

# Current Status of Higher Education in Vietnam and Potential of the Reform

**Dr. Nguyen Cao Thanh**

Education Faculty, La Trobe University, Australia  
Education Faculty, Tan Trao University, Vietnam

**Abstract** – The article examines the current status of higher education in Vietnam and potential for the renovation. Based on investigations of scholars, even though some progress has been made, the tertiary education system in Vietnam still lags egregiously behind the economic transformation. The quality of university graduates is low and does not meet the real needs of the society. Faced these concerns and based on global trends, recently, Vietnamese government has produced new policies in order to reform the educational system in general and higher education in particular. In practice, some measures are taking place and being potential in the near future.

**Keywords** – Vietnamese Higher Education, Educational Reform, International Integration.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Today, more than ever before in human history, the wealth - or poverty - of nations depends on the quality of higher education. Those with a larger repertoire of skills and a greater capacity for learning can look forward to lifetimes of unprecedented economic fulfillment. (Malcolm Gillis, President of Rice University, 1999)

The argument being put forward espoused here is similar to that of Malcolm. The higher education in Vietnam has been seriously considered as main provider of key labour for the society. However, the quality of tertiary education has not adequately fulfilled the needs of society. In order to address that problem, attempts have been made to get it off the ground, and the outcome of these attempts is more likely to be positive.

Based on the above key elements, the main aim of this paper is to examine the current status of higher education in Vietnam. Beside, another purpose of this article is to evaluate the higher education reform in the conjunction with global integration and potential outcomes of the renovation.

## II. CURRENT STATUS OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN VIETNAM

Although some progress has been made in restructuring higher education in Vietnam, many concerns still exist. Researchers who have studied this report that there are still cumbersome areas in Vietnamese education in general and in higher education in particular even though efforts to renovate the education system have been made (IIE, 2004; Stephen, Doughty et al, 2006; Hai et al, 2007; Lee & Emerita, 2008; Thomson, 2009; Jonathan, 2011).

In an educational conference held in Hanoi, Vietnam (29/10/2009), the Minister for Education and Training (MoET) Nguyen Thien Nhan concluded that, generally, the quality of higher education is low and poorly managed. He reported that, “In fact, in the last 30 years, the quality of higher education has not been adequately managed” (2009, p.4) and went on to indicate that every year there have been no reports regarding the training quality of universities. Lieu and Charles (2007) support this finding and claim that MoET has not yet built the strategies and policies necessary to create a competitive environment for higher education. With regards to teaching and learning, it is widely documented that most of the learning and teaching occurring in Vietnamese universities continues to be through rote memorization and ‘teacher-centered’ lectures in which students are not motivated to adopt critical and analytical skills or creative thinking (Stephen, Doughty, Gray, Hopcroft & Silvera, 2006; Thomson, 2009; Minh, 2009). Minh (2009) states that at universities, the common work method in the classroom is still ‘teacher talk and student write’ (p.6). Minh goes on to claim that students are not given opportunities to update current socioeconomic information. Observations in 2005 by teams of the National Academies of the United States identified problems of teaching and learning at selected Vietnamese universities and concluded that:

- Ineffective teaching methods, which have too high a dependence on lectures and little use of active learning techniques were used;
- There was a lack of emphasis on conceptual learning or higher order learning;
- Students learning is passive;
- Students spend too much time in classes each day ... [and there was] no deep learning and comprehension; (Stephen, Doughty, et al, 2006 p.16)

Another observation of an American professor in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) University of Education recorded that “Vietnamese students are reluctant to think critically for themselves because they fear being differentiated from the group” (Adam, 2004: p.2).

Higher education in Vietnam does not yet meet the needs of the nation (Jonathan, 2011). Although there were recently a number of proposals and agendas regarding renewal of the higher education system, including teaching and learning approaches, the whole higher education system has remained unchanged for a long time. Teaching and learning in the universities is still immersed in the transmission model with many hours of lectures and texts that are well out of date.

### III. QUALITY OF UNIVERSITY GRADUATES

University graduates are the key to the labor force in any society, and it is not surprising that the quality of the tertiary graduates in Vietnam has been found wanting. Before 2007 MoET has not required universities to meet standards for graduates in terms of their practical skills, professional understanding, or ability to work in different working environments (MoET, 2009) and the reflections of employers and organizations report that many do not fulfill the requirements of the workplace. Hai et al, (2007) found that many graduates lacked basic skills and knowledge, and that their communication skills were limited. A report from the World Economic Forum (WEF) comments that there are three major concerns in Vietnam: inflation, poor quality infrastructure and a lack of highly skilled workers (Vietnam net, 2009). Ly (2008) identifies a number of weaknesses observable in graduates of higher education, especially in areas such as teamwork, independent work and communication skills, and argues that these are essential for successful employment in the workplace. She also claims that many graduates find it difficult to make decisions and this is an important requirement in many jobs.

