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## EXPLORING CHALLENGES OF MIDDLE LEADERSHIP IN HIGHER EDUCATION:

### A CASE STUDY OF A VIETNAMESE UNIVERSITY

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#### ABSTRACT

Studies on middle leadership in higher education are well documented in western literature. However, middle leadership is largely under-researched in Vietnam, and this has inhibited the development of educational leadership in this country. This paper presents some main aspects of educational leadership from a study which investigated the experiences of ten mid-level leaders at a university in Vietnam. This qualitative study was located within the interpretive research paradigm and used a case study method to explore human leadership experiences and perceptions. It adopted two data collection methods, semi-structured interviews and an online questionnaire, and used thematic analysis as the data coding framework. The participants of this study were ten middle leaders of a university in the south of Vietnam, half of whom were female. They were selected according to criteria that included balance in gender, a wide range of age and professional experiences, and representation for different units across the university. The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of the setting of Vietnamese higher education and presents the challenges in leadership work experienced by educational leaders and managers at this university. It is aimed at providing guidance for improving the quality of leadership work for this university, and more broadly, for other universities throughout the country.

**Keyword:** educational leadership, Vietnam, higher education, middle leadership, challenges in leadership work

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## INTRODUCTION

Educational leadership is a subject that has long provoked interest in the research community. Internationally, many authors have written about this topic. The close relationship between high-quality educational leadership and an institution's achievements has also been well documented (Brundrett et al., 2003). However, in Vietnam the field of educational leadership, especially at tertiary level, has been largely under-researched. This dearth has inhibited the development of educational leadership in this country. Furthermore, during Vietnam's transitional period, the Vietnamese higher education system experienced many challenges and a severe lack of depth in leadership experience and skills within tertiary institutions (Fry, 2009; Hayden & Lam, 2007; Pham & Fry, 2002; Vallely & Wilkinson, 2008).

The purpose of this paper is to identify barriers to leadership roles and, more importantly, to provide guidance to help improve the quality of educational leadership practices both in this university in particular, and in other universities throughout this country in general.

Data collection for this study was guided by the following research question: What are some challenges experienced by these leaders in their leadership work?

This study focuses on "middle leaders", those at the "middle level" of the hierarchy of this university. These middle leaders include Heads or Deputy Heads of functional offices, Directors or Vice-Directors of centers, Dean or Deputy Deans of schools, or Heads or Vice-Heads of departments.

## THE SETTING OF VIETNAMESE HIGHER EDUCATION

### *Historical, cultural and political context of Vietnam*

In the analysis of contemporary educational issues in Vietnamese higher education, it is important to consider the historical and political context as the education sector mirrors the broader picture of the country's historical legacy and the political system. One of the most salient historical political themes related to education concerns the external domination first by the Chinese, and then by the French.

One thousand years of Chinese rule had an indelible effect on Vietnam, its culture and values. The most noticeable consequence of the Chinese domination is the impact of Confucianism on Vietnamese culture, especially in terms of hierarchy and power distance. Power distance refers to the degree to which members of a group expect and agree that power should be shared unequally; it also creates levels between people based on power, authority, prestige, status, wealth and material possessions (Northouse, 2007). Specifically, the Chinese Confucian philosophy has left Vietnam with a highly bureaucratic and hierarchical structure in which age and seniority is accorded with wisdom and considered as an important indicator of social status. Moreover, influenced by Confucianism, Vietnamese society tends to accept that high power distance is a fundamental characteristic of an orderly structure (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004). These Confucian principles of



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hierarchical thinking and high power distance undoubtedly have historical influences on leadership in the higher education system in Vietnam.

Another Confucian influence on Vietnamese culture concerns women's status. Confucianism has strongly influenced Vietnamese society, and accordingly shaped the lives of Vietnamese women. Along with a feudal ideology, Confucianism has traditionally allowed Vietnamese society to perceive the status of women to be inferior to that of men (Ha, 2001). This norm is well illustrated by the Confucian moral code of the "three obediences" for a woman: to obey her father before marriage, to obey her husband when married and to obey the eldest son after the husband's death (Tạ gia tông phụ, xuất giá tông phu, phu tử tông tử). Women's low status is also demonstrated by an old saying: having a son means something; having ten daughters means nothing (Nhất nam viết hữu, thập nữ viết vô). In addition to this low status, Vietnamese women are also expected to conform to the femininity norms of the "heavenly mandate" (Truong, 2008, p. 19) which involves giving birth, breast feeding, teaching children, taking good care of the family and elderly relatives and a number of other unpaid unnamed jobs in addition to their full-time employment. In the mean time, their husbands are not expected to contribute to such tasks. Ironically, women who are considered as physically weak as opposed to men are expected to undertake all the household jobs; and those women who fail to fulfill these household tasks, sometimes for reasons beyond their control, will still be considered as not-desirable-standard-Vietnamese-women.

From the latter half of the nineteenth century until 1945, Vietnam was ruled by the French colonial regime that invested little in Vietnamese higher education. Consequently, Vietnam missed the move toward institutional innovation in higher education that was taking place throughout much of Asia during the early twentieth century (Valley & Wilkinson, 2008). From 1945 to 1975, Vietnam was divided into the North and the South, and there were therefore two separate systems of higher education in the country. The system in the North assisted by the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) reflected Soviet influences, while the system in the South was based on the French colonial model (Pham & Fry, 2002).

After independence and liberation in 1975, the Vietnamese higher education system was unified. However, during eleven years of adopting a centralized planned economy, Vietnam fell into a serious socio-economic crisis. Life became extremely hard and, accordingly, education stagnated (Pham & Fry, 2002).

In 1986, a profound socio-economic policy change, usually referred to as 'Đổi mới', was introduced. With this policy change, Vietnam became a transitional economy, in its transition from a centrally planned to a market economy. In response to such major socioeconomic reforms, Vietnam higher education has adopted important education reform policies to accommodate the new system (Fry, 2009).



### **Overview of the Contemporary Higher Education System in Vietnam**

Seven types of universities and colleges exist in Vietnam: specialized universities, a legacy of the Soviet influenced higher education system focused on a single area of study; multidisciplinary universities offering a wide range of academic programs up to the doctorate; open universities which are considered as semi-public universities because they are owned by the State and run by a public authority; private universities which do not get state funding and concentrate on popular fields of study; public and private junior colleges offering 2-3 year programs; and international universities such as the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT).

