
Potential Consequences of COVID-19 Pandemic on Higher Education System in Vietnam

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Date of publication (dd/mm/yyyy): 03/08/2021

Abstract – COVID-19 pandemic has negatively impacted every nation and Vietnam is not an exception. Its consequences will still be felt for years to come. The last few years witnessed enormous efforts of Vietnam to transform and improve the higher education, but COVID-19 could destabilize the system with dire consequences. It rises inequalities due to the application of distance learning; decreases the quality of teaching and learning; narrows the financial resources of higher education institutions (HEIs), exacerbates post-graduation unemployment, and pushes private institutions into risks. Therefore, urgent actions at national level are required to be ready when the pandemic is over, otherwise the recovery of the whole system could be too slow. This article highlights some of these consequences in purpose of giving policymakers, leaders of HEIs and other stake holders in Vietnam a better preparation.

Keywords – Higher Education, COVID-19 Pandemic, Consequences, Vietnam, Students.

I. INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 pandemic forced all aspects of life in all over the world to be changed in the last 18 months. Most of governments must pursuit the objective of reducing the spread of the virus by lessening social contact with the interruption of traditional eye to eye education (Sintema, 2020) and Vietnam is not an exception. During the 2020-2021 academic year, Vietnamese education and training system have encountered many challenges, especially in the first months of 2021. Therefore, the education sector must take urgent and serious measures to prevent and control the spread of Covid-19 in institutions.

According to the preliminary report of Vietnam General Statistics Office (GSO) (2021), the academic year of 2020-2021 had 4.3 million kindergartens children, a decrease of 0.1% from the previous year; 17.5 million pupils in general education; and over 24 million students in higher education. At the moment, the 2020-2021 academic year is approaching its final stages. Many localities decided to give pupils and students an early summer break, organize online school year review. The schedule of the entrance exams and the high school graduation exams is prepared in “many scenarios” depending on the condition of the epidemic.

This article discusses the consequences of the COVID-19 on higher education system of Vietnam both in short term and long term. Some of its impacts can be visually recognized but the chained consequences in the future also must be carefully considered by the Vietnamese government.

II. VIETNAMESE HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM STRUGGLED DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC: THE “OBVIOUS” SITUATION

In early February 2020, the Prime Minister of Vietnam issued Decision No. 173/QĐ-TTg (2020) on the announcement of an acute respiratory infection caused by a new strain of corona virus. Immediately, 63 provinces/cities in Vietnam issued notices to all students leaving schools/universities and staying at home. Approximately 24 million Vietnamese pupils and students of over 53,000 education and training institutions

nationwide cannot go to schools. This period. At that time, the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) announced a stipulation of “suspending education institutions, not stopping studying”. Therefore, HEIs in Vietnam must adapt to the situation by switching from traditional face-to-face classes to distance teaching and learning.

Financial Difficulties

This change in teaching method required HEIs to further invest in their facilities, especially information technology, to support their teachers in online-teaching. On the other hand, the physical facilities must be wasted during the outbreak. In addition, many Vietnamese HEIs offered special support policies for their learners such as tuition fee reductions, financial supports to buy laptops, or cheaper access to internet broadband. Although these actions helped learners to maintain their studies, the training quality was damaged while the financial burden was pushed to HEIs (International Association of Universities, 2020).

Online Examination

Another consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic on HEIs is examination. Many institutions in Vietnam have struggled during the period with online exams. These HEIs did not have sufficient resources and methods to evaluate results of students in distance. Beside rising the costs for HEIs, the legitimacy of exams during this period is highly questioned because it is much more convenient for students to cheat in these patchwork online examinations. According to interviews with over 10 representatives of Vietnamese HEIs in Hanoi, the research received several responses that the institutions are themselves questioning the results of online examinations. In general, the results of students during last one year were increased by 10%-20% compared to the previous year. However, all of the representatives did not believe this is a good sign of effective online training program but a prove of dishonest examinations. They claimed that the results of students significantly increased in subjects which have online exams, especially multiple-choices ones, but it slightly decreased in subjects which required students to write reports. Moreover, the examiners of these institutions also reported that there were a lot of common incorrect answers in the online exams. This situation suggests that a non-well-prepared online examination system created a suitable condition for students to cheat in their exams. Although these HEIs predicted this situation, they do not have any other choices rather than accepting the results and hope that they can go back to traditional method, or a better online examination will be designed in near future.