One of the salient weaknesses of the training at universities in Vietnam is the disconnection between classroom and the needs of the market. Vietnamese universities are not producing an educated workforce that Vietnam’s economy and society demand (Thomas & Wilkinson, 2008). Struggles for companies looking for qualified workers are illustrative. In 2006, Intel – the world’s largest semiconductor manufacturer - was looking to hire hundreds of new engineers. However, from interviews of over 2,000 Vietnamese potential candidates only forty individuals were found to be suitable for recruitment (Thomson, 2009). Further to this point, the deficiency of the Vietnamese labor force not only negatively affects domestic development but also handicaps the global integration that Vietnam is pursuing.

### IV. GLOBAL SETTINGS

*How to combine national identity with a globally engaged Vietnam?* No doubt Ho Chi Minh would have found a way to do this (Adapted from Marginson’s work, 2010). The issues facing Vietnam today are different to those at the time of Ho Chi Minh – but equally challenging.

Today, higher demands and the competitive environment of the international market bring to Vietnam both opportunities and challenges, especially since Vietnam joined the WTO in 2007. According to Hai, Lam and Duc (2007), international integration would benefit Vietnamese education in terms of international cooperation to enhance the quality of education; motivating students to strengthen their ability to be able to work in a competitive environment; and the opportunity to receive, approach and exchange from other progressive education systems in the world. Further to this, globalization puts a lot of pressure on education’s

shoulders in terms of its quality (Ly, 2008). According to Ly (2008) in order to fulfill international commitments and to meet the requirements of modernization and industrialization since Vietnam joined the WTO, a capable labor force is more vital than ever. It is evident that the socioeconomic and international changes demand the labor force, specifically new university graduates who have the ability to think critically and creatively, to solve problems and to interact with others in meaningful ways (Lee & Emerita, 2008). Researchers in this area conclude that the Vietnamese labor force including university graduates, is still incapable of meeting the needs of the global market. This has a critical effect on the Vietnamese economy, which often lags well behind even its Southeast Asian neighbors.

International banks and organizations released statistics that show comparisons between Vietnam and other Asian countries in terms of education spending and economic production.

Table 1: Economic production and education spending, Asia-Pacific nations, 2007

	<b>Population (millions) WB</b>	<b>Gross National Income (\$ billions) WB</b>	<b>Gross National Income per head (\$ PPP) WB</b>	<b>Public education spending (% GDP) WB</b>
Japan	127.8	4813.3	34,600	3.7
China PRC	1320.0	3120.9	5370	3.5 ADB
Korea	48.5	955.8	24,750	4.6
Thailand	63.8	217.3	7880	2.6
Philippines	87.9	142.6	3730	3.2
Indonesia	225.6	373.1	3580	0.9
<b>Vietnam</b>	85.1	67.2	2550	9.2
Cambodia	14.4	7.9	1690	1.9

(Documented from World Bank (WB), Asian Development Bank (ADB), Public

Private Partnerships (PPP), and New Times, 2008)

Within the Asian countries Vietnam is just above Cambodia in terms of the national income per head although it has the highest percentage of GDP allocated to education, suggesting the importance this sector is now given.

For Vietnam to productively function and compete in the global workforce, Thompson (2009) argues that universities in Vietnam must properly equip graduates with the necessary skills. Marginson (2008) has identified attributes that nations, including Vietnam, need to maintain if their higher education system is to be productive in the global context. Important elements of his recommendation include the need for a modern research and innovation system, an education system that prepares tertiary students for a future of continuous adaptation and innovation, a sufficient spread of people who can communicate globally and work effectively with people from other countries in business and governmental activities. He suggests that a sign of global effectiveness is when a nation has a strong flow of students moving in and out of the country.

Based on the accounts from the above scholars, it is worth noting that the overwhelming concentration on globalization has a significant effect on socioeconomic development and particularly has close bearing on the outcome of tertiary education in Vietnam. In an important sense, to maximize advantages from global trends, Vietnamese tertiary graduates need to be capable and competent enough to meet international requirements.

## V. POTENTIAL FOR HIGHER EDUCATION REFORM

Since the outset of the Doi Moi (reforms) in 1980s and later Vietnam's entrance into the World Trade Organization (WTO) in January 2007, the Vietnamese government has recognized the need to reform the outdated system of higher education. MoET and the government have produced an impressive set of goals, policy proposals, and education laws to articulate the dramatic changes. These include:

- As early as 1991, the government, through the channel of the 7<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, officially acknowledged the importance of reforming the tertiary education system to meet the needs of socioeconomic changes.
- In the agenda of the reforms of higher education from 2001 to 2010, there were prescriptions regarding reforming teaching and learning. Particularly, the focus was "learning is parallel with doing, and matching theories with practice" (p.75). Moreover, the agenda stresses the importance of independent learning, presentation skills, teamwork skills and rising issues. (Hai, et al, 2007)
- In 2007, MoET intended to enhance the quality of training in higher education with the slogan 'training in accordance with the needs of the society'. To implement this action, MoET required universities to build and to proclaim standards of each qualification of students, and to analyze the suitability of that qualification to the needs of employment and society. (MoET, 2009)
- In March 2010, MoET produced an agenda specifically aimed at the standards of tertiary education graduates. This policy listed attributes of new graduates including:
  - Hard skills: professional skills, practical ability, skills in dealing with working situations, and problem solving skills.
  - Soft skills: communication skills, teamwork, ability in using information technology and being a competent speaker of English.
  - Behaviour: professional behavior and attitude, responsibility and being ambitious in learning updated knowledge. (MoET, 2010)
- In the perspective of Vietnamese education until 2020, the resolution shows that education is a prime national priority, and that investment in education is an investment in development. Particularly, the proposal lists the criteria in which people are expected to be capable:
  - choosing and grasping new knowledge

