THE ROLE OF ACADEMIC PROGRAM DIRECTOR IN THE CONTEXT OF AUTONOMOUS UNIVERSITIES IN VIETNAM

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Abstract: This paper discusses the position, role, and responsibilities of the Academic Program Director (APD) in the context of university autonomy in Vietnam. Through an analysis of the APD's role in the development and implementation of academic programs at the university, along with the responsibilities and tasks of the APD in updating and improving the academic programs. The paper also describes the role of the APD in guiding and supporting teaching faculty and the program support team, as well as interacting with the community and employers.The author hopes that through this paper, readers will gain a clearer understanding of the significance of the APD's role in the development of higher education in Vietnam. Building on the paper's analysis, the author outlines key aspects of the APD position and proposes directions for establishing this role in the higher education environment in Vietnam, particularly within the context of autonomy. The anticipated results of the paper are expected to be beneficial for university leaders, APDs, and faculty members interested in the development of higher education in Vietnam.

Keywords: *Academic Program Director (APD), academic programs, training programs, autonomous universities, higher education.*

I. Introduction

University autonomy has been considerably guided and institutionalized into rules and instructions by the Party and Government. It is a necessary requirement to implement advanced university administration methods to enhance the education quality. The autonomy of a university can be defined as the institution's ability to self-operate in service to its established missions and goals. The university is granted control over human resources, admissions, research, and matters related to administration and finance.

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University autonomy in Vietnam presents many opportunities, yet not without challenges, for higher education institutions. While having control over the administration and the academic development processes, these universities must also deal with pressures coming from the labor market as well as competitions among themselves. Therefore, an academic management position responsible for developing appropriate academic program activities is required.

II. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Research on the Position of Academic Program Director

a) Worldwide

The Academic Program Director is considered to be a crucial position in the higher education system and has been widely studied across the world. However, the attention and degree of research regarding this varies for different countries and regions.

In the United States of America, APD is seen as one of the most important roles in higher education institutions, and has been studied extensively. Available research focuses on the APD's role and responsibility in the development, revision, and evaluation of the teaching faculty and the academic programs. For European countries, APD is also deemed as a vital position in higher education institutions, but the interest and research on this position are not equal across countries. In Asia, there is a growth in the attention and research for the position. For China, APD is once again viewed to be a crucial position in universities, and it

has been studied to put forward academic program management policy.

b) In Vietnam

The research on the Academic Program Director position in Vietnam has not been widely explored. A survey of legal documents in the higher education sector reveals that to develop academic programs, there is a need for "Academic *Program Development Specialist*", and the appraisal of academic programs requires "*field experts capable of developing, improving academic programs, and ensuring the university education quality*" (MOET, 2021). However, there are no specific mentionings of these expert positions in the associated regulatory documents (GOV, 2020).

Some universities in Vietnam have established the position of Academic Program Director, which includes the criteria definition and responsibilities of the role. A survey of 32 universities in Vietnam shows that 11 universities have established the position, 10 are in the process or interested in establishing it, 6 are not interested in the APD model, and 5 are reviewing the experiences of other universities. This indicates the ongoing adoption of the APD model from advanced universities worldwide in many Vietnamese universities. However, more research is needed to understand the role and importance of the APD in managing and developing academic programs at Vietnamese universities.

2.2. Training Management and Development of Academic Programs

According to current regulations,

autonomous universities are allowed to be proactive in opening academic programs and developing competency-based training. MOET (2022) has some more flexible regulations regarding the conditions for opening programs, enhancing autonomy for universities to open programs that align with current trends in professional education worldwide, ensuring alignment with the functions, tasks, and development orientation of the education institutions while still ensuring the conditions to improve the education quality.

According to (MOET, 2021), "Academic programs are a system of educational and training activities designed and organized to achieve training objectives, aiming to award a university degree to learners. The training program includes objectives, knowledge volume, structure, content, methods, and forms of assessment for subjects, majors, educational levels, standards of outcomes appropriate to the National Qualifications Framework of Vietnam.".

At higher education institutions, the implementation of an academic program is typically assigned to the department that is responsible for handling degrees. The Head of the department is responsible for organizing and ensuring the quality and effectiveness of the department's assigned functions and tasks. As a manager, the Head plays a crucial part in organizing academic activities according to the assigned academic program. There is currently no specialized professional whose duty is to manage the development and revision of the academic program.

