



## A Preliminary Study on University Culture at Higher Education Institutions of Economics in Vietnam

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### Abstract

The university's culture acts as an internal force to help the university in breakthrough and sustainable development. Very few researches on the organizational culture of higher education institutions in Vietnam. This research aims to identify the overall picture of the organizational culture of higher education institutions of economics in Vietnam. Quantitative and qualitative research are applied in this research. 79 lecturers from higher education institutions of economics in Vietnam have participated in the survey on the university's culture measurement which is conducted from August 2, 2023 to September 10, 2023. The questionnaires were developed based on the OCAI framework and Competing Value Frame. Findings show that most economics higher education institutions in Vietnam are participating in the Clan culture which creates an open and good academic environment. Managers of these institutions have a people-oriented leadership style of caring about the lecturers, faculty, researchers, administrative staff and students as well as personal relationship orientation. The respondents also show the preferred university's culture at higher education institutions of economics in the future should not only focus on improving their clan culture but also consider the adhocracy culture which emphasizes understanding the changing environment and adapting to change through innovation. It is recommended that these institutions should adapt both to internal and external stakeholders' demand and to keep up with the fastly changing nature of the educational system. It is a good way for Vietnamese economics higher education institutions to enhance training quality, student satisfaction and achieve excellent performance in the future.

*Keywords: university culture, competitive value frame, clan culture, hierarchy culture, higher education institutions of economics in Vietnam*

### Introduction

In the context of the Industrial 4.0 revolution taking place strongly in all aspects, higher education institutions are facing many challenges in terms of environmental changes and increasing labor market requirements. Like other higher education institutions, universities of economics in Vietnam are trying efforts to build an effective and sustainable organizational culture. The goal of building an effective organizational culture is to help

the economics universities in developing a good brand, attract students and partners, creating work motivation, and stimulating creatives, increasing stability, limiting the risks of contradictions and conflicts; and forming the attitudes and behaviors of individuals in higher education institutions. Building the organizational culture of economics universities helps to change the way of thinking and culture of the entire community in education organization. Organizational culture at higher education institutions is also an important factor to help these organization to sustainably develop and positively contribute to the socio-economic development

Several research on the organizational culture at universities, the importance of organizational culture and roles of managers in building organizational culture in universities has been done over 30 years (Deal and Kennedy, 1982; Bartell, 2003; Tierney, 1988; Cameron & Freeman, 1991; Sporn, 1996; Fralinger Barbara & Olson Valerie, 2007). However, there is very little research on the current situation of the organizational culture in universities, especially in economics higher education institutions in Vietnam. As a result, this research aims to provide the overall picture of the current situation of economics higher education institutions' culture in Vietnam, to identify the factors that influence organizational culture and propose some solutions to improve their organizational culture to achieve higher performance, confirm their position in the educational market and forward to the sustainable development of Vietnamese economics higher education institutions.

### **Literature review**

#### *Organizational culture at the higher education institutions*

Organizational culture at academic organizations attracted many scholars recently. Studies on organizational culture at higher education institutions focused on evaluating the awareness of the importance of organizational culture in the academic environment (Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Bartell, 2003; Tierney, 1988; Cameron, K. S. & Quinn, R. E.; 2006; Sporn, 1996; Fralinger Barbara & Olson Valerie, 2007) or identify the impacts of managers in building the organizational culture at higher educational institutions (Hellowell, D. & Hancock, N., 2001). Some research has shown the importance of building organizational culture in the operation and development of universities (Keup, J. R. et al., 2001). In Vietnam, some scholars implemented studies on organizational culture at universities such as Kiem (2007), Huan (2007) and Loc (2009, 2022). These studies contributed to have a better understanding of organizational culture in the academic environment and propose some solutions to build and develop organizational culture in a pedagogical environment.

According to Eldrige and Crombie's (1974), a typical definition of an academic organizational culture is the system of beliefs, values, norms, habits, and traditions embedded in the historical process, held by its members in schools to recognize, follow and imprint in physical and spiritual forms, to create a unique identity for each pedagogical institution.

