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# INNOVATION STATUS IN VIETNAM: CASE STUDY OF VIETNAMESE SMES

● THAI THU THUY - PHAN VAN THANH - OLA AL JAAFREH - TARIQ ISMAIL

## ABSTRACT:

Innovation has been considered not only an important factor for creating and maintaining the competitiveness of nations but also a key determinant of enterprises performance in over the world. Besides this, the best way to help these enterprises to maintain sustainable development as well as create competitive advantage is improving their innovative thinking. Innovation is nothing new however in the case of developing countries like the Vietnamese economy in changing the time of shifting towards a mid-income country it becomes the key important factor to speed up the economy's development. In addition, Vietnam is recognized as one of the fastest growing economies with an impressive averaged GDP growth rate per year which has dominated by efforts of small and medium enterprises (SMEs). It can be said that SMEs has played an important role in the Vietnamese economy. Moreover, recent studies have shown that only by improving the innovative thinking of Vietnamese SMEs, especially domestic innovations, can help to create and to retain the competitiveness of the Vietnamese economy. This paper aims to explore the role of innovation of SMEs in the context of Vietnam - a transitional economy and analyze the current status of innovation of Vietnamese SMEs.

**JEL classification:** M10, O30, O39.

**Keywords:** Innovation, Vietnamese SMEs, Innovation status in Vietnam, Vietnam.

## 1. Introduction

Nowadays along with a lot changed in the current century, not only in developed countries but also in developing countries, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) stand for small and medium-sized enterprises considered as the backbone of every economy. Although the statistical definition of SMEs varies by countries, due to its ease to collect the most common way to use based on the number of employees of each organization together with values of sales and values of assets. For example, while in EU and OECDs set the upper limit of the number of

employees in the SMEs between 200-250, The World Bank defines SMEs to have a maximum of 300 employees, USD15 million in annual revenue, and USD15 million in assets. In case of Vietnam, according to the newest decree that was issued by the Vietnamese government, Decree No. 39/2018/ND-CP, SMEs have considered as those enterprises between 10 and 200 employees and have total assets less than VND 100 billion or total annual revenue less than VND 300 billion.

According to an OECD study in 2017, SMEs represent almost all of the business population in the OECD region, accounting for 60 percent of total

employment and contributing an average of 50 percent to 60 percent of the total added value (OECD, 2017). Moreover, SMEs contribute to more than one-third of GDP in emerging and developing economies and account for 34 percent and 52 percent of formal employment respectively. SMEs are the engine of economic growth and employment in developing countries (Chaminade and Vang, 2009). In fact, the number of employee in SMEs has progressively increased at the global level. Statistics data from 2003 to 2016 in 132 countries show that the number of total full-time employees in SMEs has nearly doubled, from 79 million to 156 million (ILO, 2017). Especially, in developing countries in the Asia-Pacific region, SMEs play a central role in promoting economic dynamism, innovation and job creation (UN, 2012) and become an important source of export revenues in some developing countries such as East Asia, and OECD countries. In detail, SMEs are often an essential channel for the diffusion and adaptation of innovations to different contexts (Cusmano, L. et. al. 2018). In order to survive and develop, innovation management is becoming increasingly important for SMEs (Radas and Bozic, 2009). To innovate effectively, SMEs need to innovate business strategies and practices that enable creative and risk-taking behaviors to be supported by a steady platform for economic exchanges and cooperation linkages provoked by an effective institutional framework (Minh and Hjortso, 2015).

However, SMEs in developing countries face many constraints such as the ability to access limited resources: human resources, poor infrastructure, and complicated procedures in setting up, operating, and growing a business. Besides this, in the context of globalization, SMEs now is dealing with many challenges to access new markets, technologies and improve competitive advantages. Thus, it is important to understand SMEs' innovation characteristics to recommend effective innovation practices for practitioners and support the development of contextualized policies in emerging economies and to overcome obstacles and difficulties. With the target of becoming a middle-income industrial country with a knowledge economy and a national innovation system contributing significantly to the development of the

development of the country's socio-economic development by the year 2020, innovation in Vietnam has considered as the key of success (Ministry of Science and Technology, 2010).