Universities have the autonomy to initiate majors and minors, admissions, teaching, scientific and technological activities within legal boundaries. The development of academic programs is mandatory, as stipulated in (MOET, 2022): *The proposed academic program of the department must be developed, evaluated, and issued in accordance with the regulations of the Ministry of Education and Training, meeting the academic program standards of the fields, specialized branches, and aligning with the National Qualifications Framework of Vietnam.*

General Assessment of the APD position:

The APD position plays a crucial role in the development of academic programs and ensuring the quality of education at universities. The position is essential in adapting to the complexity of higher education nowadays, especially in response to academic changes and the demands of the labor market. Along with this, the trend in developing the APD position requires innovative leadership skills, the ability to diversely manage in academic programs, and effective interaction with both the academic community and businesses.

2.3. Survey on the APD role

A survey on the establishment of the APD position has been implemented at around 40 public universities, with coordination from the Heads of Personnel Departments at these institutions, and 32 universities responded. At each university, the survey participants come from various units, including (i) Human

Resource Departments (HR), (ii) Training Management Departments (TM), (iii) Faculties/Schools (F/S), (iv) Other Units; the APD development team at Hanoi Open University is excluded.

A total of 112 opinions were collected from staff (heads, deputies, officers) working in various units of universities, divided into groups as follows: (i) HR Dept. - 40, (ii) TM Dept. - 28, (iii) Faculties/Schools - 37, (iv) Other Units - 7.

The survey results on the establishment of the APD at the mentioned universities position are outlined in point b, section 2.1 above. Additional details of the survey are described below:

a) Regarding the duties of the APD.

Questions were formulated based on the five expected tasks of the APD, with varying degrees of suitability for each mission group (Very suitable, suitable, somewhat suitable, etc.).

Out of 112 responses gathered, the degree of suitability (Very suitable, suitable) based on mission groups includes: (1) Developing academic programs: 99.11%; 2. Implementation of Academic Programs: 95.54%; 3. Building an Interactive and Collaborative Work Environment: 87.50%; 4. Guidance and Support for Lecturers: 90.18%; 5. Community and Employers Engagement: 83.04%.

The survey results indicate that the level of suitability for the anticipated missions of the APD position is quite consistent among the surveyed participating groups. Some additional responses gathered through the survey aim to provide further clarification on the missions of the APD, and they will be used to describe the mentioned missions in more detail.

b) On the managerial role of the APD

Questions were formulated based on the two management positions of the APD, with varying degrees of appropriateness for each management position group. Results from 112 opinions identified APD as a leadership and managerial position (LMP): 18.75%, specialized management position (SMP): 81.25%.

The results indicate that identifying the APD as a specialized managerial position would be suitable for the majority of universities.

c) On the human resource for the APD

Questions were formulated about three sources of human resources for the APD position, including: Career lecturer, contract lecturer outside the university (contract), and a combination of career and contract lecturer (hybrid).

Results from 112 opinions identified the human resource for APD as follows: 26.79% are career personnel; 73.21% are hybrid personnel; none selected contracted personnel. This indicates that the use of hybrid personnels for the APD position is suitable for the current shortage of professional human resources in most universities.

III. Research Methodology

This study employs a multidimensional research approach, including theoretical research and the collection and analysis of existing

documents. Document analysis focuses on legal texts, regulations, and guidelines to determine the position of the Academic Program Director in higher education in Vietnam. The study also involves analyzing and comparing previous research on the role of APD in academic programs at universities worldwide. Additionally, surveys and interviews with university personnel, particularly heads of organizational and personnel departments, are conducted to gain a deeper understanding of the realities and prospects of APD.

The purpose of this paper is to propose directions for establishing the position of Academic Program Director at Vietnamese universities in the context of university autonomy. The paper focuses on the roles and responsibilities of the Academic Program Director in the development and implementation of academic programs at university level. The scope of the paper includes analyzing the roles and responsibilities of APD, outlining key aspects of the position in terms of work objectives, relationships, and qualification and competency requirements for personnel in this position within and outside the university.

This study will provide valuable insights on the roles of APDs in Vietnamese universities. The anticipated results will support management decisions and contribute to the development of academic programs, thereby enhancing the quality of higher education in Vietnam.

