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Change management in Higher Education by Kotter's Model: A Case Study in Vietnam Private University

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Abstract

Faced with the changing demands of the higher quality teaching profession, especially the increasing trend of studying at private universities leading to many initiatives on the issue of change and reforming the educational management model brings the effect so the university needs a planned sequential path. The purpose of this study is to examine the evolutionary changes and challenges facing the educational administration of private universities. From there, establish and propose a suitable model based on the apply Kotter's eight-step model of change to enhance effective change management in private universities in Ho Chi Minh City, and at the same time propose a model towards effective change management results across all private universities in Vietnam. Change efforts focus on enhancing faculty capacity to support diverse student success. The change process is planned using Kotter's (1996) eight-step change model and is, therefore, a regulated, linear, sequential change process. The initial steps were reviewed, and the strategies were considered workable. This approach enhances faculty acquisition and project success. Characterization of each step provides insight into ways to apply Kotter's model of change in higher education settings.

Keywords: Change Management, Higher education, Kotter's change model, Private University, Vietnam

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Introduction

Universities need to operate a transition from the common 'traditional' settings towards an education that contributes to a sustainable social change by preparing students to be change agents who care for others and the well-being of society. Universities, as well as schools, must be continuously taking part in the process of change, or they will not be successful with their students given the ever-changing needs of society (Speck, 1999). In addition, change in schools gets the whole community involved in its processes, as Hall et al (2001, p. 14) states: "Change processes are easier and chances of sustained success are increased as the school staff understands more about how to use external resources and as those external to the school recognize the importance of their roles in facilitating each school in achieving change success."

One can look at some models and practices at the university level. First, in the case of Chinese educational settings, Ma wan-Hua (2007), cited in (Herschock et al 2007: 164)

expresses, “The changes China has undergone over the past three decades are so fundamental that virtually no aspect of social life has remained unaffected. Higher education is no exception.” He adds that at the system level, Chinese higher education has experienced changes concerning expansion, diversification, massification, and commercialization. Also, according to Ma Wan-Hua, recently the Chinese Ministry of Education held two Chinese and foreign university president conferences for more awareness of the interplay of local, national, regional, and global forces and issues in decision-making for institutional change and development.

Muongmee Suchinda (2007), poses the need for educational reforms in Thailand. He states that educational reform is, among other things, seen as a crucial ingredient for building a nation of wealth, stability and dignity, and the capability to compete with others in the age of globalization. He also notes some indicators, which need to be put in play, as follows: (1) strong leadership with clear vision and understanding of the mission of education, (2) control of the politics influencing education, (3) a duty of the government to solve any educational problems, (4) reduction of the gap between academics and the general public in the process of educational reform, (5) the main issues of educational reform – change in mentality, behavior and work culture in education, (6) parents’ thoughts about traditional education needed to be reformed, and (7) students’ points of view need to be considered.

In 1986, Vietnam started the economic renovation, which is often referred to as economic reform¹. The economic reform replaced a central planning economy with a regulated market one, contributing to the country’s high economic growth rates since the late 1980s (WB, 2012). The new governing philosophy of economic activities had gradually penetrated the education sector. In 1993, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam released Resolution 04-NQ/HNTW on education renovation continuation that crucially directed the higher education development. The resolution refers to diversifying funding and types of institutions and restructuring and expanding the higher education system. The development in the context of globalization and international integration has set for the education system the task of training dynamic, creative, capable, and qualified people to lead a developed society. National education reform since the early 1990s has seen many major changes (Mac Cargo, 2003). The country is also facing challenges and opportunities. Regarding the challenges, Mac Cargo (2003) argues that the reforms have led to a rapid increase in the number of students, the number and types of educational institutions, and courses at all levels of study. In contrast to other organizations, higher education institutions are also distinctive in their shared governance, tenure and promotion systems, and multiple power structures, often with multiple or ambiguous goals (Kezar 2011). Because of these characteristics, change models that are political, cultural, or sociocognitive, rather than simply teleological may be more effective (Kezar 2001), and the complexity of higher education settings may warrant a more adaptable approach (Quan et al. 2019). Especially, for private universities, change management becomes more and more necessary to ensure the quality of input education as well as improve the quality of training for private universities core.