Organizational culture at higher education institutions is built based on the system of beliefs, values, standards, habits and traditions to create a unique identity for each higher education institution (Thang, 2017). Deal and Peterson (2016) indicated that organizational culture is the appearance of the academic organizations that is formed from standards,

values, beliefs, rituals and ceremonies, symbols, and traditions. From previous studies, it is possible to generalize the concept of a higher education institution's culture as revolving around the system of beliefs, values, norms and traditions created during the formation and development of the school, university which are used by related parties including lecturers, students, civil servants and other employees. The internal and external stakeholders accept, follow and express through tangible and intangible forms, thereby creating a difference for each organization in the field of education and training. Therefore, it is affirmed that a higher education institution is a form of organization, and the university's culture is an organizational culture with an educational function. In another way, university culture also includes values of organizational culture, but it has its characteristics of the educational organization (Hung, 2016).

#### *Roles of organizational culture at the universities*

Organizational culture plays a very important role in the development of any higher education institution and university. Organizational culture creates the differentiation between higher education institutions and between universities. It is considered an irreplaceable asset of the higher education institution and university. The organizational culture of the higher education institution has a big contribution to its competitiveness and provides the development orientation for the higher education institution in the future (Tahiraj et al., 2017; Loc, 2022; Thang, 2017).

#### *Higher education institutions of economics in Vietnam*

There are several ways to define a higher education institution. According to Jasmine et al. (2014), a Higher education institutions include traditional universities and professional-oriented institutions, which are called universities of applied sciences or polytechnics. Higher education is defined as any of various types of education given in postsecondary institutions of learning and usually affording, at the end of a course of study, a named degree, diploma, or certificate of higher studies (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/higher-education>). In this research, a higher education institution of economics is defined as any university who offers the academic program in economics. It will include the economics universities and any university offering the academic programs in economics. According to the information from Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training, there are currently 84 universities who offer the academic program in economics in Vietnam. Most of them are located in the North of Vietnam. (<https://phothongcaodang.fpt.edu.vn/cac-truong-co-nganh-kinh-te>).

#### **Measurement of organizational culture of higher education institute of economics in Vietnam**

There are several models on organizational culture at an academic organization such as Competing Value Frame (CVF) and 11 steps models developed by Hagberg & Heifetz (2000). Keup et al., 2001; Fralinger et al., 2007; Loc, 2009; Hong et al., 2022 applied Hagberg & Heifetz's model in studying the organizational culture at public and private universities in the world and in Vietnam. The CVF model was applied successfully and commonly in public universities (Beyketin et al., 2010; Ferreira & Hill, 2008; Omerzel et al., 2011; Smart et al., 1997; Tahiraj et al., 2017). This model, originally developed by Quinn & Roherbaugh (1983) and later further revised by Cameron & Quinn (2006),

university culture is divided into clan, adhocracy, hierarchy, and market culture. According to the CVF model, with hierarchy and the market as the dominant culture, the university tends to be a structured and formal workplace, with a strong results orientation, where the main concern is getting the job done. These values are applied to maintain internal control and produce effective, reliable, and predictable results, as well as to face the external environment and achieve results that demonstrate work of the university to third parties and remain competitive with other universities. In Vietnam, 84 universities have a program in economics, and among that, 59.5% are public universities (<https://phothongcaodang.fpt.edu.vn/cac-truong-co-nganh-kinh-te>). As a result, this research selected the CVF model to study the organizational culture at economics universities in Vietnam.

To evaluate the current organizational culture of higher education institution of economics in Vietnam, the authors used the OCAI (Organizational Culture Assessment Instrument) based on the perception of lecturers on the university culture. The OCAI is also used to identify the future organizational culture of Vietnamese higher education institution of economics that needs to be developed to meet the future changes in the environment.

### **Data collection and research methods**

The research used both primary and secondary data. Secondary data was collected through the reports from MOET's reports, the General Statistical Office, etc. Primary data was collected through a questionnaire survey. The questionnaire was built from reference to previous studies and based on the OCAI model. Six dimensions of higher education institution's culture are measured in the OCAI tool including Dominant Characteristics, Organizational Leadership, Management of Employees, Organizational Glue, Strategic Emphases, and Criteria of Success. Each dimension has 4 options (A = Clan, B = Adhocracy, C = Market, D = Hierarchy). The lecturer is asked to rank the importance of these 4 options from 1 to 4. The most important component is equivalent to the content in the question that received the highest score. Based on the OCAI survey results a picture of higher education institution's culture at present and expected to be in the future is drawn. The authors surveyed emails and sent them to lecturers at Vietnamese higher education institutions including universities of economics and universities who offer the academic program on economics in Vietnam from August 2, 2023 to September 10, 2023. The number of questionnaires distributed was 200. There were 79 returned and usable questionnaires (accounted for 39.5%). The sample size of 79 is acceptable for this research according to the Rule of Thumb. The data processing process includes data cleaning encryption, and description analysis.