Vietnam higher education has undergone dramatic change during the past decade and improvements have been reported. However, problems remain. Hayden and Lam (2007) point out some major problems. Firstly, only a minority of the relevant age group in Vietnam can participate in higher education because of the shortage of institutions available. Moreover, people from rural and impoverished backgrounds are under-represented among enrolments. Secondly, management procedures are heavily bureaucratic with excessive regulatory controls. Besides, there is a lack of leadership insight and skills within institutions. Thirdly, the quality of teaching and learning is poor with very high staff-student ratio (1:30), and teaching methods remain traditional. University graduates are therefore poorly prepared with skills and abilities beyond those required for narrow academic pursuits. Furthermore, academic salaries are insufficient to elicit strong professional commitment; and most academics are not involved in research (Hayden & Lam, 2007). In addition, Vallely and Wilkinson (2008) identify other problems concerning autonomy, merit-based selection, international connections and standards, and accountability.

*Autonomy:* Governance of the higher education system in Vietnam is strongly centralised. The State is the source of all authority, so the educational institutions are subject to a highly centralised system of control. The central government determines most of the concerns of universities such as how many students universities might enroll, how much lecturers are paid (in case of public universities), and even promoting faculty. This system removes from institutions the motivation to compete and innovate and leaves them with insufficient autonomy to develop.

*Merit-based selection:* Unhealthy practices such as corruption and nepotism are still found in the Vietnamese higher education system. University personnel systems are not transparent, and promotion is based on non-scholastic criteria such as seniority, family, political background and personal connections.

*International connections and standards:* Knowledge generation is borderless, but Vietnamese institutions lack meaningful international connections. Moreover, some of them are inward looking and do not evaluate themselves in accordance with international standards.

*Accountability:* Vietnamese institutions are not held accountable to outsiders. In the public system, funding is not associated with performance or quality of teaching and learning. Therefore, academics are not motivated to innovate.



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## **METHODOLOGY**

This qualitative research was located within the interpretive research paradigm and used a case study method to explore human leadership experiences and perceptions. It adopted two data collection methods, semi-structured interviews and an online questionnaire, and used thematic analysis as the data coding framework. The participants of this study were ten middle leaders of a university in the south of Vietnam, half of whom were female. They were selected according to criteria that included balance in gender, a wide range of age and professional experiences, and representation for different units across the university.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The theoretical framework is located within the interpretive research paradigm and uses qualitative research methods.

### **The interpretive research paradigm**

A paradigm is “a collection of logically related assumptions, concepts, or propositions that orient thinking and research” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p. 22) and it determines the criteria for the researcher to define inquiry problems and to approach them theoretically and methodologically (Husen, 1997). A paradigm involves a community of researchers who share the same ontology, epistemology and methodology (Bell, 2009; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Ontology raises the question of what the form and nature of reality is and what there is that can be known about it; epistemology involves the nature of the relationship between the knower and what can be known; and methodology is concerned with how the researcher finds out what can be known (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Punch, 2009).

Interpretive research emphasizes social interactions and practices, and its main purpose is to understand human experiences. This is also the purpose of this research. Interpretive researchers state that “all human action is meaningful and hence has to be interpreted and understood within the context of social practices” (Usher, 1996, p. 18). Interpretive approaches are consistent with this study as I am concerned with the meanings that people bring to situations and which they use to understand their world. I believe that reality is not “out there” to be discovered, but rather it is subjective and largely based on how people perceive it (Neuman, 2006). In other words, interpretive research implies “reality is socially constructed” (Mertens, 2005, p. 12). These characteristics are believed to best correspond with this study because it is also about exploring human experiences and human perceptions in a socially constructed reality. It is believed that using interpretive research approaches will help to achieve the most reliable findings about the leadership experiences at the university under study.



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## **Qualitative research methods**

Consistent with interpretive approaches, this study used a qualitative method. Qualitative methods explore “the unique lived experiences of the participants to enhance understanding of particular phenomena” (Mutch, 2005, p. 19). They allow researchers to explore small areas in great depth, so are suitable for educational purposes as in this study. Qualitative researchers believe that people are conscious of their behaviors, so their feelings, thoughts and perspectives are vital. Shank and Villeda (2004) liken qualitative research to a lantern used to illuminate dark areas, so that we could see and understand things which were previously obscure. This is consistent with the purpose of this study: to unveil unexplored areas in educational leadership, so that people can understand why things work as they do. Unlike quantitative research that uses deductive logic, qualitative research uses inductive logic; the key ideas emerge from the data collected (Mutch, 2005). With these characteristics, it is believed that qualitative research worked best for this study that examines human leadership experiences and perceptions of the middle leaders at a university in Vietnam. Qualitative research was best suited to help to obtain reliable and valid data to find answers to the research question.

## **Research method: the case study method**

The case study method, “an in-depth examination of an extensive amount of information about very few units or cases for one period or across multiple periods of time” (Neuman, 2006, p. 40), has been widely used in social research for many different disciplines, including education. Case studies allow researchers to explore an inquiry in depth, and to cope with the intricacies and subtlety of real-life contexts (Denscombe, 2007). Case study research also focuses on relationships and processes rather than outcomes and final products; on holistic understanding more than isolated elements; and on natural occurrences rather than artificial situations. A case study helps to answer how and why certain occurrences may happen, rather than just say what those occurrences are (Denscombe, 2007). Therefore, the case study method is believed to work best in qualitative research which explores experiences and real life accounts.

After careful consideration of the characteristics of the case study method, an instrumental explanatory case study method was used for this study. It is believed that it would offer the best opportunity to examine things in detail and to accumulate sufficient information to discover the complexities of the participants’ leadership experiences.

The case study approach has salient strengths. First of all, it enables researchers to investigate the inquiry in some detail and to cope with the subtleties and complexities of real life situations. Specifically, it engages researchers with the relationships and social processes of the occurrences to achieve holistic understanding (Denscombe, 2007). Therefore, it is desirable in social qualitative research and thus consistent with this study. Secondly, it works well in contexts where the researchers have little control over circumstances. As this method addresses phenomena as natural occurrences, there is no pressure on researchers to control, to intervene in, nor to change situations. Thirdly, the case study method is suitable for small-scale research like this one that focuses efforts on one, or a few, research sites. In addition, it allows the use of multiple methods of data collection, which encourages the exercise of



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triangulation -- a process used to improve the reliability and validity of data and findings (Burns, 2000; Denscombe, 2007).

