



# The Status of Provincial Universities in the Mekong Delta Area of Vietnam

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Currently Vietnam has 235 universities. Among those, there are 170 public universities, 60 private universities and 5 foreign-owned universities. All Vietnamese universities must follow the Vietnamese law of higher education, supervised and inspected by the Ministry of Education and Training; nevertheless, the 170 public universities are not necessary under this ministry but can be under different ministries or equivalent ones. Around ten years ago, many provinces in Vietnam established universities under themselves, of course public ones, so-called provincial universities. The Mekong Delta in Vietnam plays an important role in the development of the country, and some provinces in this area have provincial universities under themselves. However, the quality of these universities is questionable, while the unemployment of university graduates has recently been very concerned. This paper was to investigate the performance of provincial universities in the Mekong Delta in Vietnam. The study showed that key indicators of provincial universities in this area were considerably low. Then suitable solutions for such weaknesses were proposed to make these provincial universities in the mentioned area more developed.

**Key words:** *Higher education, Provincial universities, Mekong Delta.*

## Introduction

Among the 235 universities in Vietnam, there are 170 public universities, 60 private universities and 5 foreign-owned universities (Le 2017). For most universities in Vietnam it is not necessary to be autonomous. They basically follow the Vietnamese law of higher education, supervised and inspected by the Ministry of Education and Training. In addition,



private universities are under their boards of trustees, while public universities are under ministries or equivalent ones.

Originally, all universities in Vietnam were under the Ministry of Higher Education and Vocational Training. In 1990, the Ministry of Education and Training was established (MOET 2016). Then many ministries and equivalent ones founded universities under themselves. Typically, many universities are under provinces, called provincial universities. These universities of course must follow the Vietnamese Law of higher education but are directly managed by the provinces, equivalent to ministries, they are under.

In 2017, it was found that 200,000 university graduates were jobless (Mai 2017). There were different arguments about the reasons of this issue. Some experts complained that Vietnam did not have a good job market for university graduates, since the country only required non-skilled labour. However, a considerable reason was that Vietnamese universities provided low-quality graduates, so they could not easily find jobs. As a result, it was difficult for universities, especially provincial universities, to attract new students (Duy 2017, Hung 2017).

Performance capacity of universities in Vietnam was considered by some authors. Typically, Nguyen studied the case at four prestigious Vietnamese universities (Nguyen 2016); in which the author investigated the management capacity for building human resources for university research of these universities and found that they did not have powerful enough policies to encourage academics to do research to the best of their potential. Then, Nguyen and Gramberg proposed strategies and processes to enhance research planning capacity of these universities, which may improve research performance (Nguyen & Gramberg 2017). Although many questions and doubts about the quality of provincial universities in Vietnam were discussed, there has not been any research paper investigating this issue. Some studies by one of the authors of this paper regarding the research capacity of faculty of universities in Vietnam can be found in (Loc 2015, Loc 2016, Loc 2017). This paper is to fill in this gap.

How to evaluate the performance of a university should be an interesting topic and possibly controversial. However, the most common indicators are based on universities' performance on education, research and knowledge transfer. These elements are shared by popular university ranking systems (Abramo et al. 2015; Bedggood et al. 2012; Claassen 2015; Daraio et al. 2015; Razem 2017) and by the criteria of good universities in (Kalender 2017, Liu & Cheng 2011, Mok 2014, Razem 2017, Ross Williams 2016, Shek 2015). It is worth noting that the indicator of education consists of many items, but the faculty research record is mostly important. Therefore, the key elements including faculty and research can reflect the strength of a university. The Mekong Delta of Vietnam is an important area in the country regarding economic and social development. However, the education in this area has not been

developed as expected, especially in higher education (Feinberg 2014, Hoang 2010, VNS 2015). It is worth conducting a serious investigation on universities' performance, especially provincial universities, in this area.