### **Findings**

#### *Sample characteristics*

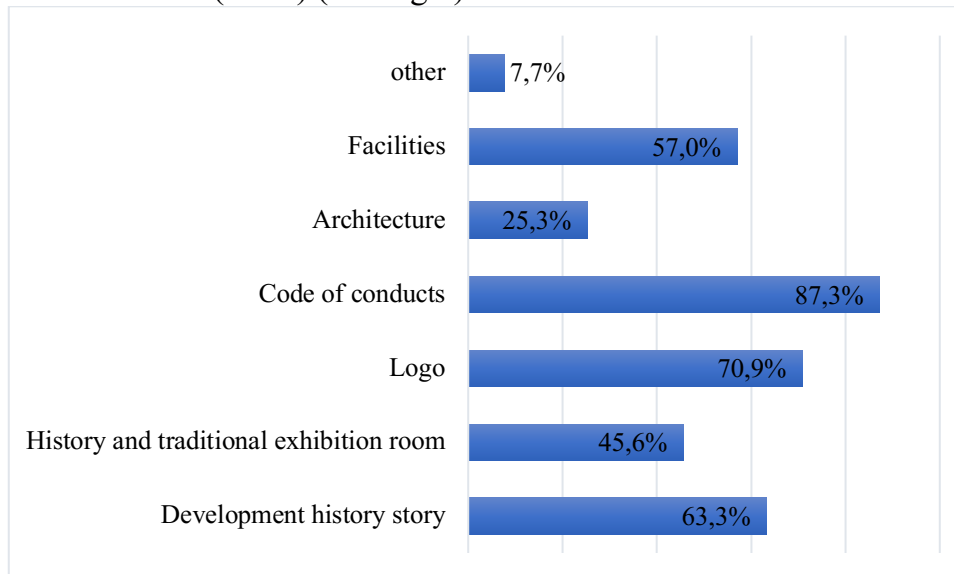
Among 79 respondents, lecturers account for 70.7%; managers and heads of departments account for 18.7%, administrative staff account for 6.7%, researchers account for 1.3% and the rest are top managers. The respondents come from the big size of universities with more than 1000 staff is 28%, from small size (<500 staff) and middle size (500-1,000 staff) occupy the same share of 36%. The respondents come from universities with more than 7,000 students occupying the biggest share of 36%, from universities with

students less than 3,000 is 33.3%, and the smallest share is universities have several students from 5,001 to 7,000.

*Current and preferred organizational culture of higher education institutions of economics in Vietnam*

Findings show that most higher education institutions of economics in Vietnam had their own university culture for more than 10 years (41,8%); 40.5% of them had their university culture since established; very few universities did not have the organizational culture yet (5,1%).

Higher education institution's culture can be viewed as the identity of an organization. One can learn about university's culture by observing the construction of buildings, the maintenance of campus facilities, and student interaction. Similarly, the economics higher education's culture is expressed in various forms. Findings show that code of conduct is the most dominant expression form of the economics higher education in Vietnam (87.3%), following is the logo of the university (70.9%); then is establishment history story (63.3%), facilities (57%), history & traditional exhibition (45.6%) and other forms occupied the smallest share (7.7%) (see Fig.1)