Beside the strengths, the case study method also has a few limitations. The first limitation concerns ethical difficulties. The case study method requires the participants to talk or to write about their experiences, some of which might draw them back to undesirable thoughts and feelings (Willig, 2001). Secondly, the question of "generalizability" from the findings makes case studies vulnerable to criticism (Burns, 2000; Denscombe, 2007; Wellington, 2000). Critics claim that the findings from a small number of case studies can hardly provide sufficient insights and understanding of a more general phenomenon. As a result, findings from case studies cannot be generalized to other cases (Willig, 2001). There have been, however, arguments against these criticisms including Wolcott's (1995) claim that "each case study is unique, but not so unique that we cannot learn from it and apply its lessons more generally" (p. 175) and Walker's (1980) suggestion that "an instance is likely to be as typical and as atypical as any other" (p. 34).

When the case study method was used in this study, the researcher was fully aware of the issue of generalisability. However, as this study focused on a single university, and aimed at exploring the leadership experiences and perceptions at this particular university, it is believed the case study method was still suited to the research. In addition, triangulation with the use of two methods of data collection was adopted to increase the internal validity and reliability of data for this study. The methods used were interviews and an online questionnaire. These two methods helped collect complete, valid and reliable data, so that the research findings could contribute some insight and understanding to the under-researched domain of educational leadership in Vietnam.

### **DATA COLLECTION**

Successful case studies require data collection methods to be carefully selected and well conducted. This section presents the two methods of data collection used in this study: interviewing and an online questionnaire.

#### **Interviewing**

Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2007) define an interview as a conversation with a specific purpose while Kvale (1996) describes it as an exchange of opinions or ideas between two people discussing an issue of interest. As interviews can "reach the parts which other methods cannot reach" (Wellington, 2000, p. 71), many qualitative researchers employ interviewing in their research.

Different approaches to classifying interviews can be found in the literature. However, interviews are most commonly categorised into three types: structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviewing (Burns, 2000; Dyer, 1995; Fontana & Frey, 1994; Mutch, 2005; Wellington, 2000).



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In a structured interview the precise form and direction of questioning are determined in advance before the actual interview. The respondent is asked a prepared list of questions and all respondents are asked the same questions in the same order. Structured interviewing is inflexible, but it offers a quick and easy way of collecting data and saves the interviewer's time (Dyer, 1995).

At the other end of the continuum is the unstructured interview that Burns (2000) describes as a "free-flowing conversation, relying heavily on the quality of the social interaction between the investigator and informant" (p. 425). This approach does not use a prepared list of questions, with the researcher instead deciding what questions to ask depending on the flow of ideas. The researcher might start by posing an initial question and explaining the topics to be addressed in the interview (Dyer, 1995). The unstructured interview is useful for exploring the respondent's experiences and life history.

The combination of these two approaches forms the semi-structured interview, the most frequently used approach to interviewing. A semi-structured format means the interview still has some key questions, and is conducted in a more open-ended way (Mutch, 2005); that is, the interviewer allows the respondent to expand their answers, and it gives room for "individual lines of thought" (Dyer, 1995, p. 59). The interviewer might have an interview guide to ensure that the interview focuses on important research issues, but the wording and ordering of questions are not fixed (Burns, 2000). Semi-structured interviews are useful for exploring respondents' perspectives, opinions and ideas about a chosen topic. Of the three types of interviews, it is believed that the semi-structured interview was most suitable to this study as it allows the participants to express additional thoughts and feelings about the questions asked. This helps to enrich data and findings, and thus enhances the quality of the research. As with any other method, it is necessary for researchers to be aware of the strengths and limitations of interviewing, so that they can achieve the best results and data.

Burns (2000) identifies many benefits of interviewing. First, the flexibility of interviewing allows the researcher to explain the questions to the respondents or ask for further clarification from them in case of misunderstanding or confusion. Secondly, the response rate is much higher for interviews than for questionnaires because people are usually more motivated and willing to express their ideas orally than in written form. In addition, the presence of the researcher also encourages the respondents to give more comprehensive responses (Burns, 2000). Thirdly, during the interviews, the researcher can observe non-verbal expressions by the respondents, and this might provide additional information for data collection (Bell, 2005; Burns, 2000).

Interviewing, however, has some limitations. One disadvantage is that interviews are time-consuming (Bell, 2005; Burns, 2000). Also, as interviewing is a "highly subjective technique" (Bell, 2005, p. 157), it is possible for bias to exist (Hyman et al., 1954). For example, Burns (2000) has identified the researcher's personal characteristics -- age, gender, educational level, or interviewing experience -- as one factor that might bias the interview. These limitations of interviewing, however, can be significantly minimized if the researchers are well-prepared, cautious, skillful and professional in the way they organize and conduct the interviews.





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To make sure not to miss out on any details and information provided by the participants, a recorder was used during all of the interviews. Before the interviews, the researcher carefully checked the recorder, interview questions, and notebook. The researcher wanted to ensure that she would gain good quality data. During the interviews, she tried not to use leading questions because this could bias the participants' answers. She also avoided going into personal issues. Good preparation and caution in interviewing helped to achieve professionalism in conducting the interviews.

As a junior staff member interviewing senior leaders, the researcher was aware that there might be a power differential during the interviews, which might influence participant response. However, the participants, most of whom had been her lecturers, were now her colleagues, so professional relationships were good. Therefore, she believed that they were honest in their answers. In addition, Dyer (1995) and Fontana and Prokos (2007) suggest that in order to motivate and encourage the honest answers, researchers should try to build rapport with and gain trust from the participants. Rapport and trust could be achieved by maximizing communication with the participants, and by explaining the research clearly. Therefore, the researcher explained the research as fully, clearly and honestly as she could to the participants, so that they could understand the research motives and integrity. In this way, she was able to build rapport with them and thus gain their trust. The researcher believes that, with her existing trustworthy relationships with the participants and a good rapport with and trusts from them, she was able to gather honest and reliable research data.

Besides using interviews as the main method of data collection, an online questionnaire was used as a secondary method to achieve more detailed and accurate data.

### **Online surveys: online questionnaire**

The use of online surveys as a data collection method in research is increasing, as it is fast and inexpensive (Couper, 2000; Dillman, 2007). Among different types of online surveys, the most common is an online survey as a web-based questionnaire which is designed as a web page and works as a host website accessible to visitors. This type of questionnaire offers some benefits.