There are 13 provinces in the Mekong Delta including An Giang, Bac Lieu, Ca Mau, Can Tho, Ben Tre, Dong Thap, Hau Giang, Kien Giang, Long An, Soc Trang, Tien Giang, Tra Vinh and Vinh Long. Note that among these Can Tho has more advanced indicators and therefore is currently a central city. There are 17 universities located in 10 provinces in this area (KTS 2016). Ca Mau, Ben Tre and Soc Trang do not have any university placed in. But Ca Mau and Ben Tre each has a university branch; the branch of Binh Duong University in Ca Mau and the one of Vietnam National University in Ho Chi Minh City in Ben Tre. Therefore, only Soc Trang is the unique province in the area where there is not any university operating in. The university distribution in the 10 provinces in the area is given in the following table.

**Table 1:** The university distribution in the Mekong Delta

Province	University	Type
An Giang	An Giang University	Public, Provincial
Bac Lieu	Bac Lieu University	Public, Provincial
Can Tho	Can Tho University	Public, Ministry
	Can Tho University of Medicine and Pharmacy	Public, Ministry
	Can Tho University of Technology	Public, Provincial
	Nam Can Tho University	Private
	Tay Do University	Private
Dong Thap	Dong Thap University	Public, Ministry
Hau Giang	Vo Truong Toan University	Private
Kien Giang	Kien Giang University	Public, Ministry
Long An	Long An University of Economics and Industry	Private
	Tan Tao University	Private
Tien Giang	Tien Giang University	Public, Provincial
Tra Vinh	Tra Vinh University	Public, Provincial
Vinh Long	Mien Tay Construction University	Public, Ministry
	Vinh Long University of Technology Education	Public, Ministry
	Mekong University	Private

Among 17 universities in the area, there are 6 private ones and 11 public ones. Furthermore, there are 5 provincial universities under An Giang, Bac Lieu, Can Tho, Kien Giang and Tra Vinh; where each province has one university.



In this paper, only provincial universities greater than 10 years old in the area were considered. These include An Giang University, Bac Lieu University, Tien Giang University and Tra Vinh University. To make this study more convincing, an equivalent-age provincial university in the region was considered for comparison; this is Universiti Malaysia Pahang from Pahang province of Malaysia, which is 15 years-old but considerably successful. Currently, Universiti Malaysia Pahang ranked 188th in Asia by QS Asia University Rankings provided important solutions to the provincial universities under consideration (TU-UMP 2019, UMP 2019).

This paper investigated the key elements as mentioned above of 4 provincial universities at least 10 years old in the Mekong Delta area in Vietnam, or the four shortly. The unexpected result was that the performance of these universities is seriously low, to be compared with the equivalent-age university in the region. Then, some solutions were proposed to solve this issue.

## Data and Method

For convenience, the following abbreviations are used in this article:

University	Abbreviation
An Giang University	AGU
Bac Lieu University	BLU
Tien Giang University	TGU
Tra Vinh University	TVU
Universiti Malaysia Pahang	UMP

In this study, the key element of faculty was retrieved from the investigated provincial universities' public reports. In addition, personal exchanged emails with representatives of the four universities were used. For Universiti Malaysia Pahang, its profile was adopted from QS Asia University Rankings since it was ranked in Asia. More precisely, from (AGU 2017, AGU 2019, BLU 2017, BLU 2019, TGU 2018, TVU 2018, UMP 2018, UMP 2019), the following summary was conducted:

**Table 2:** Key elements

	AGU	BLU	TGU	TVU	UMP
Age	20	13	15	13	17
Faculty	490	215	297	1009	623
Faculty with PhD	43	16	30	362	476

For the key element of research, it was collected from the Web of Science (Clarivate, USA) for the period 2014 - 2018. This database is currently the most prestigious source of peer-

reviewed publications in the world, and widely used by most of institutions and well-recognised university ranking systems. Only ISI-journal articles within 5 years were considered. The researching algorithms in Web of Science were as follows:

University	Researching key at “Address”
An Giang University	“An Giang Univ.” or “Angiang Univ.”
Bac Lieu University	“Bac Lieu Univ.” or “Baclieu Univ.”
Tien Giang University	“Tien Giang Univ.” or “Tiengiang Univ.”
Tra Vinh University	“Tra Vinh Univ.” or “Travinh Univ.”
Universiti Malaysia Pahang	“Univ. Malaysia Pahang”

Then the statistical result was given in the following table.