According to APEC Conference (2017), more than 97 percent of the total number of enterprises in Vietnam is considered SMEs which account for 77 percent of total employment among all types of enterprises and contribute 41 percent of GDP. However, the innovative ability now is still a big limitation of Vietnamese SMEs' performance and directly effects to their competitive advantage in the context of globalization. Hansen, Rand, and Tarp (2004) emphasize that innovation has positive and significant effects on survival of SMEs by using data from surveys of SMEs in Vietnam during 1990-2000. Nguyen et. al. (2008) find that innovation is important for exports of the SMEs in Vietnam. Vu, Sonobe, and Otsuka (2009) analyze an iron and steel industrial cluster in northern Vietnam and show that the enterprises, the majority of which are household enterprises, carry out multifaceted innovation and have higher labor productivity and larger operating size measured by value added. Other than these, rigorous studies about the roles of innovation in the performance of the SMEs in Vietnam are limited.

Therefore, this paper aims to explore the role of innovation of SMEs in the context of Vietnam and give a descriptive analysis about the practices of innovation in Vietnamese SMEs, based on previous literature on innovation at the firm level and the data and/or report have been released by the Vietnamese government.

## **2. Conceptual framework of innovation**

Innovation is one of the most exciting topics which has attracted very special attention from national governments, researchers, and practitioners. However, innovation has been defined in various ways and lacked a common definition, undermining the understanding of the nature of innovation (Zairi, 1994) and (Cooper, 1998). The earliest definition of innovation was conducted in 1965 by Thompson: "Innovation is the generation, acceptance, and implementation of new ideas, processes products or services." (Thompson, 1965). A similar definition of innovation was proposed more recently by Bessant and Tidd (2007): "Innovation is a process of

translating ideas into useful and used new products, processes and services” and “Innovation is the effective application of processes and products new to the organization and designed to benefit it and its stakeholders” (Rose et. al., 2009).

On the other hand, Ram, Cui, and Wu (2010) defines innovation from a different perspective which embraces different forms of innovation: There are five broad dimensions in which the concept of innovation is defined and discussed, including (1) Innovation as something new; (2) Innovation as a conduit of change; (3) Innovation as a value driver; (4) Innovation as invention or creativity; and (5) Innovation as a process. According to these authors, among the five dimensions, innovation as something new appears as the central theme in most definitions and no doubt that the element of “newness” is necessary for something to be called “innovation”. The researchers also maintain that “newness” alone is not sufficient unless it adds value or brings improvement to the innovation adopting unit. Newness which is mentioned above associates with “change” to gain sustainability-oriented innovations. Damanpour provides a detailed definition of innovation, quoted as follow: “Innovation is conceived as a means of changing an organization, either as a response to changes in the external environment or as a pre-emptive action to influence the environment.” (Damanpour, 1996.) Thus, innovation is largely defined to encompass a variety of types, including new product or service, new process technology, new organization structure or administrative systems, or new plans or program pertaining to organization members.

In a similar context, Drucker stated that “Innovation is the specific tool of entrepreneurs, the means by which they exploit change as an opportunity for a different business or service” (Drucker, 1985). While Rogers discussed that innovation is “an idea, practice, or object that is perceived as new by an individual or other units of adoption” (Rogers, 2003). Costello et. al. (2013) concluded that “innovation is usually risky, costly, and time-consuming”. However, in this paper, we use the definition of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development which provides a definition of innovation at the firm level as follows: “An innovation is the implementation of a new or

significantly improved product (good or service), or process, a new marketing method, or a new organizational method in business practices, workplace organization or external relations.” (OECD, 2005).

According to OECD’s definition, innovation can be divided into four types: product innovation, process innovation, marketing innovation, and organizational innovation. Furthermore, an important clarification that must be made in this definition is the degree of newness or novelty. The first issue is how much novelty is sufficient for a change to be considered innovation. Some variations are mentioned such as: simple capital replacement or extension, changes resulting from fluctuations in factor of production’ prices (e.g. increase in the price of petroleum - one type of input), product customization that does not lead to significant differences in product, regular seasonal and other cyclical changes (e.g. small modification of products to fit with different seasons), are all too trivial to be qualified as innovations. Another issue needs to be considered is to whom it is new. The OECD (2005) has discussed three related concepts for the novelty of innovations: new to the firm, new to the market, and new to the world, in which, new (or significantly improved) to the firm is the minimum requirement. Products /processes /methods implemented for the first time in the firm are considered innovations of that firm even though they may already be implemented by other firms. The innovation does not necessarily need to be developed by the firm itself but can be acquired from external sources. An innovation is classified as new to the market if the firm is the first to introduce it on the firm’s operating market. The market can be defined subjectively by the firm itself. An innovation is new to the world when the firm is the first (in the world) to introduce the innovation for all markets and industries, domestic and international. In this case, the firm can be considered as an inventor or a market leader.

