students. Data collected from this study reveals that there is evidence that multicultural education has been conducted at Vietnamese universities to a limited degree. Not many universities have set clear educational objectives regarding multicultural education; multicultural content seemed to be incomprehensive and unsystematic. Despite acknowledging the importance of multicultural education, a fairly large number of administrators, lecturers and students appeared to have limited understanding about the concept and approaches of multicultural education which has led to restrictions in their involvement and effective use of a range of methods in practice.

To meet social demands for workforce and innovations in educational policies regarding multicultural education, Vietnamese universities will need to pay further attention in setting clear objective, building multicultural education programs, and prioritizing resources. Multicultural education must be deeply integrated within the core curriculum, teaching practices and institutional cultures. We argue that administrators and lecturers need to deepen their knowledge and skills about multicultural education. They need to be trained in order to be able to implement multicultural approaches in their practice.

This study was simply an exploratory investigation that provides initial evidence of the practice of multicultural education through a relatively small number of participants' perspectives. As multicultural education is a continuing process, more in-depth research on the practice of multicultural education is required to identify factors that may have influence on the process, and to suggest appropriate strategies for implementing multicultural education in Vietnamese universities. However, preliminary findings from this study reveal a great disparity between the current practice and innovative requirements that Vietnamese universities will need to

address, if they wish their graduates to thrive in a multicultural workplace.

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