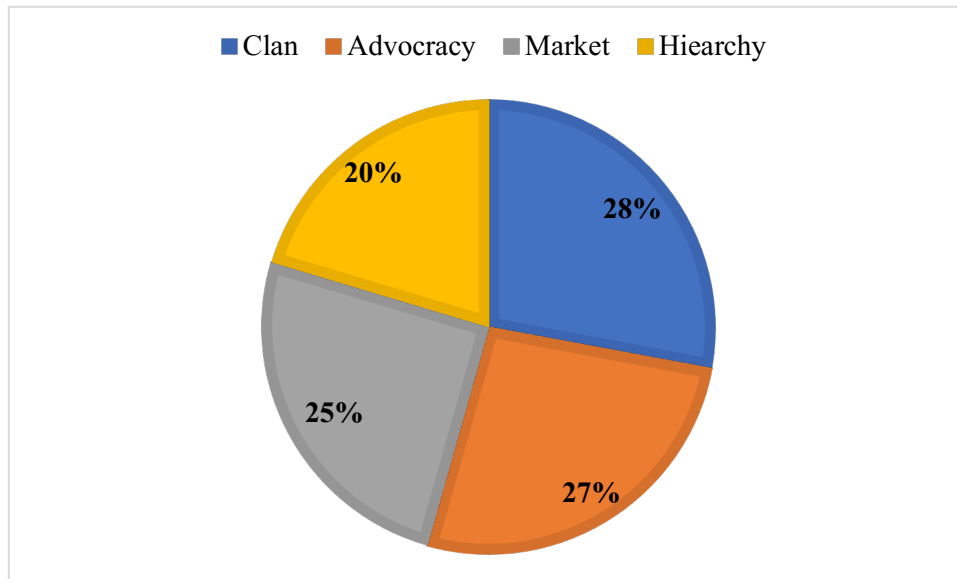


**Figure 1. Different expression forms of economics higher education institutions' culture in Vietnam**

*Source: survey data*

Research results show that the higher education institutions of economics in Vietnam currently are integrated of Clan, Adhocracy, Hierarchy and Market culture in which Clan (28%) is a dominant one; then Adhocracy culture (27%), Market culture (25%) and Hierarchy culture (20%) (see Fig. 2). Most respondents perceive the Clan culture as the most perceived culture at higher education institutions in Vietnam and think their universities provide them with a good academic environment. The Clan culture encourages a humane work environment, and a friendly place to be in, and leaders are considered mentors. At the higher education organization of economics in Vietnam, students consider lecturers and administrative staff as friendly and helpful in satisfying their needs. This is

in line with the Clan culture characteristics where students in universities are their internal customers. Organizational culture can be defined in many different ways, but in the higher education context, culture can be referred to as the specific values that leaders seek to integrate into an organization (Schein, 2017).



**Figure 2. Overall organizational culture of economics higher education institutions in Vietnam**

*Source: survey data*

Findings show that internal focus and integration is the dominant characteristic of the economics higher education institutions' culture. It is reasonable for higher education institutions which operate in the pedagogy environment. The lecturers, researchers, and administrative staff share a lot of knowledge, experience, and information. It also shows the engagement of people after working a long time together. The internal focus is also created by the leaders through caring about the lecturers, faculty, researchers, administrative staff, and students as well as personal relationship orientation. As a result, the university's culture at higher education institutions on economics in Vietnam has the following dominant characteristics:

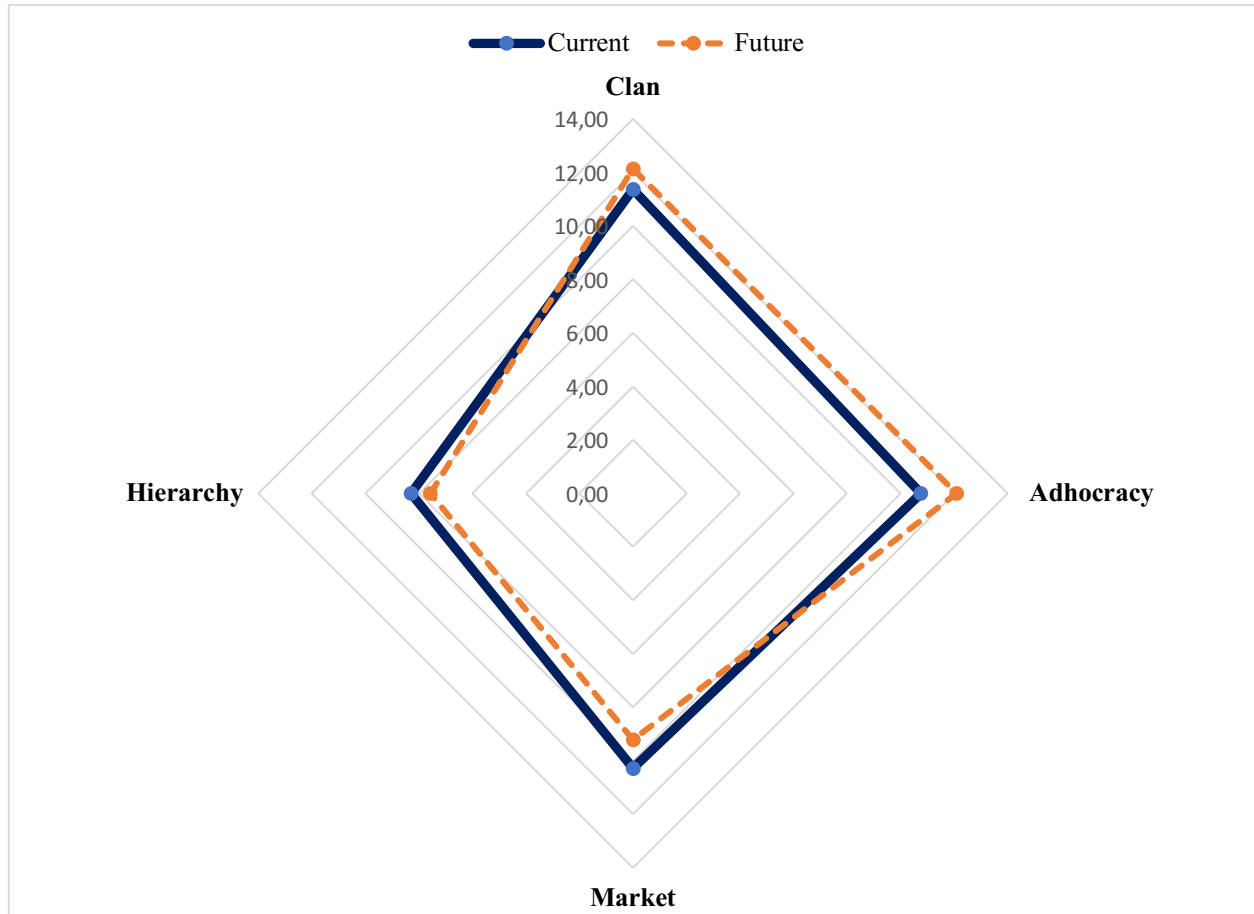
- Economics higher education institutes in Vietnam have a human, open, friendly, and internal focus. These universities' leaders define the successes based on the development of human resources, teamwork, employee commitment and concern for people.