First, it allows for the use of graphic power that makes the surveys more interesting and inviting to the respondents (Denscombe, 2007). Second, it can generate a high response rate (Kehoe & Pitkow, 1996). Third, the researchers can collect the responses very quickly in a very inexpensive way (McCullough, 1998). Moreover, this type allows for anonymity in responses, which has a positive influence on the response rate (Kiesler & Sproull, 1986) because the respondents can answer the questions without worrying that their answers can be traced back to them. Also, the absence of the researchers in an online survey will help eliminate any subjective bias that their presence might bring about (McCullough, 1998).

Being aware of the benefits of web-based online surveys, the researcher exercised it as a supplementary data collection method. She used SurveyGizmo™ which offers free student accounts. Using Survey Gizmo™ means the survey respondents are anonymous. Therefore, the survey respondents were named as Respondent 1, Respondent 2, Respondent 3, and so forth. Within the online survey method, the researcher used the online questionnaire tool, which is an effective component of the survey method.



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The questionnaire comprised seven questions related to the topic. It is believed that the online questionnaire helped to draw out further information from the participants to enrich the data.

### **Selecting the participants**

The participants of this study were ten middle leaders of a university in the south of Vietnam, half of whom were female. These middle leaders include Heads or Deputy Heads of functional offices, Directors or Vice-Directors of centers, Deans or Deputy Deans of schools, or Heads or Vice-Heads of departments. They were selected according to criteria that included balance in gender, a wide range of age and professional experiences, and representation for different units across the university. With the existing good professional relationships with the participants, the researcher could access them personally. She explained to them the purposes of the research and all the ethical issues to achieve their consent.

Choosing suitable participants is very important to the quality of any study, so the researcher chose these participants very carefully. She wanted to ensure diversity and representation to make the data more valid and reliable. She read through the organizational structure of the university and made a list of ten potential participants. She selected five male and five female middle leaders with a wide range of age and professional experiences. In addition, they were from different units across the university. Another important criterion was that the researcher selected those with good relationships with her because they would be more open and willing to share their innermost thoughts and feelings. This criterion, mentioned by Denscombe (2007) as a practical consideration-- a matter of convenience-- is necessary because leadership is a sensitive topic in Vietnam; people who do not know her well might have felt reluctant to talk about it. In addition to these ten leaders, the researcher also had another two more on the list in case some of the ten were unable to participate in the research.

### *Accessing the institution and the participants*

As the unit of analysis was the university where the researcher had been working, she did not have to go through any formal paperwork to get access to the potential participants. Instead, she first talked to the President of this university about the topic, purposes and questions of the study. Then she arranged meetings with the potential participants and carefully explained to them the research including the purposes and ethical issues. She also had them read the participant information sheet. Fortunately, all the ten people asked to participate agreed to do so. When they agreed to take part in the research, the researcher had them read and sign the consent form. She expected that they would ask her more about signing the consent form because this is not a common practice in doing research in Vietnam; but in fact, they were all happy to sign it, saying that they understood this procedure as they had previously done research in a western university. After that, the researcher sent copies of the interview questions to their email two weeks before the interview dates, for their reference. It was believed that this would help to keep them focused in their answers. Moreover, the researcher was aware that the participants also needed some time to reflect on those questions, especially those about sustainable leadership, because this term might be a new to them.



### **Conducting the data collection methods: interviewing and the online questionnaire**

Ten participants were involved in the research. The interviews were conducted at the most convenient times and venues for them. In most cases, the interviews took place in participants' offices at the university. In other cases, the meetings were in a cafeteria or a local restaurant. Although the interview questions were designed in English, they were translated into Vietnamese to facilitate response especially for those lacking good comprehension of English. Before the interviews, the researcher started with some small friendly talk about work, study and family to create a relaxed and comfortable atmosphere. During the interviews, the researcher was recording and taking note of what the participants were saying and of what she could observe. First, the researcher asked them the interview questions. Then based on the flow of the answers, she also asked them some follow-up questions. Female participants were also asked about their difficulties as female leaders. All ten participants were open and friendly. Some of them, however, refused to answer one or two questions because they felt they had nothing to contribute on that topic, or they did not feel comfortable answering them. Each interview lasted no longer than 40 minutes. After the interview, the researcher thanked the interviewees and informed them that she would send them the transcription for their verification, and that an online questionnaire would also reach them in a month's time. During and after each interview, the researcher made some notes about what had happened in the interview and about the issues mentioned. It is worth noting that the interviewees were referred to as Interviewee 1, Interviewee 2, Interviewee 3, and so forth in the findings and discussions, in order to ensure anonymity.

The online questionnaire was used as a supplementary data source to interviewing. It was a web-based questionnaire comprising seven questions. It helped to elaborate some of the issues indicated in the interview data, and it was designed using SurveyGizmo™. Although the online questionnaire was sent to the same ten participants, only eight out of ten got back to the researcher. Therefore, the data from the questionnaire came from just eight respondents who were named as Respondent 1, Respondent 2, Respondent 3, and so forth.

### **Data coding and validity**

This section presents the data coding and the validity measures used in this study. Firstly, it describes the thematic analysis used as the data coding framework. Secondly, it addresses triangulation. Then, it examines aspects of the validity and reliability of this research. Finally, it describes the process of transcribing and analysing the data.

#### **Data coding framework: thematic analysis**

Many approaches to analyzing data in qualitative research exist; these include thematic analysis, content analysis, and semiotic analysis. However, the most common strategy is thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Mutch, 2005).

Thematic analysis is "a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). This strategy helps scholars to organize qualitative data aimed at



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communicating with a broader community of other scholars and researchers (Boyatzis, 1998). Thematic analysis involves a six-phase process “where movement is back and forth as needed, throughout the phases” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 86). Firstly, researchers familiarize themselves with the data by reading them carefully and actively. They also take note and highlight ideas for coding when reading; interview data need to be transcribed into written form (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Secondly, researchers code interesting aspects of the data systematically and meaningfully (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Tuckett, 2005) by writing notes on the texts being analyzed, highlighting potential items with colored pens or using post-it notes to mark interesting features of the data. Next, researchers continue to analyze data but at a wider level of themes, rather than codes. They classify different codes into potential themes by using visual tools. They also need to think of the relationships between codes, themes and different levels of themes. Interestingly, there will probably be some codes that fail to fit in any of the main themes. The researcher then should put them into a ‘miscellaneous theme’ because they might be helpful later (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Fourthly, researchers review themes and check if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts and also in relation to the entire set of data before working on a thematic map of the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). They then consider how each theme relates to the research questions and to the others. Moreover, they need to think about naming the themes. Names should be concise, meaningful and directly related to the content of the theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Last, the thematic analysis should be presented concisely, coherently, logically and interestingly with vivid examples or extracts that clearly demonstrate the main points. Importantly, the report needs to go “beyond description of the data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 93) and present an argument related to the research questions.