To sum up in order to innovate, a firm has three options as follow: (1) to adopt an innovation that already exists somewhere else; (2) to adopt an existing innovation by first getting it, and then modifying it to suit the firm’s own needs and (3) to create or/and develop the innovation themselves without taking all or part of existing innovations.

### 3. Characteristic of Vietnamese SMEs

The concept of SMEs contains a broad spectrum of definition. So, the definition of SMEs varies in context across countries, industries, organizations, agencies and the academic community. SMEs are often defined numerically or specifically to cover companies with a workforce ranging from 1 to 100 employees and in some cases up to 250 employees as the upper limit with a few exceptions such as The USA (500 employees) and Japan (300 employees). Statistically defined, the lower limit for the member of employees for the “small-scale enterprises” is usually put at between 5-10 workers and the upper limit is ranged from 50-100. The upper limit for the “medium-sized enterprises” is usually 100-250 employees.

The European Union standard definition for SMEs is any business with fewer than 250 employees and a turnover of up to EUR 50 million

or a balance sheet of about EUR 43 million (Table 1). This definition may not be applicable to all countries. Thus, it can be said that SMEs encompass a very broad range of enterprises from established traditional family business employing over a hundred people to survivalist self-employed people working in informal microenterprises. (Table 2).

In Vietnam, SMEs are defined as independent enterprises with registered capital of no more than VND 100 billion and employing less than 200 workers on average over a year. SMEs in Vietnam include state-owned enterprises, non-state enterprises, and foreign-invested enterprises, the majority of which are non-state enterprises. The SMEs are in various industries and a large number of the SMEs are in the trade, manufacturing, and services. According to Article 6 of the Government's Decree No. 39/2018/ND-CP, "SMEs

Table 1. SME criteria

Company category	Staff headcount	Turnover	or	Balance sheet total
Medium-sized	< 250	≤ € 50 m		≤ € 43 m
Small	< 50	≤ € 10 m		≤ € 10 m
Micro	< 10	≤ € 2 m		≤ € 2 m

Source: European Union, 2003

Table 2. SME criteria by Vietnamese Government's Decree No. 39/2018/ND-CP

Business sector	Company category					
	Micro		Small		Medium-sized	
	A and R (Bil. VND)	Number of employees (L)	A and R (Bil. VND)	Number of employees (L)	A and R (Bil. VND)	Number of employees (L)
I. Agriculture, forestry and fisheries	$A \leq 3$ or $R \leq 3$	$L \leq 10$	$A \leq 20$ or $R \leq 50$	$10 < L \leq 100$	$A \leq 100$ or $R \leq 200$	$100 < L \leq 200$
II. Industry and construction	$A \leq 3$ or $R \leq 3$	$L \leq 10$	$A \leq 20$ or $R \leq 50$	$10 < L \leq 100$	$A \leq 100$ or $R \leq 200$	$100 < L \leq 200$
III. Trade and services	$A \leq 3$ or $R \leq 10$	$L \leq 10$	$A \leq 50$ or $R \leq 100$	$10 < L \leq 50$	$A \leq 100$ or $R \leq 300$	$50 < L \leq 100$

Note. A: Total assets (Bil. VND); R: Total revenue of the year (Bil. VND); L: The average number of employees participating in social insurance of the year.

Source: Summary from Vietnamese Government's Decree No. 39/2018/ND-CP

are business establishments registered in accordance with the law. It is divided into three levels: micro, small and medium scale (the total capital equivalent to the total assets determined in the enterprise's balance sheet or the average labor force is a priority criterion)".

In Vietnam, SMEs account for up to 97 percent of all registered firm. They account for 77 percent of total employment, contribute 41 percent of GDP, 30 percent of the total value of industrial output, nearly 80 percent of retail sale volume, 64 percent of gross goods transportation value, and 100 percent of the total output value in some handicraft items. The SMEs sector also creates more than 50 percent of the total number of jobs every year (CIEM et.al., 2012). The total number of active enterprises are about 450,000 enterprises in 2011 and 590,000 enterprises in 2016 (of which 68 percent are micro) (Figure 1), in addition, the number of newly registered enterprises increased on average by 14 percent per year from 2011 to 2016 (Figure 2).