- University leadership is people-oriented, and the leaders act as mentors and facilitators to support and motivate the lecturers, researchers, students and other administrative staff in achieving their tasks and objectives.

- Management style in these universities is focused on teamwork, consensus, and participation. One of the characteristics of economics higher education institutions is doing research. Lecturers can form a team including students to do scientific research and

consultancy projects as well. Leaders encourage professors, senior lecturers, and students to be involved in sharing opinions and sometimes in the decision-making process.

Changes on the current and preferred culture of economics universities in Vietnam are shown in Figure 3.



**Figure 3. Current and Preferred organizational culture of economics higher education institutions in Vietnam**

*Source: Survey data*

When lecturers are asked to determine the preferred culture in the next 5 years, the result shows a slightly increased preference for the Clan culture and Adhocracy. The importance of empowerment, participation, teamwork, and commitment was emphasized by most respondents. Emphasized more on Clan culture through teamwork, participation and consensus, the university's culture of caring can lead to the success of economics universities in Vietnam. Additionally, findings also show an increased preference for Adhocracy culture as some respondents prefer the university to be more innovative and increase its adaptability to its environment, especially in the VUCA and self-financial conditions of the education system in Vietnam. These factors can affect the effectiveness of academic programs, delivery systems, and internal relationships.

## Conclusion

This study points out the general picture of the university culture of higher education institutions in Vietnam. Higher education institution is considered as the identity of an organization. People can see the university's culture at Vietnamese higher education institutions in different forms such as building architecture, facilities, logo, and interaction between students, among lecturers and students, ...Applying OCAI and CVF helps to identify and diagnose the changes in culture at economics universities in Vietnam. Currently, most higher education institutions of economics have a Clan culture which shows the internal focus and good academic environment that create the high commitment, trust, openness and teamwork inside these universities. However, in the next 5 years, the expectation from respondents is that these higher education institutions should not only emphasize Clan culture but also needs to develop the Adhocracy culture. Adhocracy culture will enhance innovation and creativity in the education system to improve training quality and student satisfaction. These changes occur as an organization progresses through these universities' establishment and development and copes with external pressures. The fast and continuous changes from the external environment require often adjustments and institutional changes to implement development strategies. The higher education institutions of economics in Vietnam need to adapt not only to internal stakeholders such as national and international students to undergraduate students, professionals and graduate students but also to the demands of external stakeholders including the local community, government authorities, accreditation agencies, trade unions and the press and to keep with rapidly changing nature of the educational system. Stakeholders internally and externally are diverse and play unique roles. University culture of higher education institutions of economics in Vietnam should form and demonstrate appropriate behavior to all stakeholders, motivate individuals, manage information appropriately, and create good internal and external relationships. Understanding its current practices and adapting to change will help the higher education institutions of economics in Vietnam better achieve their goals in terms of staff productivity, research outputs, teaching quality, and student satisfaction.

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