With its clear and elaborate steps, thematic analysis was undoubtedly the best choice of data analysis for this study. These six steps were carefully followed to ensure effective presentation and organisation of data.

### *Triangulation*

Triangulation is defined by Neuman (2006) as “the idea [of] looking at something from multiple points of view” (p. 149). Denscombe (2007) identifies four different types of triangulation: methodological triangulation, data triangulation, investigator triangulation and theory triangulation. Of these the most common type is methodological triangulation or using multiple data collection methods to provide a more complete picture of the inquiry investigated. Methodological triangulation was also used in this study through the use of two different methods of data collection: semi-structured interviews and an online questionnaire. These two methods undoubtedly enhanced the reliability and validity of the data and findings of this study.

### *Validity and Reliability*

In any research, researchers need to prove to the research community that quality is achieved in their research. In quantitative research, quality involves validity, reliability and generalizability (Morrow, 2007); in qualitative research, a new term for quality has been recently adopted, namely trustworthiness or rigor (Davies & Dodd, 2002; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Morrow, 2005; Seale, 1999;



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Stenbacka, 2001). As this study used qualitative research, it was important that it keep to standards of trustworthiness to achieve validity and reliability. Williams and Morrow (2009) suggest that there are three aspects of trustworthiness that all qualitative researchers must attend to. They are integrity of the data, balance between reflexivity and subjectivity, and clear communication of findings.

### *Integrity of data*

Integrity of the data means the adequacy or the dependability of the data. Williams and Morrow (2009) claim that qualitative researchers can achieve integrity of the data by articulating their methods and analysis strategies clearly. Moreover, they also need to prove they have collected a sufficient quality and quantity of data. This matter of “adequacy of data” (Morrow, 2005, p. 255) is usually thought of as a sample size issue, but the trustworthiness of the data means more than sample size (Sandelowski, 1995; Yeh & Inman, 2007). Researchers, instead, should try to collect rich data by ensuring a diversity of demographics and perspectives in the sample of participants.

To ensure integrity of data in this study, the researcher adopted methodological triangulation through the use of interviews and an online questionnaire, both of which were clearly described and articulated. Moreover, the participants in this study were selected according to criteria in terms of gender, age, professional experiences and representation for units across the university, to ensure diversity in the sample of participants. Therefore, it is believed that this research was able to achieve integrity of data.

### *A balance between reflexivity and subjectivity*

Balancing reflexivity and subjectivity means “the balance needed between what the participants say and the ways in which the researchers interpret the meaning of the words” (Williams & Morrow, 2009, p. 579). This balance can be achieved by using a bracketing strategy, “the process of becoming aware of one’s implicit assumptions and predispositions and setting them aside to avoid having them unduly influence the research” (Morrow, 2005, p. 254). Thus, researchers are able to keep their own perspectives separate from the participants’ stories. Alternatively, they could also use the strategy of member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), or having a group of researchers with at least one external auditor (Hill et. all, 2005) to ensure this balance.

A balance between reflexivity and subjectivity was achieved in this study by the use of participant verification. This means that after the researcher transcribed the data word for word, she sent these transcriptions to the participants for verification. The participants then revised the transcriptions and corrected any mistaken ideas. This technique helped to avoid any potential bias arising from the researcher’s own perspectives.

### *Clear communication of findings*

Another critical standard of the trustworthiness of a study is whether researchers clearly communicate what has been found and why it matters. In addition to clear writing and presentation of the study,



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researchers also need to show that their research has achieved “social validity” (Morrow, 2005, p. 253), meaning that their research makes some potential contribution to the development of society in certain ways. Moreover, the researchers need to prove that they have answered the research questions proposed from the beginning, and, equally importantly, they need to tie the findings to the existing literature (Williams & Morrow, 2009).

As this study focused on educational leadership, which is under-researched in Vietnam, it is believed that its findings add fundamental knowledge and understanding to the existing literature in the field. These insights will contribute to enhancing the quality of educational leadership within this university and beyond. Moreover, during the study process, every methodological choice (research paradigm, research methods, and data collection methods) was made with great caution and consideration to ensure that the research question would be appropriately addressed. This has ensured that the data and findings of this study are valid and reliable.

### *Transcribing and analyzing the data*

The process of transcribing the data was time-consuming. Each interview took almost two hours of transcribing; however, this also allowed the researcher to become thoroughly familiar the data. After transcribing an interview, the researcher sent the transcription to the participant for verification. Then she translated it into English.

The researcher followed the thematic analysis process recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, she read the data many times and took note of initial ideas. After coding interesting characteristics in a systematic manner, she searched for themes by putting relevant codes into potential themes. Some ideas did not seem to fit any theme, so she put them into a miscellaneous theme. She then reviewed the themes for appropriateness, and also developed thematic maps (maps with different levels or hierarchies of themes). Next, she developed descriptions and names for the themes. Finally, she reported the findings from this analysis.

### *Ethical considerations*

As this study involved direct and interpersonal interaction with humans, there were ethical considerations. Therefore, the researcher carefully considered ethical issues and conducted the research in accordance with ethical norms. The following section presents the three most important ethical concerns that any researcher must consider. They are informed consent, protection from harm, and confidentiality and anonymity.

### *Informed consent*

Informed consent involves the researchers’ “informing the research participants about the overall purpose of the investigation and the main features of the design, as well as of any possible risks and benefits from participation in the research project” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 70). Cohen et al. (2007)



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suggest that informed consent implies four factors: competence, voluntarism, full information and comprehension.

Competence requires researchers to ensure that consent has been obtained from mature, responsible and psychologically capable people after they have been given relevant information. If participants are children, researchers need to obtain consent from their parents or guardians (Finch, 2005). Voluntarism means that participants can choose whether or not to take part in the research (Cohen et al., 2007) and they can withdraw from the research at any stage (Mutch, 2005). Full information entails the researcher providing the participants with full relevant information in simple and clear written form. Comprehension implies that participants fully understand the research study including its procedure, purpose, conduct and even potential risks.

