

The Impacts of International, National and Institutional Conditions for Higher Education on the Primary Processes of Teaching and Learning in the Higher Education Institutions in Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes how the international, national and institutional conditions affect the primary processes of teaching and learning in the Vietnamese higher education institutions. Under such influences, the Vietnamese higher education institutions are facing both challenges and opportunities in terms of the competitions among institutions, establishment of credit-based system, quality assurance and accreditation.

Keywords: *Marketization, globalization, quality assurance and accreditation*

Introduction

The Vietnamese higher education (HE) has an interesting history. First, after a thousand years of dominating Vietnam, Chinese ideology and related education system such as Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism had strongly affected Vietnam. After their independence from China in 938, the Vietnamese developed their own educational system and created their unique system of characters, *Chu Nom*. The first HE institution, the Temple of Literature, was established in 1076. Then in 1847, the French

navy invaded Vietnam. A French missionary, Alexander de Rhodes, developed a Romanized script called *Quoc Ngu*. *Quoc Ngu* which has been used since then as the Vietnamese official language. Because of the fear of possible uprisings of the Vietnamese intellectuals, the French developed the HE institutions, which only served their colonial purposes (Pham and Fry, 2004: 302-305). This led to the fact that 95% of the Vietnamese were illiterate. From 1945 to 1975, Ho Chi Minh, the leader of the Communist Party, led the Vietnamese fight against the French and later on the Americans. Vietnam officially gained their independence and reunification in September 2nd, 1975. The long wars against the invaders resulted in serious destruction of the Vietnamese education. The Vietnamese HE at that time was strongly influenced by the Soviet system (ibid, 2004: 309). After the 1975 period, under the pressure of markets and economic development and the collapse of Socialist system, the Vietnamese government has implemented many changes and reforms, Doi Moi, especially in the HE system. The Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) was established in 1990. MOET, the representative power of structure of the Vietnamese government, has made all of the most important decisions, issuing guidance and policies, governing enrolling, quality assurance, curricula, and all of the related educational events (Viet, 2009). In November 1993, MOET introduced the structure of the national education system (ibid, 2004: 221).

The present structure of HE in Vietnam includes pre-school, primary, secondary, vocational and higher education. Pre-school education consists of kindergartens (children from 4 months to 3 years old) and nurseries (children from 3 to 6 years old). The next level is general education with 3 consecutive stages: primary, lower secondary and upper secondary. Children from 6 to 11 years old are admitted to primary schools. There are 5 grades (Grade 1 to 5) in this level. Lower secondary schools admit students from 11 to 15 years old to enter from grade 6 to grade 9. Students age 15 to 18 years old study in upper secondary schools in grade 10 to grade 12. Vocational training includes short vocational training (training less than 1 year), vocational training (more than 1 year), and professional secondary (3 to 4 years for graduates of lower secondary schools).

HE system consists of undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Students who pass the formal university entrance exams can study undergraduate levels. There is a variety of majors offered in these two levels. Students can choose to study their undergraduate degrees formally (day classes) or informally (night classes). However, night undergraduate classes are for officers who are working in daytime, and have free time

at night to study at universities. The duration of learning these majors varies from 4 to 6 years. Two-year masters are offered for students who have either obtained the formal or informal undergraduates. They can choose to do three-year Ph.D. degrees after their M.A. completion.

Students who fail in the university entrance exams to public institutions can apply to either study in colleges or transfer their grades to study in private and semi-private universities. Two-year or three-year programmes with a variety of majors in colleges are offered to students. Some colleges even have the connection training programmes in which the students can study one or two more years to obtain formal public university degrees. In the Vietnamese era of education decentralization, more and more foreign and private universities were established to meet the society studying demands. In comparison to public universities, the domestic private ones were claimed to be of lower quality. Only students who fail the university entrance exams to public universities then have to study in those institutions.