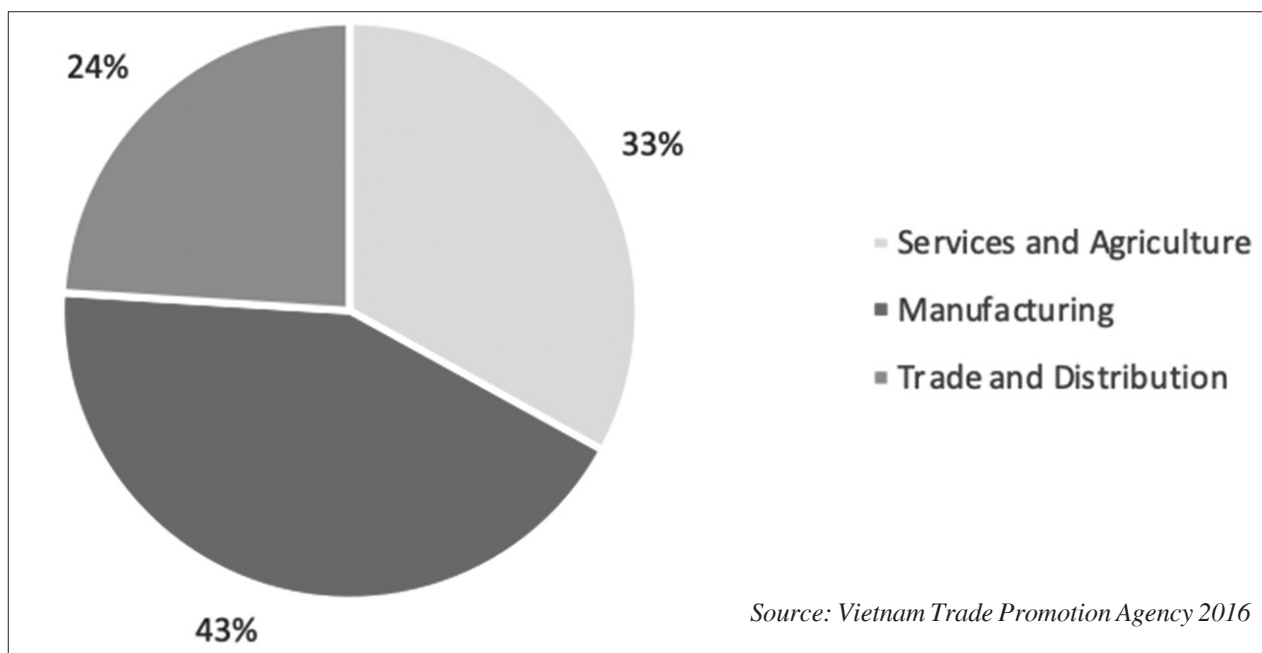
According to CIEM (2012), in the survey of SMEs, they conducted in 2011, about 70 percent of the number of SMEs was microenterprises, which include a large number of household enterprises, and only about 6 percent was medium

enterprises. The Vietnamese SMEs are mainly small enterprises but they contribute greatly to the economy. Vietnamese SMEs account for half of the total employment among all types of enterprises. A fair proportion of total capital was invested by SMEs and SMEs generate about half the total revenue of all enterprises in Vietnam.

Due to the impacts of the global financial crisis during the last few years, the SMEs sector in Vietnam has faced great difficulties. According to a report from the CIEM (2012), 60 percent of the surveyed SMEs reported that the crisis negatively affected their businesses and they have reduced new investment and innovation in 2011 compared to 2009. Out of more than 2,500 SMEs that participated in the survey in 2009, about 20 percent have closed by 2011 for reasons including increasing difficulty in accessing credit, increasing inventories, and difficulties in employing skilled labor. During the first 9 months of 2012, about 42,000 SMEs closed and 60 percent of the SMEs surveyed have reduced their number of employees. (Figure ).

Especially, according to Ministry of Planning and Investment in the first six months of 2017, over 61,276 new enterprises were established with the total registered capital of VND 596.2 trillion, up

**Figure 1: Business Line of Vietnamese SMEs in 2016**





12.4 percent of the number of businesses and 39.4 percent of registered capital compared to the same period last year.