**Table 3:** ISI-journal papers during 2014 - 2018

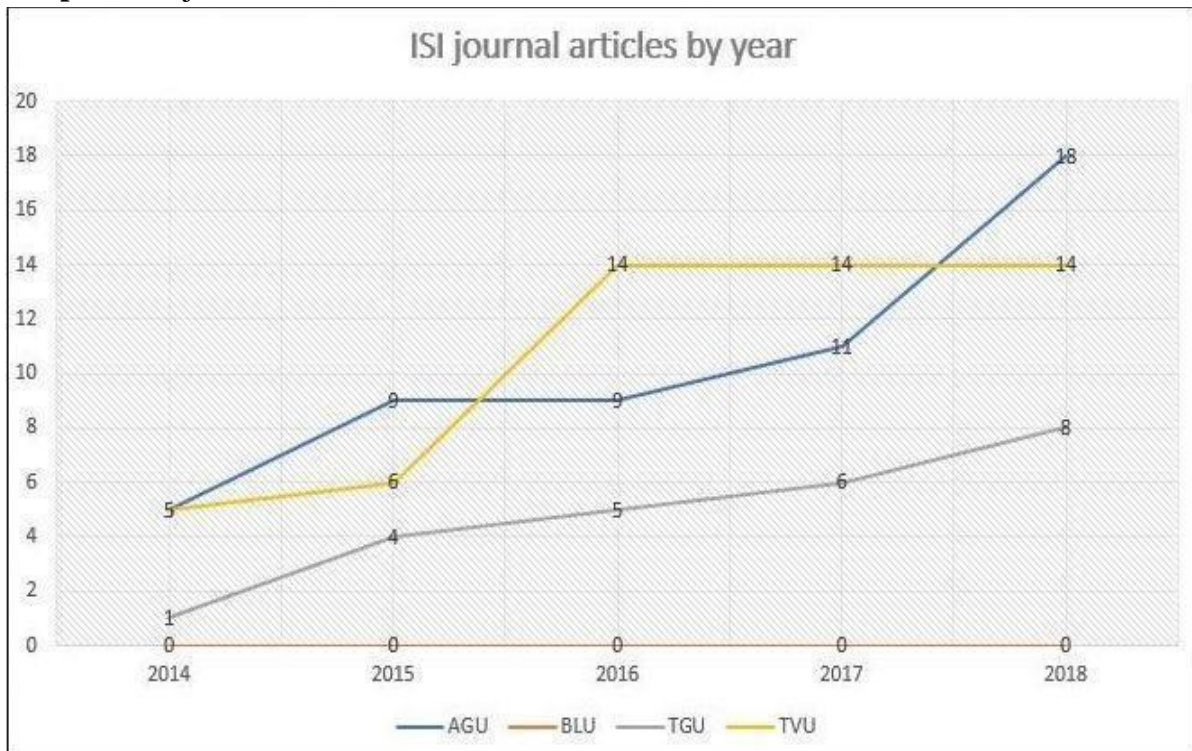
	AGU	BLU	TGU	TVU	UMP
<b>2018</b>	18	0	8	14	415
<b>2017</b>	11	0	6	14	430
<b>2016</b>	9	0	5	14	345
<b>2015</b>	9	0	4	6	330
<b>2014</b>	5	0	1	5	161