III. FUTURE CONSEQUENCES OF COVID-19 ON HIGHER EDUCATION IN VIETNAM: THE “INAPPRECIABLE” PICTURE

It is understandable that, currently, Vietnam, as well as other countries in all over the world, are giving all priority to the health and medical sectors in order to prevent infection and limit the number of deaths. The government are also prioritizing support disadvantaged social groups. Therefore, economic recovery or support for other sectors must go behind. However, it is necessary for each sector to start evaluating the impact of COVID-19 and assess its possible consequences.

Inequalities

As a part of lock down measures to prevent the spread of the virus, Vietnamese government had no choice rather than physically closing HEIs. As a result, these HEIs also had no choice but to use information and

communication technology to provide online programs for their students from a distance. First, this situation created digital inequalities among Vietnamese HEIs. Some of them are significantly better equipped, financially advantaged and technologically experienced than others. As this unequal condition existed, the educational quality could be seriously impacted in disadvantaged institutions. Second, among students from different areas, the inequality appeared significantly between the rich living in urban areas and the poor in rural areas (UNESCO & IESALC, 2020).

It is undeniable that the crisis has created an opportunity for all HEIs in Vietnam to rapidly enhance their information technology operations. However, most of them cannot afford to offer the entire online training programs in such a short time. Although a certain number of Vietnamese HEIs have adopted a hybrid approach in teaching between face-to-face and online methods to increase enrollment and training quality, none of them have intends to completely replace the traditional method (Wang, 2020). This raises a question of what the government should do to minimize the inequalities that appeared as a consequence of e-learning.

Training Quality

It could be a mistake to blindly believe that online teaching and learning can be effective simply by uploading the script or a recorded video of a lecture (Bao, 2020). However, this is precisely what happened in Vietnam during some first months of the lockdown, and it even still commonly exists now. In fact, in order to provide a high-quality e-learning program, teaching materials must be prepared by professional designers while instructors or teachers also must be pedagogically trained with this method. Moreover, students need time to be familiar with these new programs. Therefore, urgent online teaching and learning programs during the lockdown must negatively impact the quality.

Furthermore, the training programs that were more impacted by the rush of e-learning should be sciences and technology, as students from these sectors cannot practice in laboratories. Meanwhile, science and technology are considered as critical sector in a hyper-developing economy like Vietnam. How should Vietnamese HEIs find alternatives to the use of laboratories and limit the negative consequences of poor-quality programs resulting from rushed online courses?

Unemployment of Graduates

Since the beginning of COVID-19 pandemic, the unemployment figures of Vietnam have showed some negative results, including the rate of unemployed graduates from HEIs. One of the main causes of unemployment is the lack of “soft skills” by graduates in Vietnam, such as communication skills, personal initiative, team- and group- working, etc. Therefore, the widespread application of online teaching and learning in Vietnamese HEIs during the pandemic can aggravate the situation. In addition, due to economic motives, a certain proportion of employers were forced to lay off their employees, thereby hindering graduates to find jobs during this period. The sociopolitical consequences of large-scale unemployment, especially among educated young generation, might be severe.

Private HEIs

Another feature of the higher education system in Vietnam is the presence of private universities and colleges. In last few decades, the number of private institutions as well as their enrollment rates have increased steadily.

Different with public HEIs, private universities in Vietnam often operate under business model and rely significantly on tuition fee revenue to finance salaries and other operating expenditures. While Vietnamese public HEIs can eventually receive financial and policy supports from the State to deal with the consequences of COVID-19 pandemic, the private sector might have to narrow down their scale or even shutdown due to lack of funds and increase of costs.

IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the higher education system in Vietnam must overcome several sequelae of the COVID-19 pandemic in the future. These include decrease in training quality, reduction in equalities and challenges in financial resources. Therefore, the government needs to prepare and start having serious actions to encounter them. Otherwise, Vietnam or any other countries in the world might face a lost generation of youth which can waste the talent of young people, undermine decades of progress, and exacerbate inherent inequalities.

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