By the same token, Luu Nguyen Quoc Hung (2007), conveys five challenges, which include: the comparability of quality and standards; the multi-nationalization of higher education; the problem of brain drains; the problem of intellectual property; and maintaining a university as a learning organization. Regarding the roles of leaders in the transformation of Vietnamese higher education, Hung (2007) suggests that Vietnamese universities need a radical transformation to improve the quality and effectiveness of education to meet the

diversified demands for human resources. However, the decentralization must be affected in a step-by-step manner.

Over 30 years of establishment and development, Vietnamese private universities have made important contributions to the development of the country in general and the education and training sector in particular. However, the Vietnamese private university system still has many shortcomings and limitations in terms of both size and quality. Therefore, to contribute to realizing the vision of Vietnam's higher education development in the context of increasingly fierce competition in higher education, the system of private universities needs to be fundamentally reformed comprehensive, including university governance issues. Besides that, the research topics on this topic are still limited in terms of both scope and time of research. Therefore, the university needs a planned sequential path: The management of change needs to be considered and upgraded in the whole process of change. In this article, the author has deeply explored the factors affecting university governance, thereby based on Kotter's Model of Change (1996), building, and establishing an appropriate model for the governance of Private Universities in Vietnam in general and Ho Chi Minh City in particular.

Literature Review

Kotter's Change Model

Kotter's change model is one of the best-known frameworks for change management (1996). Because it is regarded as a simple and straightforward framework, many practitioners continue to implement it (Borrego and Henderson 2014; Pollack and Pollack 2015; Wentworth, Behson, and Kelley 2018). Expert John Kotter studied 100 companies transforming. Analyzing the achievements and mistakes, Kotter identifies some common mistakes. This led him to compile the document "Eight Steps to Change": A sequence of actions to help ensure a successful change process. Kotter's change model comprises eight steps (Kotter 1996): (1) Create a sense of urgency. Major change requires more effort than business as usual (Cohen 2005) and informing people of the urgent need for change helps them get ready for it (Kotter and Cohen 2002). (2) Build a guiding coalition. If the first step is implemented successfully, people who have the right knowledge, skills, and authority will be inclined to join the change process (Kotter and Cohen 2002). Success depends on having the right people on the team (Collins 2001), including effective leaders (Bystydzienski et al. 2017; Kotter 2008; Quardokus Fisher and Henderson 2018). (3) Form a strategic vision for change. Building a strategic vision guides the change process toward a shared, known, and desirable new state. This vision must be paired with appropriate, feasible, and effective strategies for achieving it (Cohen 2005; Graham 2012; Senge et al. 2012). (4) Communicate the vision. The major change is successful only when people buy in and drive in the same direction (Besterfield-Sacre et al. 2014). (5) Remove obstacles. Before the full-scale change can take effect, possible barriers to change must be identified and removed (Cohen 2005). (6) Create short-term wins. In the process of the change, celebrating minor victories along the way can serve as an emotional reward, creating momentum for success (Cohen 2005; Kotter and Cohen 2002). (7) Consolidate improvements. As the change occurs, members sometimes lose their sense of urgency, become exhausted, or fall back into old routines (Kotter and Cohen 2002). To prevent these situations, the change needs to be continuously monitored and refined to ensure everyone stays passionately involved (Cohen 2005). (8) Anchor the changes. When the change is institutionalized and becomes routine to people, and the knowledge, skills, and attitudes have been disseminated, it can be viewed as successful (Cohen, 2005). When planning the change process with these steps in mind, it is

important to allow enough time for the entire sequence of events and to do them in the right order. Kotter has discovered that following a change plan with continuity and patience is the fundamental foundation for success: “Skipping a few steps will only create the illusion of speed and never create new ones.” satisfactory results. Making a fatal mistake at any stage can have a devastating effect, slowing growth, and negating hard-won gains.”