## Findings

### *Poor Research Records*

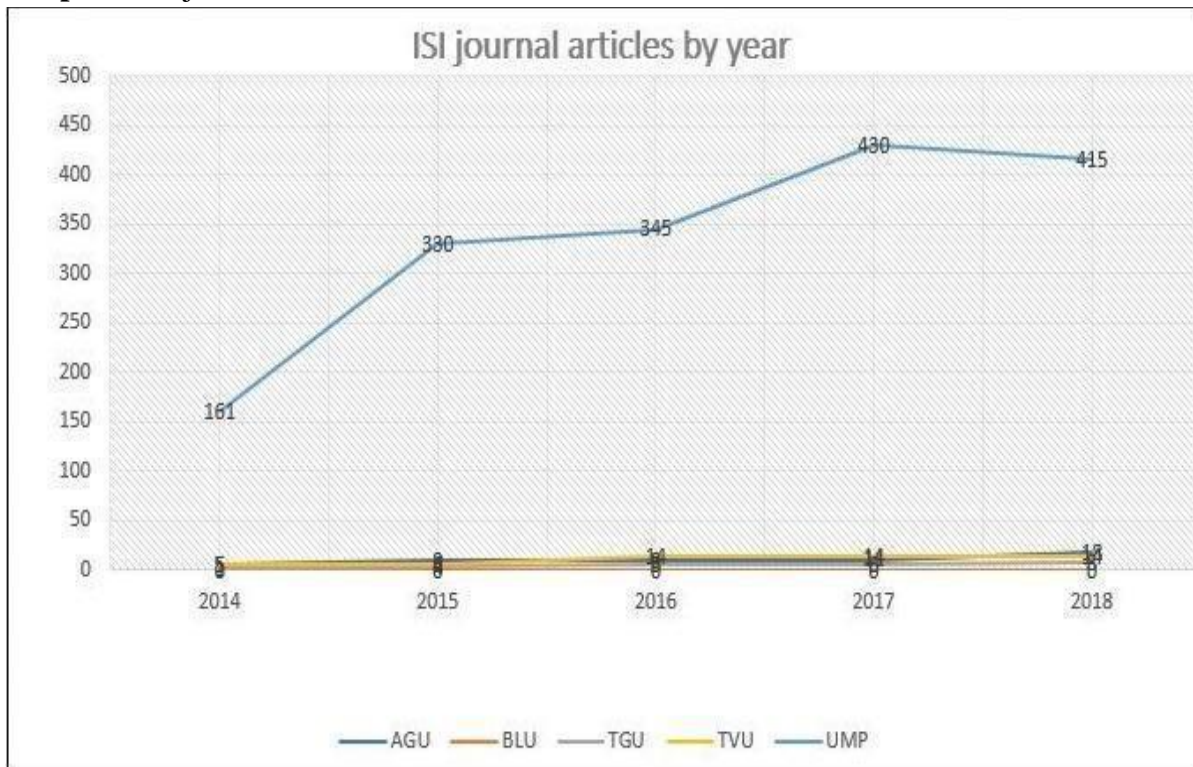
The data in Table 3 showed that the research records of the four provincial universities under consideration were extremely poor. Seriously, BLU had no ISI-journal article during the five years 2014 – 2018. TGU only had less than 10 ISI-journal articles per year in the latest years. AGU, the eldest one among the four, performed better; on average it produced 10.4 ISI-journal articles per year during the term. However, the best university among the four regarding ISI-journal articles was TVU, which was among the youngest one and only 13 years old. TVU published 10.6 ISI-journal articles per year for the duration. The following graph presented the performance of ISI-journal articles of the four provincial universities during 2014-2018:

**Graph 1.** ISI-journal articles of AGU, BLU, TGU and TVU



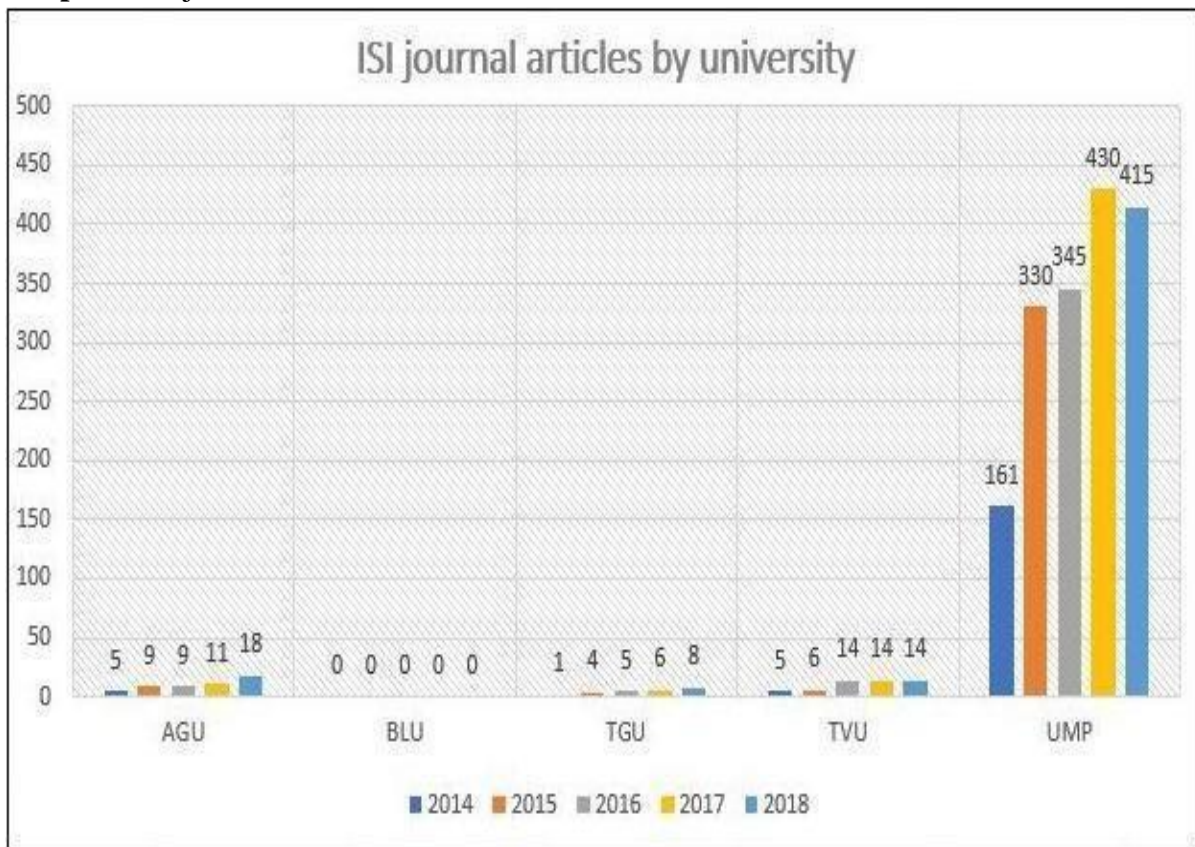
However, to make the issue more visible, let us compare the research records of the four provincial universities with that of a good university in equivalent conditions, which was UMP. Recall that UMP is also a provincial university, just 17 years old, and was ranked 188th in Asia by QS Asia University Rankings. During the period 2014 – 2018, the peer-reviewed publications of UMP measured by ISI-journal articles were impressive and steadily increased. Considerably, UMP surpassed the considered four provincial universities in the Mekong Delta area in Vietnam. This difference was extremely far; more precisely:

**Graph 2.** ISI-journal articles of AGU, BLU, TGU, TVU and UMP



Graph 2 showed that the records of ISI-journal articles of the four universities AGU, BLU, TGU and TVU. They were so modest that one may think that these universities would not have done any scientific research, to compare with UMP. This was a serious weakness of the four provincial universities in the Mekong Delta area of Vietnam. To make this weakness clearer in comparison with UMP, the following column graph was considered:

**Graph 3.** ISI-journal articles of AGU, BLU, TGU, TVU and UMP



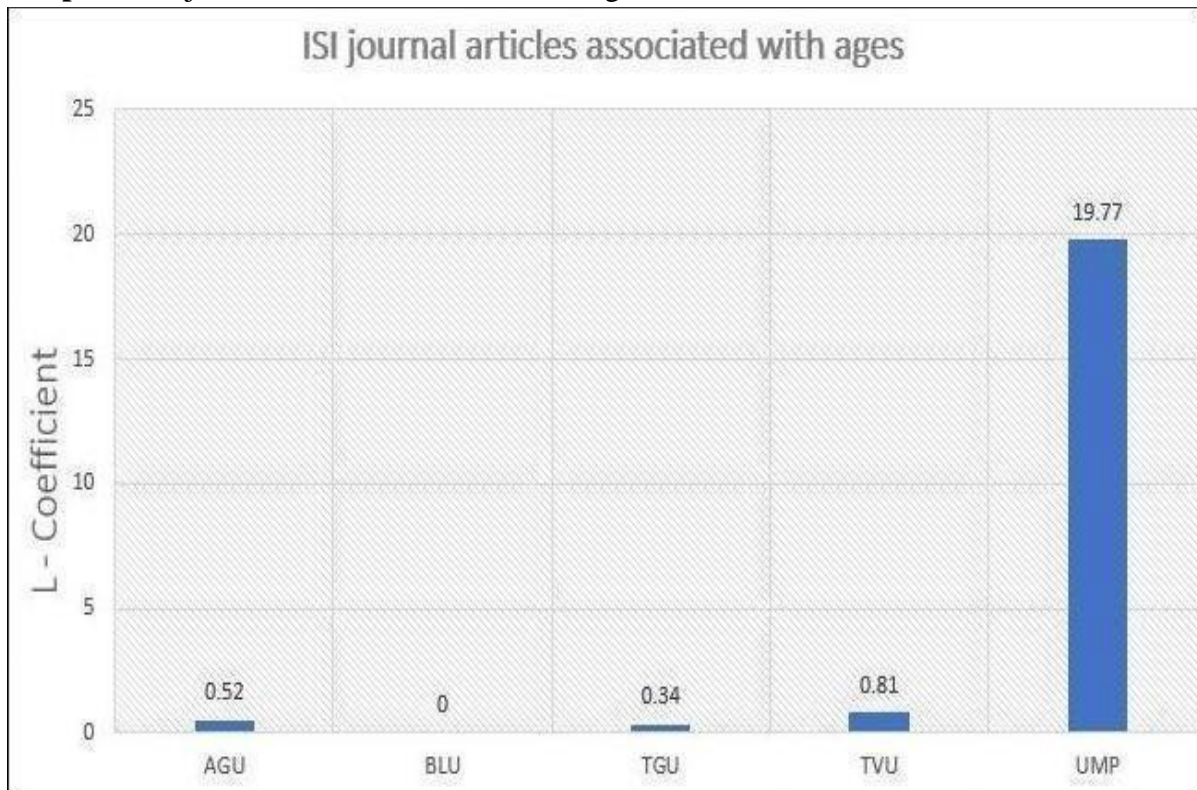
The ages of the five universities under consideration are not equal, so it can be questioned whether their research records should be different. Consider the coefficient

$$L = \frac{1}{5} \frac{N}{A},$$

Where  $N$  is the number of ISI-journal articles of a university during the five years 2014 – 2018 and  $A$  is the age of this university. Then the records of ISI-journal articles of the five universities were more clearly presented in the following column graph, regarding their ages.