According to statistics from MPI, the Vietnamese economy achieved a highly respectable growth rate of 6.7 percent in 2017, with projections for another 6.5 percent in 2018. This positive outlook is due to robust domestic demand and increased trade opportunities from the new bilateral FTA with the European Union. Besides this, with the labor cost competitive and proximity to the Chinese production chain, Vietnam becomes a premier location for SMEs to set up manufacturing hubs to boost global trade activities.

decades to match the impressive annual growth rate of 7 percent over the past two decades leading to the elimination of extreme poverty in Vietnam. Hence, innovation associated with diversification is the major keys to identifying the trajectory of Vietnam's growth path as productivity growth and the single most significant driving force of productivity. In 2015, SME Survey Results from United Nations University showed that an average Vietnamese SME is specialized because only 11.6 percent of firms produced more than one product; new product development largely increased but improvements in existing product declined; finally, firms from the food and fabricated metal sectors tend to diversify and innovate more than other sectors. (Table 3).

**Table 3. SME Survey Results from United Nations University**

	Diversification (More than one 4-digit ISIC)		Innovation 1 (New product development)		Innovation 2 (Improvement of existing product)	
	2013	2015	2011	2015	2013	2015
All	11.1	11.6	3.96	23.8	16.4	13.2
Micro	9.1	10.1	3.19	23.9	12.9	10.0
Small	16.4	14.6	4.71	22.0	24.0	19.4
Medium	15.8	18.3	8.00	28.0	30.2	28.7
Urban	9.9	8.3	5.14	18.8	19.0	15.1
Rural	12.1	14.2	3.07	27.7	14.4	11.8
Industrial Zone	9.8	9.0	3.19	24.7	15.4	16.7
Not in the industrial zone	12.2	13.6	4.51	23.0	17.2	10.5

*Source: John R. et al. 2015*

#### **4. Innovation in Vietnamese SMEs**

Vietnamese SMEs now is facing with many threats with their limitations caused by high cost of finance, cumbersome lending procedures and stringent collateral requirements, underdeveloped capital markets, ineffective loan guarantee funds, and SMEs themselves limitations (limited capability and inefficient, lack of management skills, skilled employees...). However, according to the World Bank, Vietnam stands at a cusp of opportunity - meeting high growth rates in the coming two

Based on reports published by government and non-profit organizations, the current state of innovation in Vietnamese SMEs has the following characteristics: Innovation in Vietnamese SMEs is generally low at both the national and enterprise levels due to low level of awareness and knowledge about innovation in general and among Vietnamese SMEs in particular; Vietnamese SMEs often use project templates to manage innovation and tend to adopt or adapt existing initiatives rather than develop new ones; and Human resources for

innovation do not meet the requirements of business development because the Vietnamese SMEs do not pay attention to training human resources capacity for innovation.

*Firstly*, innovation in Vietnamese SMEs is generally low at both the national and enterprise levels. In general, innovation systems in developing countries are poorly constructed and are very fragmented (Aubert, 2005). In Vietnam, a weak national innovation system, characterized by limited business funding for R&D activities, a loose relationship between science and enterprises, lack of international linkages (OECD, 2013). According to the National Office of Intellectual Property of Vietnam (NOIP, 2012), the number of patented applications by Vietnamese enterprises in 3 years (2009-2011) is very low. The office receives 255 applications for inventions from Vietnamese enterprises. There are no SMEs that have patents. In addition, about 10 percent of the surveyed enterprises (46/583 enterprises) tried or applied a patent for 3 years (2009-2011). Among them, there are 30 large enterprises, 16 SMEs (Nha and Quan, 2013).

The main reason for this low result is the low level of awareness and knowledge of innovation in SMEs in Vietnam. According to Nha and Quan's report (2013) on 583 enterprises, many Vietnamese businesses have not paid much attention to the policy of innovation. Specifically, 72 percent of enterprises surveyed do not have human resource policy for innovation; 78 percent do not have the financial investment policy for innovation; Nearly 80 percent do not have cooperation policy and development partners for innovation. Human resources are less cared when innovation policy is enacted. Businesses are less interested in the ability to innovate when hiring and less interested in outside resources for the process. Only 12 companies have R&D department. In addition, creativity requires an environment in which employees are not afraid to make mistakes. However, Vietnamese corporate culture does not create a foundation for innovation. Specifically, 65 percent of respondents said that enterprises do not facilitate the sharing of knowledge and promote learning culture. (Nha and Quan, 2013).