Fig 1. Kotter's 8 step model of change

Kotter's Change Model in Higher Education Institutions

Kotter's change model has been used to successfully guide or account for the change in higher education settings but is generally related to administrative and technological changes. For instance, Wentworth, Behson, and Kelley (2018) reported on their use of Kotter's change model to replace a teaching evaluation system. They attributed their success to their adherence to Kotter's steps, but also explained how these steps fit within a higher education context. They noted the importance of including members elected by the faculty on the guiding team to fit within the shared governance model and gain faculty buy-in. When communicating the vision to faculty, they helped faculty understand how the new system could provide benefits in tenure and promotion processes, including by providing faculty with more useful and timely feedback. Likewise, they took care to be transparent in communicating how and why they chose a specific system. Similarly, driven by nationwide changes to dental education, a dental school found success using Kotter's change model to overhaul their approach to assessing student and program clinical outcomes (Guzmán et al. 2011). Their success hinged on aligning to incentive systems, including offering continuing education credits to involved faculty and rolling out the new system through smaller pilot implementations to build faculty trust.

Kotter's change model was used to change faculty participation in accreditation activities of a business school (Calegari, Sibley, and Turner 2015). While their efforts were successful, they noted that Kotter's change model provided insufficient guidance on gaining faculty buy-in. Like Wentworth, Behson, and Kelley (2018), they noted the importance of transparency and communication. They also found faculty needed to be re-engaged following a short-term win. Similarly, analysis of a top-down effort to integrate instructional technology and library services found that when faculty felt such wins were artificial, this hindered their progress (Sidorko 2008).

Methodology

This part of the study is aimed at presenting the procedures based upon the research objectives and the research steps as well, as displayed below:

Phase 1: Constructing a hypothetical model for enhancing effective change management in universities. To develop a model for effective change management in universities globally, there was a document search in higher education settings internationally regarding change management with change implementation and change processes through theories, models, and real practices. From this point, a global tentative model for change management was constructed. (Also seen at the result of Phase 1 at Expected Results of the Study- Figure 2).

Phase 2: Verifying the hypothetical model for enhancing effective change management in universities. Getting the tentative model for effective change management beforehand from Phase 1, the author sent it to an international expert group to be judged. There were 15 experts (5 from Thailand, 5 from other Asian countries and the rest from Europe and North America) in the educational administration field (criteria designed in advance), joining the judgment group toward the tentative model (Also seen at Expected Results of the Study-Figure 2). The criteria for experts would be as follows: (1) the administrator, who has been working in the higher education level, (2) the administrator, who has known about change management and its related issues for about 5 years, and (3) the educator, teacher, or professor, who has had a lot of experiences of working/teaching/advising in this field for the above listed items.

The tentative change management model was sent to 15 experts by email. The experts put their answers on a rating scale in the questionnaire, gave their feedback through email discussions and interviews. Comments, ideas, and suggestions from the international experts in the questionnaire were synthesized. A modified model was then judged. Descriptive reports from email discussions were written. With the questionnaire, there was an analysis looking at mean and standard deviation.

Phase 3: Proposing the model for enhancing effective management of Private Universities in Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam. There would be three sub phase steps:

Step 1. Studying the present state of the administration and the needs for change management in Private Universities in Ho Chi Minh City. This was a document search. First, there was a study about Vietnamese higher education settings and ways to improve the educational reform process since the 1990s, especially regarding change management. One had to visualize a national model for change: Also needed was a search of documents about Private Universities in area Ho Chi Minh City administration and the implementation of change management. In addition, a comparison about change management between Private Universities and the international contexts was considered to finalize a model for each Universities specific conditions.

Step 2. Constructing a model for effective change management. For the sake of finding a suitable model of the current change management performance on site, a new model, called a change management model, was created. First, a careful judgment from the results of the item 3.1 in Phase 3 would be the foundation to help construct a model. Second, there may also be a reference towards the international change model judged from the international expert group from Phase 1. Finally, a model would be constructed.