**Graph 4.** ISI-journal articles associated with ages

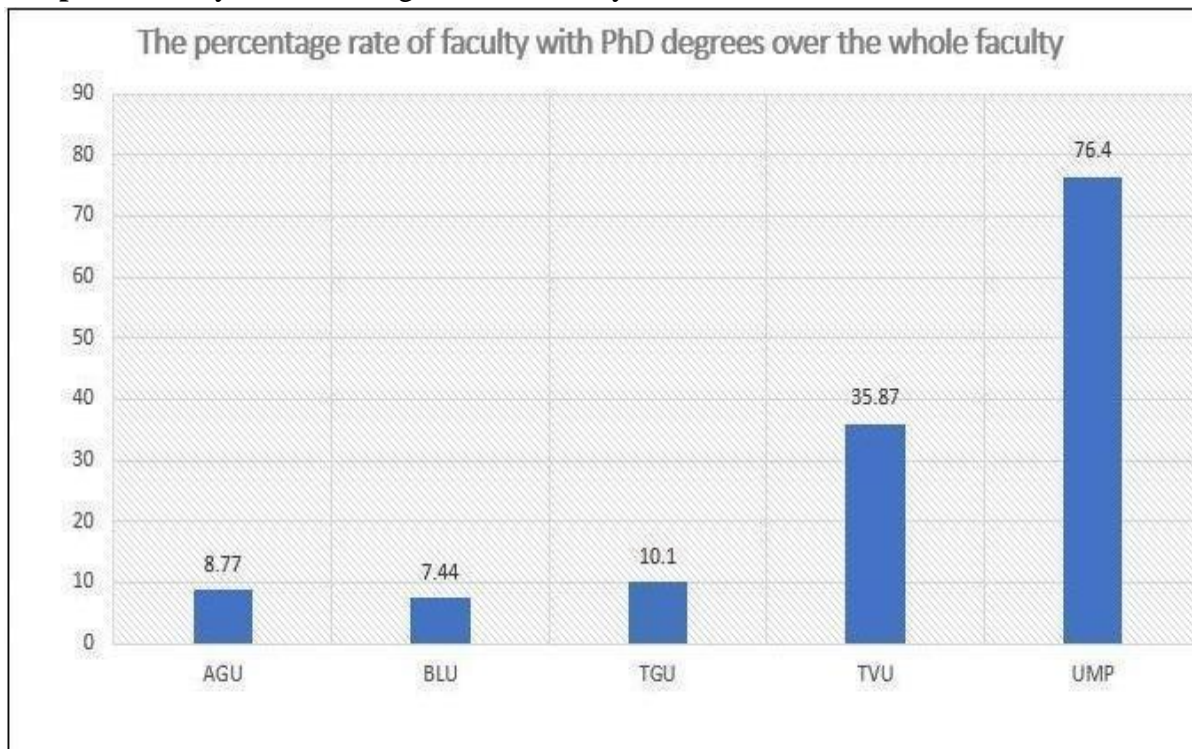


Graph 4 showed that the research records of the above five universities in regard with their ages were correlated with those in Graph 1, Graph 2 and Graph 3.

### ***Poor-Quality Faculty***

Basically, the quality of faculty of a university is the key of its success. To measure the faculty quality, the rate of them with PhD degrees over the whole faculty was considered. Graph 5 showed that the percentages of faculty with PhD degrees of the four provincial universities in the Mekong Delta area was extremely low. The lower rate was of BLU, only 7.44 % of the faculty hold PhD degrees. The other universities AGU and TGU were slightly better than BLU but still of low rates of this aspect, 8.77 % and 10.1 % were the percentages of faculty with PhD degrees of AGU and TGU, respectively. TVU had a pretty good rate of faculty with PhD degrees, in comparison with others in the group of four, its faculty with PhD degrees occupies 35.87 % of its whole faculty. However, UMP had 76.4 % of faculty with PhD degrees. This concluded that the percentages of faculty with PhD degrees of AGU, BLU, TGU and TVU were too far from a standard record; in which the first three held truly concerned records of this indicator.