IV. Research Content

4.1. Academic Program Director in the Context of University Autonomy in Vietnam

4.1.1. The Employment Position of the Academic Program Director

The role of the teaching faculty (referred as lecturers) is crucial for implementing academic programs. The duties of lecturers are stipulated in (MOET, 2020), where teaching is considered a fundamental task, and *participation in the hosting, or establishment and development of academic programs* is also deemed important (MOET, 2020).

Faculty members are usually assigned to specific disciplines, with each discipline typically managing a set of modules that share similar traits. The development and improvement of academic programs require the involvement of disciplines within a department and coordination by its leaders and managers. Clearly, with this organizational structure, there is a lack of an expert position comprehensively covering all different disciplines within an academic program. It should be noted that the role of departmental leadership and management in implementing academic programs does not entirely replace the necessary specialized disciplinary activities.

The APD, under the perspective of employment position classification and categorized by workload, is defined as *a job position held by an individual* (GOV, 2020). Examining the classification based on the job characteristics and description, there are four groups according to (GOV, 2020): (i) Leadership and managerial

positions; (ii) Employment specific specialist positions with a professional title; (iii) Shared specialist positions with a professional title; (iv) Support and service positions. It is evident that none of these positions truly align with the role of the APD. However, the (i) Leadership and managerial position may be considered more suitable among the four groups. Considering the APD as a managerial official position within a unit may not be entirely appropriate because managerial officials are typically associated with administrative rather than specialized managerial tasks, while the APD tends to focus more on academic activities.

University autonomy in organization and personnel enables the establishment of internal regulations regarding structure and personnel decisions in accordance with the law. Therefore, universities have the authority to create the APD position as a specialized managerial role according to their own regulations.

4.1.2. The role of the Academic Program Director in a university

Although there have been many studies on leadership in the management field, such research is still relatively scarce when it comes to academia, especially regarding APD even when this position plays a crucial role in student learning outcomes, teaching quality, program excellence. Quinn's Competing Values Framework (CVF) is introduced to determine the effectiveness in personnel management, further complemented by the Integrated Competing Values Framework (ICVF) with APD playing a central role in the model's development

(Vilkinas & Ladyshewsky, 2012; Vilkinas & Cartan, 2015).

In the ICVF model, six operational roles of the APD are identified: Innovator, Broker, Deliverer, Monitor, Developer, and Integrator. Applying the ICVF model to the university environment in Vietnam, there are differences in regulations regarding faculty resources between public and private universities. The roles of APD in this context may be proposed as follows:

Innovator - the role concerns creativity and exploratory ideas; it focuses on: (i) Developing academic programs, ensuring the continuous development of the academic program; (ii) To innovate, develop new ideas and apply new methods and processes to improve and enhance the effectiveness of academic programs; (iii) Creativity and innovation, focusing on improving and enhancing the quality of academic programs.

Developer - the role is to develop a working environment; it focuses on: (i) Establishing an environment that encourages learning, creativity, and enhances the personal development of members within the organization; (ii) Enabling conditions to promote the development of individuals and teamwork.

Deliverer - the role involves in the execution of set goals and result insurance; it focuses on: (i) Organizing the deployment of the academic program according to the plan; (ii) Ensuring the completion of the academic program's predetermined objectives and the achieved results align with what has been promised; (iii) Ensuring the operation effectiveness

of the academic program and achieving goals that are consistent with the direction of the university.

Monitor - the role seeks control over resources and operational processes within the academic program; it focuses on: (i) Monitoring and controlling documents, data, operational processes, and compliance with the university's policies, regulations, and legal requirements; (ii) Maintaining control over resources and the operational process of the academic program, ensuring its quality and performance.

Broker - the role is about influences and connections to implement an effective academic program, it focuses on: (i) Establishing and maintaining relationships among individuals, groups, or different departments in the work environment pertaining to the academic program; (ii) Ensuring that decisions related to the academic program are implemented effectively and collaboratively; (iii) Building and creating opportunities for collaboration between university and external organizations related to the implementation and development of the academic program.

Integrator - the role is about collaborating and organizing different elements within an academic program; it focuses on: (i) Ensuring the connection and cohesiveness among different parts of the academic program; (ii) Ensuring consistency and compatibility among various elements in the work environment.