In this study, the issue of informed consent was carefully addressed. All participants selected were mature, responsible and psychologically capable. Firstly, the researcher provided them with full relevant information on the study by giving them the information sheet and ethics proposal. Then she carefully explained the research to them with a focus on the procedure, purposes, conduct and potential risks. She also emphasized that they could choose not to participate in the research or that they were free to withdraw at any stage. If they agreed to participate in this research, the researcher had them read and sign the consent form for participants.

### *Protection from harm*

According to the Ethical Conduct in Human Research and Related Activities Regulations (University of Waikato, 2008), researchers must try their best to identify and minimize any potential harm to the participants in the “physical, psychological, social, economic or cultural” sense (p. 4). Researchers, therefore, must be very cautious in order not to harm the participants.

The researcher observed the principle of protection from harm by asking the participants to choose the interview venue and time most comfortable for them. Additionally, she tried to be sensitive and avoid personal and emotional issues that could make them feel uncomfortable.

### *Confidentiality and anonymity*

Confidentiality means not disclosing the participants’ personal information nor any of the information they provide, without permission (Arksey & Knight, 1999; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The issue of confidentiality is very important, especially in research on a sensitive topic, because it is a privacy issue; revealing true identities might create problems for the participants. Assurances of confidentiality can influence the participants’ decision to participate in the research. Besides confidentiality, the principle of anonymity should also be observed. Researchers have to ensure that their participants’ real identity cannot be revealed, which might require changing the names of the participants (Mutch, 2005). If the promise of confidentiality and anonymity is not sufficiently strong and clear, the participants might refuse to cooperate.



In this study, principles of confidentiality and anonymity were observed very strictly because the topic was leadership, a topic of some considerable sensitivity in Vietnam. The researcher ensured that all the information and data provided by the participants were kept confidential and only accessible to the researcher. She never discussed data with anyone else. Moreover, the name of the university under study was not given. In addition, the ten interviewees were referred to as Interviewee 1, Interviewee 2, Interviewee 3, and so forth; the eight questionnaire respondents were referred to as Respondent 1, Respondent 2, Respondent 3, and so forth, to ensure anonymity. Furthermore, the researcher clearly explained the rule of confidentiality and anonymity to the participants, so that they could freely answer the questions without fear of professional reprisals.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS**

With respect to challenges faced in leadership work, data indicated that the participants were undergoing some challenges, amongst which the most salient included lack of collaboration across the university; difficulties as female leaders; and lack of autonomy.

### **Lack of Collaboration across the University's Units**

One of the biggest challenges reported was the absence of effective collaboration among different units across the university. Questionnaire data show that the leaders were unhappy with the lack of collaboration among units across the university. Specifically, Respondent 3, Respondent 5, and Respondent 6 found the lack of collaboration frustrating to their leadership work. Eight interviewees considered it as a barrier to effective leadership. One of the interviewees expressed his frustration:

*"Working at this university requires cooperation and mutual support from different units. However, some units are not willing enough to collaborate with others in issues that are not directly related to them. Specifically, when they receive the request for support from my unit, they usually either do it very slowly or keep delaying doing it, which is very frustrating for me. This is not about each unit working individually, but rather, about all the units supporting each other as a whole for the benefit of the university. I would suggest that closer and more efficient collaboration be enhanced to achieve effective leadership. Take one example, we need more collaboration from the Property office in accommodating lecturers with teaching equipment" (Interviewee 1, interview data).*

Another interviewee shared similar concerns:

*"One of the biggest challenges for me is the unwillingness to collaborate of some units. This university works as a human body with all the units interdependent of each other, but some of them just do not understand that. Quite often, I have proposed a request and had to wait for a very long time. I came to talk to them and they asked me to wait. Finally, I came to talk with the President Board to ask for support. Only then could I get what I requested. It would be good if there were more collaboration among units at this*





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*university. It would make my leadership work, and also theirs, more efficient and effective" (Interviewee 2, interview data).*

One interviewee stated that one of the possible reasons for this lack of collaboration was the ambiguity of the operational regulations. Ambiguous and unclear regulations led to confusion and overlapping responsibilities among units, which resulted in lack of collaboration. She suggested:

*"The operational regulations should be presented in a clear and straightforward manner to avoid confusion and overlap of responsibilities. Clear and straightforward operational regulations would also help leaders of different units know which responsibilities are theirs, which would help promote collaboration among units" (Interviewee 3, interview data).*

In response to this issue, questionnaire data suggested that further collaboration could be achieved by forced collaboration. Specifically, Respondent 1, Respondent 3, and Respondent 7 stated that the President Board should issue an act of collaboration across the university. This act could clearly specify terms and regulations of collaboration among units as well as punishments for unnecessary postponements of collaboration. Moreover, Respondent 2 and Respondent 4 emphasized that there should be clear and straightforward operational regulations which specify the defined responsibilities of each unit, in order to prevent the practices of "passing the ball" among units.

Collaboration is defined by Friend and Cook (2003) as the "direct interaction between at least two coequal parties voluntarily engaged in shared decision making as they work toward a common goal" (p. 5). A strong culture of collaboration could function as the common thread within this university, which connects everyone to work together, and conversely, lack of collaboration could result in challenges for educational leaders. Data from this study revealed that poor collaboration among units across the university was a primary factor inhibiting effective leadership. This point was demonstrated by Interviewee 2 and Interviewee 1, who viewed the unwillingness to collaborate of some other units as one of the biggest challenges in their leadership work. Moreover, questionnaire data indicated that lack of collaboration was frustrating to leaders.

One probable reason for this lack of collaboration could be the traditional academic approach of individual work that has been exercised for years in Vietnamese culture. In addition, Vietnamese people are not exposed to teamwork approaches, so they are new to interactions with others, and hence not yet familiar with collaboration. Another reason for this poor collaboration might come from the particular structure of this university, in which the three main campuses are located separately. This physical separation might, to some extent, hinder collaborative relationships amongst units. To assist with that, this university has highlighted the significance of using the Internet as a tool to promote a stronger sense of collaboration. Furthermore, regular meetings with all leaders of the university that offer a good opportunity for collaboration are organized every Monday afternoon. However, the use of Internet and regular meetings can do no more than provide fora through which collaborative relationships may develop; what matters more is whether or not the leaders are committed to developing collaboration. In addressing how to promote a strong culture of collaboration, questionnaire data also suggested that the President Board should issue an act of collaboration across the university to make people collaborate more in their work. This recommendation of forced collaboration is not



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tenable because collaboration definitely cannot be forced. In fact, enforcement goes against the very notion of collaboration. Collaboration is not about authority or forced legislation; rather, it is about a willingness and commitment to working with others, and it should be promoted in a culture of trust and mutual respect. This claim of forced collaboration indicates a tension between the participants' perceptions and the literature in this field (Friend & Cook, 2003; Van-Meter & Stevens, 2000). For example, Friend and Cook (2003) emphasize that collaboration should be voluntary and come from personal commitment, rather than the use of forced legislation. They suggest that personal commitment toward collaboration could be achieved by raising leaders' awareness of the benefits of collaborating with colleagues.