**Graph 5.** Faculty with PhD degrees over faculty

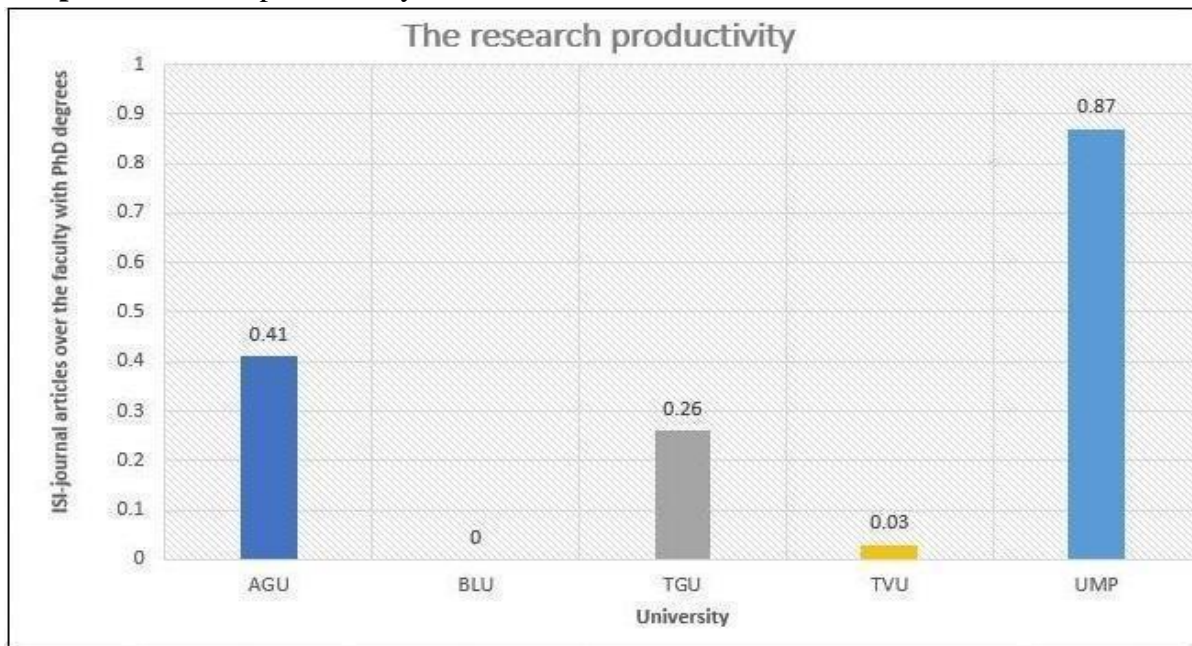


### ***Poor Productivity of Research***

In 3.2, the quality of faculty was measured by their doctoral degrees. This measurement does not always reflect the quality of the faculty, since a faculty member with a PhD degree is not necessarily a scientist nor even an active researcher.

To know the actual quality of the faculty with PhD degrees, it is proposed to investigate their research capacity. By considering the ratio of ISI-journal articles in 2018 (the latest year of the considered duration of time) and the current faculty with PhD degrees of the five universities under consideration, the following column graph presented their research productivity.

**Graph 6.** Research productivity



The results showed that the four provincial universities in the Mekong Delta area in Vietnam performed very poor research productivity. BLU produced no ISI-journal article, so its research productivity was of course zero. TVU had 14 ISI-journal articles, ranked the third among these four universities; it had many faculty members with PhD degrees and its research productivity was 0.03. Then, TGU was of 0.26; it produced 8 ISI-journal articles, less than TVU, but it had less faculty with faculty members with PhD degrees than TVU, just 8.2% of that of TVU. The research productivity of AGU was the highest among the four provincial universities in the Mekong Delta area, more precisely 0.41; this university did not have many faculty members with PhD degrees, only 43, while it produced 18 ISI-journal articles which was the best result among the four universities. After comparing the research productivity of the four provincial universities in the Mekong Delta area with that of UPM, the research weakness of these four universities could be clearer, and this was a very serious issue. The research productivity of AGU, the best among the four, was around 2.1 times lower than that of UPM.

### ***Solutions***

Based on the key weaknesses of the four provincial universities in the Mekong Delta area in Vietnam and on the good performance of UPM recognised by the QS ranking (UMP 2018) and the criteria of good universities in (Kalender 2017, Liu & Cheng 2011, Mok 2014, Razem 2017, Ross Williams 2016, Shek 2015), this section proposed considerable solutions that these universities can consider to make them stronger and to meet standard requirements of good universities.

- **Internationalising research quality.** The four provincial universities should apply the international standard into their research evaluation. They had better consider good peer-reviewed publications, for example the ones indexed in the ISI or Scopus database.
- **Recruit competent faculty.** New faculty members are recruited based on their strong academic records, rather than only their academic degrees. The research achievement must be the key priority in faculty recruitment.
- **Cooperation.** Establishing cooperation with good universities is one of the most effective ways to overcome the above weaknesses.
- **Model rearrangement.** As known, a university must involve scientific research. The investigation on the four provincial universities showed that some provincial universities in the Mekong Delta area involves almost no scientific research at all. Therefore, the model of vocational schools or applied universities should be considered; this means that some provincial universities in this area should be rearranged such that they should simply be applied universities.
- **Branches of good universities.** It is undoubted that a province must spend funds every year to support its provincial university's activities. Recently, the economy of provinces in Vietnam was not good. To save different sources, provinces should consider the option that they cooperate with good universities to establish branches of these universities in the provinces, instead of establishing or maintaining provincial universities.

## Discussion

The article gave an important investigation in typical provincial universities in the Mekong Delta area of Vietnam. Key weaknesses of these universities were clearly analysed. This should be a valuable reference for administrators and policy makers in the provinces in the area to rearrange their higher education systems.

Beside the key weaknesses presented in this article, some further directions can be studied, such as the quality of university graduates, the admission and so on, for these provincial universities. In addition, motivated by the country-level investigations in research performance such as (Bordons *et al.* 2014, Hirv 2019, Low *et al.* 2014, Manh 2015, Nguyen *et al.* 2017), we can investigate the provincial universities in the whole of Vietnam. This study will be an important step to rearrange the higher education system in Vietnam.



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