- solving problems
- organizing and cooperating
- being self-disciplined (MoET, 2010)

As documented above, key aspects such as the quality of higher education, the quality of the university graduate, new agendas and proposals of MoET and the Vietnamese government on renewing the education system in general, and on students' learning approaches in particular, were briefly reflected.

The points listed in the policies are obvious weaknesses of Vietnamese tertiary graduates. Apparently, in current global trends, the Vietnamese workers are required to possess a number of skills such as independence, critical thinking, problem solving, communication skills, and team work skill. In an important sense, graduates are expected to obtain those skills at universities before joining workplaces.

Although in Vietnam, there are still constraints and difficulties occurring in every area, there has been enormous remodeling of the Vietnamese educational system. Currently, the Vietnamese government is making an effort to strengthen the country in every area including education. Educational agendas and new policies have been implemented in recent times, with changes in teaching and learning at universities a number one priority.

## VI. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The paper has drawn a general picture of higher education in Vietnam. Even though measures have been taken, the quality of tertiary education is still alarming. Realizing the reality and relating on global trend, the Vietnamese government and the Ministry of Education and Training have been consciously aware of this problem. The topic of renovation in education in general and in higher education in particular has been seriously discussed, and steps have already begun to happen. These actions are more likely to be positive changes in the quality of the university level in Vietnam in the near future. In order to succeed in the reform, the Vietnamese government needs to apply policies that have been introduced in meetings and conferences into reality as soon as possible.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Adam, D. (2004). All Must Have Prizes or Punishing the Loser: Alternative Educational Paradigms. *Florida Atlantic University*.
- [2] Jonathan, D. (2011) *Education in Vietnam*. Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. Singapore.
- [3] Hai, V. N., D. B. Lam, et al. (2007). *Vietnamese Education: Innovation, Development and Modernization*. Hanoi, Vietnam, Educational Publisher.
- [4] IIE (2004). "Higher Education in Vietnam." *Institute of International Education. Implications of new learning environments*. Paper published in the Proceedings of the Independent Learning Conference, University of Melbourne
- [5] Ly, P. T. (2008). *The two problems of Vietnamese education in the era of globalization*. 2nd Comparative Education Conference: "Vietnamese Education in Globalization Context", Ho Chi Minh City.

- [6] Lee, L. S. and Emerita (2008). *New Directions for Higher Education in Vietnam: 2007 to 2020. Lubbock, TX USA, Texas Tech University.*
- [7] Lieu, T. T. B. and S. G. Charles (2007). *Analyzing higher education quality in the contexts of the US and the Vietnam and lessons learned for Vietnam.* Paper presented at the CIECER Conference, Vietnam.
- [8] Margison, S. (2010). *Developing Vietnam's universities in global context.* Paper presented at the Conference of Engaging with Vietnam, Monash University.
- [9] Minh, T. T. (2009). *University or high school level?, Tuan Vietnam.net.*
- [10] MOET (2009) *The proposals of reforming higher education for the period 2010-2012.* Vietnam Education Publisher.
- [11] MOET (2010) *The proposals of reforming higher education for the period 2010-2020.* Vietnam Education Publisher.
- [12] Nhan, N. T. (2009). *Report of The Development of Higher Education System, Solutions To Assure and Enhance the Training Quality.* M. o. E. a. Training. Hanoi, Vietnam.
- [13] Stephen, W. D., P. Doughty, et al. (2006). *Observations on Undergraduate Education in Computer Science, Electrical Engineering, and Physics at Select Universities in Vietnam.* Vietnam Education Foundation. Hanoi, Vietnam.
- [14] Thomson, J. (2009). "Changing Chalk and Talk: The Reform of Teaching Methods in Vietnamese Higher Education." *Independent Study Project Paper.*
- [15] Thomas, J. V. and B. Wilkinson (2008). *Vietnamese Higher Education.* ASH Institute for Democratic Governance and Innovation. Harvard Kennedy School.
- [16] Vietnam net (2009) *An overview of the economic development in Vietnam.* Hanoi.

## **AUTHOR'S PROFILE**

### **Dr. Nguyen Cao Thanh's**

Educational background:

- 1998: bachelor of Education, Thai Nguyen University of Education, Vietnam.
- 2007: Master of Education, La Trobe University, Australia.
- 2012: Doctor of Education, La Trobe University, Australia.

The author is currently working at La Trobe University and Tan Trao University as a research officer. His research interest includes: higher education renovation; student's learning, and cross-cultural experiences.