Step 3. Judging the model for enhancing effective management in Private Universities in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Considering the item 3.2 in early Phase 3, the Private Universities model may be evaluated by the expert group for its applicability-

feasibility and utilization. 11 experts from Private Universities in Ho Chi Minh City would be invited to evaluate the model through delphi techniques. The criteria towards the experts would be supposed as it was done in Phase 1. A self-made questionnaire through Delphi techniques would be carried out with at least three rounds. The results from the rounds would be collected. The results would be analyzed to measure Median (M) ≥ 3.50 and Interquartile (IR) ≤ 1.50 . Finally, the Private Universities new model would then be set up and proposed to be implemented.

Data Collection and Analysis

Our data corpus documents the evolution of the project, from early team formation through three years of implementation. We recorded interviews with a subset of faculty about their perceptions undergraduate teaching and advising; their sense of a need to change undergraduate teaching; their understanding and perceptions of project activities, including design challenges, digital badges, and students' technical writing competency; and their concerns and suggestions (Table 1).

We transcribed recorded data and employed a stepwise top-down coding approach to analyze the transcripts with a systematic and recursive collaborative coding plan (LeCompte and Schensul 2010). We developed an initial coding framework based on the eight steps of Kotter's change model (Table 2). In the initial coding, each team member coded the data line-by-line, highlighting code able moments (Saldaña 2015). In pattern coding, each researcher then analyzed data across transcripts focused on two of Kotter's steps.

Table 1. Timeline of interview

Timing	Interviewees
4 months into implementation year 1	3 faculty (A, B, C)
3 months into implementation year 2	5 faculty (D*, E*, F, G, H)
6 months into implementation year 2	2 faculty (I*, J*) and 1 non-faculty member (K*)
1 month into implementation year	2 faculty (E*, J*) and 1 staff

**Member of guiding team*

Table 2. Operationalization of Kotter's change model as coding framework

Code	Positive	Negative
Create a sense of urgency	Expresses need for change or concerns about undergraduate matters (students, curriculum, teaching, program).	Expresses complacency or satisfaction with undergraduate matters
Building a guiding team	Mentions having right people in the team, strong leadership, requisite expertise; well managed and organized. Team effectively divides work and trusts each other	Mentions team includes inappropriate people, lack of leadership, lack of trust
Communicate vision to enlist volunteer army	Mentions use of multiple forums to communicate vision, opportunity to give feedback on the change, two-way	Mentions that communication is infrequent, one-way; does not understand vision, strategies, and project progress

	communication; understands vision, strategies, and project progress	
Form strategic vision & strategies	Mentions vision of possible future, what changes are needed to get there. Vision appeals to stakeholders and is supported by aligned strategies	Mentions lack of clear vision; no plan for reaching vision; vision is not appealing to stakeholders; visions and strategies are not aligned
Create short-term wins	Mentions a clear win or celebration of a win, or plans for future wins	Does not mention wins or that wins are not celebrated, lack of plan for future wins
Remove obstacles	Mentions a barrier removed, trying new innovative teaching, empowered by faculty development	Mentions barriers that prevent trying new teaching (policies, skills, beliefs, etc.)
Consolidate improvements & sustain acceleration	Mentions short term wins are leveraged for bigger initiatives; faculty buy in more; changes in own teaching	Faculty adoption is not growing; core team allows urgency to decrease
Anchor the change	Mentions that change is a new normal; succession plans exist, lessons learned are disseminated	Expresses ‘us vs. them’ discourse between faculty and the core team; succession plans ignored; lessons learned not disseminated

Expected results and discussion

The initial result from Phase 1 of document analysis towards a tentative change model in Privates Universities.

Figure 2. The Tentative Effective Change Management Model in Private Universities

Emergent Project Work

Reflective of the autonomy (Buller 2015) and lack of expectations for determinism (Van de Ven and Sun 2011) among faculty, one year into the project, a member of the guiding team raised concerns about the quality of students’ writing. The team decided to incorporate this

as a new strategy, ultimately adding a new member to the team. Thus, while the vision remained, the strategies and guiding team changed. By responding to an emergent concern, the buy-in of the team members deepened, with several members contributing to engineering education research for the first time. This was depicted as an iterative representation of Kotter's change model in a presentation given one and a half years into the project (Figure 4) and aligns to insights that the complexity of department change warrants an adaptable approach (Quan et al. 2019).