*Secondly*, Vietnamese SMEs often use project

templates to manage innovation. Most businesses have over 5 innovative projects in recent 3 years on a small scale. Moreover, for enterprises that want to be innovative, it is much easier for them to buy ready-to-use machinery, equipment or even a whole production line than to 'reinvent the wheel'. At best, Vietnamese SMEs could take existing innovations and modify them to suit their needs. In fact, a report by CIEM, DoE, and GSO (2012) on firm-level competitiveness and technology in Vietnam has shown that in 2011, only 800 out of nearly 8000 surveyed enterprises were conducting original R&D and Vietnamese firms preferred to adapt outside technology brought from external sources. Thus, Vietnamese SMEs tend to adopt or adapt existing initiatives rather than develop new ones. In addition, Vietnamese SMEs often develop innovative ideas with their suppliers. Only 32 percent of the surveyed enterprises conducted their own innovation. 45 percent of businesses regularly work with external partners to develop products. These businesses focus on sales and marketing rather than research and development.

The explanation for this feature is that the cooperation between Vietnamese SMEs and government agencies, research centers and universities is weak. In addition, Vietnamese enterprises often face obstacles when innovating, including unstable state policies (80 percent), lack of linkages with partners (78 percent), Not willing to source human resources for innovation (77 percent), notable barriers due to management experience is not high and the capacity of innovation leaders is not high (69 percent). The risk of high innovation and lack of legal protection is also a major barrier (70 percent). Rapidly changing market demand and financial capacity are moderate barriers (Nha and Quan, 2013).

*Thirdly*, human resources for innovation do not meet the requirements of business development. In particular, of the more than 50 percent of surveyed enterprises, the percentage of employees involved in innovation is only 6-10 percent of the total number of employees. On the creative level of employees in the business, 56 percent of businesses rated employee innovation as weak. No company evaluates employees very creatively (Nha and Quan, 2013). The reason is



that Vietnamese enterprises have not paid much attention to training and enhancing human resource capacity in service of innovation. According to survey results, only 174/583 enterprises have held training on innovation. In general, the budget for training in innovation is low because of the low level of the training budget. On average, non-state enterprises spend about VND 300,000 /person /year on training. In addition, salaries account for less than 5 percent of turnover and an average income of less than VND 5 million /person /year (CIEM, DoE, and GSO, 2012).

### 5. Conclusions

Drawing on the previous literature on innovation as well as reports in innovation in Vietnamese enterprises, this research has proposed some outstanding features of the

innovation of SMEs in Vietnam. Recognizing these characteristics, first of all, the Vietnamese government needs to improve the national innovation system to facilitate the innovation process of the business. Vietnamese SMEs will be motivated to innovate if they operate in a creative environment. Therefore, Vietnamese SMEs should also have clear strategies and mechanisms for innovation, obtain more innovation knowledge and skills through different channels and training, mobilize and allocate appropriate funds for innovation activities, and should build internal and external linkages with domestic and international organizations. The first phase could be “adopting and adapting innovation” as it is now, but over the long term, Vietnamese SMEs should then gradually go into the “creating/developing innovation” stage ■

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### **TÓM TẮT:**

Đổi mới sáng tạo được nhận định không chỉ là một yếu tố quan trọng nhằm tạo ra và duy trì khả năng cạnh tranh của các quốc gia, mà còn là một nhân tố có ý nghĩa quyết định đối với hoạt động của các doanh nghiệp trên toàn thế giới thông qua việc cải thiện tư duy sáng tạo. Đổi mới sáng tạo không phải là một khái niệm mới, nhưng đối với các nước đang phát triển như Việt Nam, hoạt động này đóng vai trò chủ chốt trong quá trình gia tăng tốc độ phát triển của nền kinh tế. Hiện nay, Việt Nam được công nhận là một trong những nền kinh tế phát triển nhanh trên thế giới, với tốc độ tăng trưởng GDP trung bình hàng năm trên 6%. Kết quả ấn tượng này đạt được dựa trên nỗ lực của các doanh nghiệp vừa và nhỏ (DNNVV). Điều này khẳng định vai trò quan trọng của các DNNVV trong nền kinh tế Việt Nam. Các nghiên cứu gần đây đã cho thấy, chỉ bằng cách cải thiện tư duy sáng tạo của các DNNVV Việt Nam, đặc biệt là đổi mới trong nước mới có thể giúp tạo ra và duy trì khả năng cạnh tranh của nền kinh tế Việt Nam. Vì vậy, bài báo này nhằm mục đích khám phá vai trò của sự đổi mới của các DNNVV trong bối cảnh Việt Nam - một nền kinh tế đang chuyển đổi, mang lại góc nhìn tổng quan và từ đó phân tích tình trạng đổi mới hiện tại của các DNNVV Việt Nam.

**Từ khóa:** Đổi mới sáng tạo, DNNVV Việt Nam, thực trạng đổi mới sáng tạo tại Việt Nam.