However, under the pressure of globalization and marketization, all universities are struggling to provide better services to their customers who pay for their schooling. Figure 1 illustrates basically the education

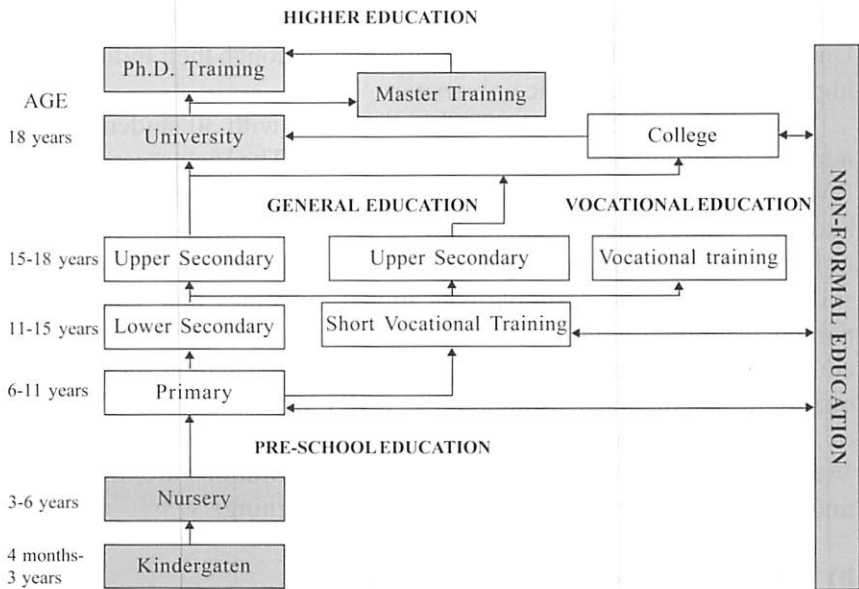


Figure 1: Structure of the National Education System
(Decree No. 90/CP of the Government Issued on November 24, 1993)

structure of the national system (Decree No. 90/CP of the government issued on November 24, 1993) (cited in Viet, 2009: 221).

There are many factors accounting for tremendous changes in the Vietnam HE system. The typical international, national and institutional conditions for HE (society demands, increasing number of foreign and private institutions, financial foreign aids) have remarkable influences on the primary processes of teaching and learning (curriculum, teaching methods, facilities, credit-based system establishment and quality assurance).

National, Institutional and International Conditions for Vietnam HE

a) Vietnamese parents' high expectation of high teaching and learning quality

The Vietnamese stakeholders, parents and students, want to pay tuition fee only for higher quality institutions. This conditions better opportunities for jobs with high salary after graduation. They are getting more cautious when choosing to pay tuition fee for any HE institutions. This explains why more students choose foreign universities such as RMIT, Harvard University, Victoria University of Wellington, although their tuition fee is higher than that of domestic universities.

Established in 2001, RMIT Vietnam began with 30 students. The number of students at RMIT now is around 5000. The Vietnamese choose RMIT because they can achieve the most modern intellectual skills and knowledge, and critical thinking skills to solve problems. Also, education in RMIT can build a capacity for teamwork and social communication skills. These are the desirable educational outcomes that Vietnamese parents want their children to have. As a result, while domestic higher education institutions are still struggling with their teaching and learning quality, the international institutions like RMIT Vietnam, Harvard Vietnam or Victoria Vietnam have met the increasing demands from the Vietnamese stakeholders. The domestic HE institutions are, therefore, under pressure to improve their teaching and learning.

b) The booming of foreign HE institutions

Since realizing the weaknesses of the Vietnamese domestic HE, the Vietnamese government initiated a decree (No. 06/2000/ND-CP) in

2000, allowing foreign investments in HE in Vietnam (Dai, 2006, cited in Fry, 2009: 248). In 2005, to make more access for the booming number of Vietnamese students, the Vietnamese government issued a five-year plan aiming at 100 HE private and international institutions. Many institutions with joint ventures, ‘sandwich programmes’, (Washington State University MBA programme, University of Houston, Victoria University of Wellington Economics programme) were established in Vietnam. For instance, in December 2004, a cooperative training program to study the Ho Chi Minh University of Economics and University of Victoria was established under Decision No. 11051/HTQT Department of Education and Training. In January 2005, the US based Roger Williams University inaugurated in Hanoi (ibid). In brief, foreign universities, to some extent, can help to meet the increasing number of Vietnamese students.