There are conflicts in the five initial operational roles of APD (Vilkinas and Cartan, 2015), leading to tension and potential friction for the role itself. Therefore, the Integrator will function as a "behavioral control room" for the preceding five operational roles (Vilkinas and Cartan, 2015). The Integrator role consists of two parts: a critical observer and a reflective learner. This role is necessary if APDs are to meet the conflicting demands they face in this position. Behavioral complexity is the ability to switch between the five operational roles with ease rather than simultaneously using one or two roles in every situation. It is the ability to fulfill any one of the five roles depending on which is most suitable at the time.

4.2. Duties of the Academic Program Director

4.2.1. Developing academic programs

The development of academic programs is a requirement when establishing educational disciplines (MOET, 2022); with the expected learning outcome approach (MOET, 2021) considered as a management tool to enhance the quality of education through regulations on standards, establishment, assessment, and issuance of academic programs at various levels of higher education. According to (MOET, 2021), there should be an "*Academic Program Development and Education Quality Assessment Specialist*" in the Program Development Council. APD acts as an academic manager, which is also emphasized in (Saharudin, 2021; GU, 2022). The APD takes charge of leading the development of academic programs in line with the university's development strategy.

Academic programs must be designed to meet domestic and international standards and align with the requirements of the domestic and international labor market. They need to be regularly assessed and revised to ensure relevance to developmental trends, meet academic needs, address student demands, and align with labor market needs. The development and updating of academic programs also need to ensure effectiveness, feasibility, creativity, and meet the requirements of both students and employers. The APD needs to coordinate necessary resources, mobilize active participation from faculty, support staff, and students, and ensure financial and technical support.

4.2.2. Implementation of Academic Programs

The APD plays a crucial role in deploying academic programs for students, ensuring educational outcomes for students (Vilkinas & Ladyshewsky, 2012), ensuring that the academic program is of high quality and complies with the education standards set forth (Vilkinas & Cartan, 2015). The duties of the APD may focus on:

- Participating in planning and organizing the implementation of academic programs; ensuring their effective deployment achieving goals;

- Monitoring the teaching and learning process;

- Conducting periodic evaluations of academic programs; identifying requirements and needs for improving the academic program;

- Supporting and advising students on their learning paths, helping them find internship or employment opportunities; Interacting with students to gather feedback on the academic program and improve the quality of educational services.

4.2.3 Building an Interactive and Collaborative Work Environment

The university work and study environment is always changing, possessing an increasing sense of competition. To ensure the quality of academic programs and create positive results for the students, the APD must foster an interactive and collaborative environment, encouraging learning and creativity. The APD's main goals include:

- Creating a learning and working environment that encourages creativity and innovative thinking; Supporting collaboration and information sharing between internal partners and teams;

- Ensuring that decisions related to the academic program are made effectively and collaboratively;

- Building and creating opportunities for collaboration between the university and external organizations related to the implementation and development of academic programs.

4.2.4. Guidance and Assistance for Lecturers and Program Support Staff

The academic program workforce comprises faculty members and support staff, including personnel from "*various departments, offices, units, management officials, lecturers, and staff*" (MOET, 2016). As the Developer and Broker, the

APD supports and guides both lecturers and support staff in their roles, namely:

- Supporting and guiding faculty members in designing and teaching courses; Providing faculty members with teaching support materials, research aids, and professional development opportunities to facilitate career advancement;

- Establishing and maintaining relationships between management, faculty members, and program support staff, and among individuals, groups, or different departments;

- Connecting faculty members and program support staff with students.

4.2.5. Community and Employers Engagement

Engaging with the community and employers is a crucial factor in managing and developing a university academic program. When there is a strong connection with the community and employers, the university can provide students with academic programs that meet the needs of the labor market. Additionally, external partners can assist the university financially, professionally, and material wise.

The APD is tasked with connecting with the community and businesses: building and maintaining relationships with local partners and businesses to meet the education and hiring needs of the job market. In the role of the Broker, they represent the interests of the academic program and are responsible for providing an important two-way connection between the party implementing the academic program and various groups inside and outside the university (Vilkinas & Cartan, 2015), namely the community and employers.