It was evident from this study that a lack of collaboration across the university inhibits leadership work. It is, therefore, necessary to promote a sense of collaboration. Data showed that a few leaders believed that collaboration could be achieved through authority and forced legislation. This is a misapprehension. In fact, collaborative relationships are only possible in a culture of trust and mutual respect, and no power or authority could enforce them. The following recommendations inspired by Friend and Cook (2003) could encourage the development of collaborative relationships at this university. First, a sense of collaboration could be obtained by raising the awareness of the leaders about the significance of collaborating with other colleagues to increase their personal commitment to collaborative relationships. Second, these leaders could also pay attention to enhancing their communication skills, because communication skills are "the basic building blocks of collaborative interactions" (Friend & Cook, 2003, p. 21). Some might argue that most educational professionals already have relatively good communication skills in order to be in their professions; in fact, the skills needed for collaboration are more technical and best developed with extended practice. Third, it is important that a culture facilitating collaborative relationships be enhanced. This culture helps to promote trust and mutual respect within the institution. The university's top leaders could foster this collaborative culture by holding informal relaxed meetings where the leaders could communicate freely to better understand each other. Moreover, as this university has three campuses located separately, staff meetings and intensive use of the Internet would be of great help in promoting collaboration.

### **Difficulties as Female Leaders**

Amongst five female participants, only Interviewee 3 said that she did not have difficulties as a female leader because her senior leaders and her family were very sensitive and supportive of her. However, not many female participants were that lucky. In fact, the other four female participants indicated that they had extra difficulties being female leaders. Interviewee 4 said that she felt under-valued being a female leader, and that her voice was not acknowledged as frequently as those of her male counterparts

*"In a meeting, my opinions got ignored more often than the male leaders' opinions. I noticed that some male leaders still looked down on female leaders' ability. In this culture, especially in a small city like here, men still tend to think that men are better at work and that women are better in the kitchen. This is so unfair" (Interviewee 4, interview data).*



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In addition, the female participants complained that they are always under time pressure. They were expected to perform the multiple tasks of teaching, leading, doing research and family care at the same time and equally well, which was far beyond their ability. Many of them found themselves under pressure all the time. Interviewee 7 reported that she was feeling very tired and stressed with her overloaded schedule. Sometimes, she even had to bring work home and worked over the weekend. This ruined her health and affected her family atmosphere. Similarly, Interviewee 4 was feeling overwhelmed with work, even at weekends:

*“As the Head of a division, a lecturer and a researcher, I have been undergoing big work pressure. Sometimes I feel so exhausted. I hardly have time to rest. There are always things to solve and due dates to meet at work. I even bring things home to work at weekends. I don’t have much time for my family. Moreover, as the Head I also need to go meet visitors; have lunch, dinner with them after work hours and at weekends. This is also tiring because I do not have enough time to rest”* (Interviewee 4, interview data).

One interviewee identified another difficulty:

*“Some leaders in this culture tend to prefer solving work things when they hang out for dinner or drinking. And it is easier for male leaders to build relationships with each other then because they can talk about work issues in a more relaxed environment. Female leaders like me, however, are too busy with family after work to go for a drink like male leaders, so the distance between me and the other male leaders just gets bigger”* (Interviewee 5, interview data).

Another interviewee claimed that in Vietnamese culture, women were expected to take care of the children and housework in the family, which put another pressure on their shoulders in addition to their overloaded responsibilities at work. Interviewee 7 complained that she felt stressed and exhausted with all these responsibilities. These female participants implied that they had to work much harder than their male counterparts to be able to achieve the same efficiency and effectiveness. Interviewee 6 reported:

*“Leadership is not an easy job, and it is even more challenging for female leaders. As female leaders, we have to try very hard to meet all the duties, both at home and at work. In fact, to be as effective as male leaders, we women have to work much harder”* (Interviewee 6, interview data).

In short, most female participants faced difficulties being female leaders in their leadership work. These difficulties included being considered inferior to men, and balancing between work and family.

Although Vietnam has been claimed to surpass most other developing countries in exercising a legal framework in support of gender equity and in delivering programs conducive to women’s advancement (Schuler et al., 2006), a gap still exists between those verbal commitments and actual practices. In fact, most female participants in this study reported a number of challenges specific to being female leaders. The participants identified gender inequity in terms of being attributed status inferior to that of their male counterparts, and bearing the double burden of work and family. Interviewee 4 commented that



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she had been looked down upon, and her opinions had been ignored by her male counterparts while Interviewee 5 experienced overloaded burdens of family care and leadership work. The problem of women being considered as inferior faced by female leaders at this university mirrors the wider socio-cultural norms of Vietnamese society. These norms are difficult to change, and represent a much bigger issue than that faced by this university alone. Gender inequity is common not only among Vietnamese female leaders (Ha, 2001; Le, 2011; Truong, 2008), but also among those elsewhere in the world (Akao, 2008; Qiang, Hang, & Niu, 2009; Vali, 2010; Warsal, 2009). In the context of Vietnam, this finding is unsurprising given the socio-cultural influence of Confucianism. Culturally, Confucianism has strongly influenced Vietnamese society, and has accordingly shaped the lives of Vietnamese women. Along with a feudal ideology, Confucianism has traditionally allowed Vietnamese society to perceive the status of women to be inferior to that of men (Ha, 2001), and female leaders such as Interviewee 4 are, unfortunately, not exempt from this norm.

In addition, Vietnamese women are also expected to conform to the femininity norms of the “heavenly mandate” (Truong, 2008, p. 19) which involves giving birth, breast feeding, teaching children, and taking good care of the family and elderly relatives, along with a number of other unpaid unnamed jobs in addition to their full-time professional employment. This point was illustrated by Interviewee 7 when she stated that she was always very busy balancing her family and professional life, and this made her exhausted. All these factors including inferiority, prevailing femininity norms and the double burden of work and family have, undoubtedly, put tremendous pressure on women in Vietnam. For those in leadership positions such as those at this university, some might expect that they could be exempt from these traditional demands to concentrate on their leadership work. They are not, unfortunately; the female leaders in this study claimed that they had to work even harder to meet socio-cultural expectations and at the same time fulfill their leadership role at work.