However, with the population of around 85.3 million in July 2007, Vietnam has become one of the most populated countries in Asia. The demands of HE from students are turning even more alarming than ever before. Establishment of domestic private HE institutions is also allowed to meet such a demand from this demographic increase. However these institutions appear in Vietnam HE with certain benefits and challenges.

c) The emergence of private domestic HE in Vietnam

In their article, Pham and Fry (2002) introduced the benefits from private HE institutions. First, private HE helps relieve the Vietnamese government financial burden. In fact, instead of spending a huge national budget for HE (10.08%), the Vietnamese government has encouraged diversification in HE. Private HE institutions, therefore, has increased in number to provide more access for 104,225 students from of a total 918,228 student nationwide. They can also manage their own budget.

What MOET can do is to provide economical, political and educational guidance for these institutions. Pham and Fry (2002: 133) stated “*This is a remarkable achievement that demonstrates the timely and judicious policy of the Vietnamese government*”. Then, private institutions help improve infrastructure for the Vietnamese HE. Pham and Fry (2002: 134) found that in private universities, students pay from USD200 to USD 300 for tuition fee per year. With their autonomy in terms of budget justification, private universities also seek more foreign investment and financial supports. Pham and Fry (2002: 134) also noted that they have obtained “*reasonably good equipment, facilities, and infrastructure*

in this initial phase of privatization". They also gave examples of how rapidly private institutions have developed their facilities. HUTECH has 32 laboratories, 800 computers and an electronic library. In Van Lang University, there are eight labs including an Environmental Lab and a new Language Learning Lab funded by Netherlands and Japan. The effort to construct modern infrastructure of these institutions manifests their strong commitment to meet the demands of the society. In addition to the emergence of more HE private institutions, more and more foreign donors offer Vietnam HE financial aids.

d) Scholarships and financial aid from foreign donors

The Vietnamese students and staff in HE institutions have received quite a number of scholarships from many donors such as New Zealand, Australia, Europe, and America. For example, in 2009, New Zealand Aid provided 20 scholarships for full-time postgraduate degrees and diplomas in New Zealand HE institutions. Similarly, the Australian Development Scholarship Fund (ADS) provided 150 HE scholarships to Vietnamese citizens. Eligible candidates can study some of the targeted fields in Australian institutions. Erasmus Mundus (EM) is considered a big 'gateway' for Vietnamese graduates to study in Europe. In the 2009-2010 academic year, EM approves 49 Vietnamese graduates to receive scholarships to study in European countries. Each student has to attend at least two universities in different European countries, in which their mobility helps them to absorb European knowledge power. Thanks to these HE scholarships, Vietnamese students can broaden their knowledge of the most developed countries around the world.

Additionally, more international donors and agency have provided considerable support for Vietnamese HE system. For example, Can Tho University in the Mekong River Delta has received much financial help from donors worldwide. The inauguration of Learning Resource Center University of Can Tho (Can Tho LRC) in April 2006 was a memorable event in the Mekong River Delta area. Can Tho LRC is a four-storey building, located in an area of over 7500 m squared of land with an investment of 9 million USD held by the Atlantic Philanthropies (USA) funding (Duyen, 2009). Rice University in Texas also signed an agreement with the Vietnam Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) to build a programme called Connexions. It is an open-source software which Vietnamese HE can use throughout the country. The total amount of money invested in that programme was USD2.25 million. Thanks to using

this software, Vietnamese HE institutions can have access to the latest research and educational materials (Fry, 2009: 249).

Taking all into consideration, the Vietnamese stakeholders' choice of HE institutions, the booming number of private and foreign HE institutions, scholarships and aid for HE graduates from foreign donors have a number of positive and negative impacts on the primary processes of teaching and learning in Vietnam.