4.3. Job Position Description for the Academic Program Director

4.3.1. Employment Position's Mission

Develop training programs that align with the university's development strategy; update and improve academic programs to match the developments in the educational field, meeting academic and labor market demands; organize the implementation of academic programs to ensure program goals and education quality; support the development of the teaching faculty, the program support team, and student assistance; establish connections and interactions with the community.

4.3.2. Work Relations

The internal relations of an APD are determined as follows: To be directly managed and overseen by the Head of department; core collaborating units include departments, centers, and laboratories within the department.

External relations for the APD may involve direct or indirect connections with: the university's scientific and educational council; the academic management and human resource management departments; specialized departments within the university; higher education and research institutions, both domestic and international; businesses, as well as employers, also both domestic and international.

4.3.3. Education and Competency Criteria

a) Education Requirement

- Educational background: Ph.D. degree (preferably Associate Professor) in a field or specialization relevant to the academic program or the department's research area.

- Skills: In accordance with general regulations, with additional requirements depending on the academic program, including field specific skills, professional competence, and other necessary skills.

- Experience: Minimum of 5 years of teaching experience at the university level or above; in-depth expertise in the subject matter.

b) Competency Requirements

- General competency: Ethics and integrity; Work organization; Communication and interpersonal skills; Coordination; Use of information technology; Language proficiency.

- Professional competency: Comprehensive, analytical problem-solving skills; Handling unexpected situations and issues; Planning and organizing skills; Coordination of activities; Communication and motivation; Training skills in assigned areas.

- Management competency: Strategic thinking; Change management; Decision-making; Resource management; Staff development.

V. Conclusion and Proposed Directions for Establishing the Position of APD

Specific proposals for establishing the Academic Program Director position at universities in Vietnam can be suggested as follow:

1. Establish the position of the APD as a management role in a specialized field and incorporate it into the position catalog and University's employment position scheme. Ensure alignment with the missions of the APD position, establish appropriate relations, and define key personnel criterias based on qualifications, skills, experience, and professional and managerial competencies.

2. Personnel for the APD position can be recruited both internally and externally (not necessarily limited to civil servants, with age restrictions for public universities), aiming to diversify the recruitment pool and address the shortage of skilled personnels.

3. Compensation for the APD: The APD should receive compensation proportional to their responsibilities and workload through contractual agreements. For APDs holding career lecturer positions within the department, there is a need to redistribute workload (reduce teaching and/or service responsibilities - without diminishing academic activities).

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VỊ TRÍ GIÁM ĐỐC CHƯƠNG TRÌNH ĐÀO TẠO TRONG BỐI CẢNH TỰ CHỦ ĐẠI HỌC TẠI VIỆT NAM

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Tóm tắt: *Bài báo này đề cập đến vị trí, vai trò và nhiệm vụ của Giám đốc Chương trình đào tạo (Academic Program Director - APD) trong bối cảnh tự chủ đại học tại Việt Nam. Thông qua phân tích vai trò của APD trong phát triển, thực hiện chương trình đào tạo (CTĐT) tại trường đại học, cùng với trách nhiệm và nhiệm vụ của APD trong cập nhật, cải tiến CTĐT. Bài báo cũng mô tả vai trò của APD trong định hướng và hỗ trợ giảng viên và đội ngũ hỗ trợ CTĐT, và tương tác với cộng đồng và nhà tuyển dụng. Tác giả hy vọng thông qua bài báo này, sẽ cung cấp cho người đọc hiểu rõ hơn về tầm quan trọng của vai trò của APD trong phát triển giáo dục đại học tại Việt Nam. Dựa trên các phân tích này, tác giả cũng mô tả một số điểm chính yếu nhất về vị trí việc làm Giám đốc Chương trình đào tạo, đồng thời đề xuất hướng xây dựng vị trí này trong môi trường đại học ở Việt Nam, đặc biệt là trong bối cảnh tự chủ. Kết quả của bài báo dự kiến sẽ hữu ích cho các nhà lãnh đạo trường đại học, giám đốc chương trình đào tạo và giảng viên quan tâm đến phát triển giáo dục đại học tại Việt Nam.*

Từ khóa: *Giám đốc chương trình đào tạo, chương trình đào tạo đại học, chương trình đào tạo, tự chủ đại học, giáo dục đại học.*

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