It is obvious that one impediment to leadership work at this university concerns gender inequity faced by the female leaders. These women leaders claimed that their status had been considered as inferior to that of male leaders, and that their voices had been undervalued and sometimes ignored. This problem of women being considered inferior reflects the wider cultural norms and societal environment, which are difficult to change. However, action is needed to improve gender equity for women in general, and for female leaders in particular. To tackle this problem, first a support network for women leaders at this university could be established. This network could be run by women as a forum where female leaders and staff could discuss their work difficulties, and share opinions concerning how to improve the situation to facilitate their professional advancement. Second, the university needs to initiate formal policies specifying gender equity and clarifying the important role of women’s representation. The university should also consider developing a cadre of female leaders to balance the gender representation in leadership. This target should be clearly specified in the university’s development strategies, and be assessed regularly. Third, on a broader scale, Vietnamese society should abandon the backward traditional thinking defined by socio-cultural norms about women’s inferior status. This traditional thinking is the mental obstacle preventing women from enjoying self-confidence and gender equity. Women leaders in this study also had difficulties balancing the double burden of work and family. To address this problem, gender role expectations should be challenged. Housework and family care should be shared equally between women and men. Men should learn to understand their wives’ multiple burdens and support them physically and mentally.



### **Lack of Autonomy**

The research data indicated a lack of autonomy at this university. The participants suggested that they needed more autonomy in their leadership work. This autonomy included financial and staffing decisions.

*“Leaders like me should be allowed more autonomy in terms of financial and personnel management. We need more power in enrolling staff that we find capable. We need able people to develop the university. Similarly, we need more power with money to carry out the initiatives we have for our units”* (Interviewee 8, interview data).

Questionnaire data corroborated the interview data in that three respondents felt frustrated with restricted autonomy, particularly in terms of financial control and staffing decisions.

Interviewee 8 and Interviewee 5 were also concerned about the limited autonomy at this university. Interviewee 5, however, addressed autonomy in terms of personnel management and curriculum design. She argued that more autonomy in designing curriculum would also make the leaders become more self-confident and hence more effective in their leadership work:

*“I believe this university in particular and other Vietnamese universities in general need more autonomy in terms of personnel management and curriculum design. More autonomy in personnel management would allow leaders to recruit capable people to work for their units.*

*With respect to curriculum design, we should not apply the same curriculum year after year because it might become backward and fail to respond to the social demands. Moreover, each university should be given more autonomy in designing their own curriculum which suits the local setting, such as the demands of the local labour market”* (Interviewee 5, interview data).

To sum up, the leaders at this university experienced some challenges in their leadership work such as lack of collaboration across the university, difficulties as female leaders and lack of autonomy. These are the barriers that inhibit effective leadership practices.

Autonomy allows professionals to make unique contributions and to respond better to societal demands, so it is important that professional autonomy be promoted in every discipline (Esdaile & Roth, 2000). This study’s findings suggested that the participants, however, had restricted autonomy. Questionnaire data showed that these leaders felt frustrated by not being permitted enough autonomy. This lack of autonomy was also considered one of the factors that inhibited effective leadership. As reported by Interviewee 8, leaders at this university lacked professional autonomy in terms of financial control and staffing decisions; they lacked autonomy to recruit suitable people for their units, or to



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control expenditure as they wished. Every decision regarding staffing management and financial control was decided by the President Board, and then arranged by the Personnel Office and Financing Office.

This procedure reflects the deeply rooted culture of central planning and bureaucratic decision-making in Vietnam, in which the ultimate power stays with those at the top, and final decisions must be made by the highest authority.

At an institutional level, a similar situation was described. Interviewee 5 expressed her concerns about the lack of institutional autonomy in light of curriculum design at Vietnamese universities. Her claim is supported by Hayden and Lam (2007) who find that Vietnamese tertiary institutions do not have much institutional autonomy. These two scholars explain the reason by reference to the political system of Vietnam. With the influences of Communism and Socialism, Vietnam has exercised strongly centralized governance over higher education, in which the State is the source of all authority (Hayden & Lam, 2007). Most universities and colleges are, therefore, managed by the Ministry of Education and Training (MoET). MoET's responsibilities include allocating enrolment quota, student loads, and grant and scholarship support for universities and colleges (Hayden & Lam, 2007). MoET is also responsible for approving curriculum frameworks for all study programs across the system. All Vietnamese universities and colleges have to follow a common curriculum structure that sometimes fails to respond to the local demands of different higher education institutions. Seen in this light, the lack of institutional autonomy is a hindrance to institutional development and also to leadership effectiveness.

It is thus recommended that the university's top leaders should allow more autonomy to the middle leaders, so that the latter could lead more effectively. This would require significant cultural change from top university leadership. Specifically, it would require the top leaders to learn to have trust and confidence in the middle leaders and to distribute authority down to lower levels. At an institutional level, a lack of institutional autonomy in respect to curriculum impedes the development of this university. Like other higher educational institutions in Vietnam, this university has to adopt a common curriculum structure developed by the Ministry of Education and Training. This curriculum structure, though carefully written by experts at ministerial level, fails to respond to the local needs of this university. It is, therefore, necessary that the President Board of this university work with those of other Vietnamese universities to request further autonomy in terms of curriculum design, so as to meet the specific local demands of each institution. More autonomy in designing the appropriate curriculum for the local context would also give the leaders more confidence in their leadership work.

### CONCLUSION

This study explored the challenges middle leaders at a university in Vietnam have been facing in their leadership work. The research made a number of interesting findings, some of which are compatible with the existing published literature; others were specific to the context. In addition, the study made practical recommendations for further leadership development in this university, and noted relevant implications for other Vietnamese universities. In the context of Vietnam where the topic of educational leadership is still largely undocumented, it is believed that this study made significant contributions in revealing the reality of leadership practices in higher education. It also disclosed major issues this university faces within its shifting process from a hierarchical bureaucratic model to a more shared



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distributed one. More broadly, this research identified the socio-cultural, historical and political barriers to advancement in the transitional period of the country, which prolongs this transition process and makes it more challenging. To overcome these barriers and to promote further development of leadership in the Vietnamese education system, concerted effort is needed from every echelon of Vietnamese society.

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