By early in the second year of the project, faculty members' – including those not on the guiding team – buy-in increased, as evidenced in their ability to speak positively and at length about the project in interviews. They expressed support for two central goals of the project – the retention of diverse students and helping these students establish their identities as chemical engineers. For several faculty, incorporating a new strategy – enhancing writing – increased their sense of ownership of the change.

Ours is not the first reported adaptive use of Kotter's change model reported in the literature. Pollack and Pollack (2015) adapted Kotter's change model for an organization that had groups with different levels of power and engagement. They retained the linear sequence of steps but did so semi-concurrently with the different groups. The process was compressed with some groups and drawn out and overlapping with others. Likewise, the change process described in Guzmán et al. (2011) is suggestive of an iterative approach, as they concisely mention changes based on pilot testing. Perhaps because of a felt need to fit into the linear structure of the model, we get little sense of how this occurred.

Figure 3. Concept of changing management in one year into the project.

Conclusions and Implications

Previous studies of Kotter's change model in higher education have mainly focused on change efforts outside of faculty teaching and departmental culture (Penrod and Harbor 1998; Wentworth, Behson, and Kelley 2018). Our study contributes to the current literature by presenting an analysis of the fit of Kotter's eight steps in a particular academic department. We found creating a sense of urgency was straightforward because it aligned to the grant-seeking culture of higher education. Likewise, forming a guiding team was straightforward because of the requirements of the NSF call and more generally because of the visible authority structure of an academic department. Forming shared vision and strategies required interdisciplinary collaboration among guiding team members. While communication strategies are relatively simple in a department compared to many organizations, communication is not sufficient if the change is unfamiliar and requires experiential learning to see its potential. Because we had removed a key barrier – ensuring engineering education research would count toward scholarship – this provided a means to support faculty to study the impacts of their new teaching approaches. In contrast to past research on Kotter's change model in higher education, we found that short-term wins were important as they enhanced the credibility of the change process, helping to sustain acceleration; this difference may be attributed to the authenticity of our short term wins. While organizations may be able to manufacture short-term wins that are accepted by the members, the wins in academia need to align to expectations for tenure and promotion. Finally, by changing the culture, the current and developing leaders encountered and sought new opportunities to make further changes. Providing an empirical understanding of how Kotter's eight steps function in higher education settings paves the way for greater engagement of both researchers and practitioners in settings that depend on stakeholders who possess high autonomy.

Examining our use of Kotter's model considering notable concerns – faculty autonomy, the top-down and deterministic nature of the model – and considering contextual factors elucidated a means to retain the accessibility of Kotter's model while mitigating concerns. Based on our findings, we generalized a design-based change model for guiding the change process in higher education (Figure 5). This empirically derived model merges DBIR (Fishman et al. 2013) with Kotter's change model, emphasizing the iterative nature of change processes and providing guidance on trajectories for departmental change while retaining the accessibility of Kotter's change model. We feel this addresses key shortcomings of Kotter's model as applied to higher education settings, namely that dissemination is an important motivator in such settings, that faculty retain autonomy, and that top-down, deterministic, linear, sequential models like Kotter's can covertly structure thinking and reporting of process, even those that happened iteratively (e.g. Guzmán et al. 2011).

Figure 4. A framework for guiding Private University change processes that merges design-based implementation research with Kotter's change model.

This research developed the concepts, validity, reliability, and practicability of a new model for enhancing effective change management in a school climate that has emerged so far since the educational reforms at any levels worldwide were on the move and since globalization touched the educational process. Regarding Private Universities in Ho Chi Minh city, Vietnam needs a new model for developing its change management process to fulfill its educational roles in the Vietnamese learning environment and the Ho Chi Minh city regions as well and puts its step on integrating into the global education environment. Meanwhile, any educational institution in a country may certainly choose its suitable model to apply, manage and develop a change management process for the sake of its educational goals.

Limitations and Future Directions

The limitations of the study suggest two things. First, the scale of the study only focuses on the private universities of a city, the final research papers can develop the research scale. Second, it is a proposal model, so R&D (R&D) in this sense is only in the second step. A follow-up study of the model is required to be performed and evaluated to be certain of its applicability in different environments.

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