Impacts and Challenges of Conditions on Primary Processes of Teaching and Learning

a) The competition to lift up HE quality to international standards among HE Institutions

In order to raise the teaching and learning quality, HE institutions in Vietnam develop their own plans and strategies. The focus is on training more high qualified staff, developing more research, improving more facilities and curricula. For example, Can Tho University (CTU) is one of the biggest universities in the South of Vietnam. Its missions are training, researching and collaborating with international cooperation. CTU hosts many national and international level research studies in the Mekong River Delta. In order to improve facilities, CTU has developed diverse partnerships with over 80 institutes, universities and international organizations. Major projects with Netherlands, Japan, America, etc. have brought CTU many benefits. For example, they have received funding to launch a training and research innovation grant project called Trig. There are three targeted groups: improving management capacity (Group 1), innovation in research and training scientific and technical fields (Group 2), innovation of training and research fields of social sciences (Group 3). Launching such a diversified and comprehensive project, CTU hopes to achieve a better reputation and higher quality in Asia in terms of management in scientific research, innovation in research and training in social science, natural science and technology. In addition to comprehensive development projects, CTU also launched a programme called 'TOEIC CTU'. In this programme, a board of twelve English lecturers in CTU worked together in one year to write a new English curriculum for English non-major students. The goal in this programme is to help CTU students acquire good English communication skills. Although it may take CTU a long period of time to achieve their long-term goal, the

chance of attaining the goal is more certain with their strong determination. Similar to CTU, many other universities are trying their best to compete against each other. They can have different missions and goals. Such competition among them has resulted in better teaching and learning quality.

In spite of much effort in raising the HE quality, universities in Vietnam face a number of challenges. First, there is no fixed standard for quality among HE institutions. As a result, the description and evaluation of the quality of staffs and students are still vague, which eventually leads to huge gaps between training provided by HE institutions and the needs from the Vietnamese job market and society. Some students are jobless in spite of the high demands of skilled work force. Ho Chi Minh City Labor Department (2002) (cited in Pham and Fry, 2004: 13) reported that 75% of the students can find jobs which are mostly unrelated to their prior HE training. Then despite the effort to train more skilled and qualified staffs, Vietnam has suffered shortages of human resources. Because of the past wars, teachers' living situations were so bad that many of them had to abandon their schools. Low salary rates also put the Vietnamese teachers' lives in difficult situations. Consequentially, they have to earn their living by teaching for many other institutes in Vietnam. Because of overly heavy teaching commitments, not many teachers can further their studies, for example up to a Ph.D., or engage in research work. All difficulties eventually decrease the quality of Vietnam human resources in HE. Brain drain is a more alarming tendency seen in the public sectors of the Vietnamese government. Many skilled public officers quit their jobs in Vietnamese government sectors and work for foreign companies for the sake of improving their life situations and better working environments.

b) The application of credit-based system in Vietnam HE

In the process of reform in Vietnam that began in late 1986, HE institutions created a credit-based system. In 1993, MOET provided further guidelines on Vietnamese credit-system which was similar to that of the American HE institutions. Polytechnic University in Ho Chi Minh city was the first institution applying credit-based system. Many other universities like the University of Da Lat, Can Tho University, and the College of Fisheries in Nha Trang started to apply the system with different levels.

Credit-based system is noted to bring Vietnam HE many remarkable benefits (Lam, 2009). First, students are more active in designing plans

for their studies on reference to their own capabilities and circumstances. This also helps the university training more flexible and increases students' mobility. They can transfer their credits to study in other institutions inside Vietnam or overseas. Studying in HE institutions with credit-based system, students are allowed to actively change their majors during the learning process without having to learn it from the beginning. Further, credit-based system allows higher efficiency in terms of teaching quality and curriculum development. Universities with credit-based system can organize common papers for many students in many departments to avoid the repetition of taking the same papers in other institutions.

Likewise, such move creates more opportunities for universities to use the best teaching staff and the best means for each paper field, which increases the teaching quality. Better curriculum quality and quality assurance process are then obtained in strict regulations agreed among institutions with credit-based system. For example, Polytechnic University in Ho Chi Minh City ensures that their learning materials are relatively good in which each paper has English and Vietnamese versions. To improve teaching conditions, the University of Technology in Ho Chi Minh City also equips its classes with overhead projectors and multimedia projectors. In addition, new methods of teaching and learning are explored and developed to ensure that students know how to self-study and make use of new technology in the system. Application of credit-based system helps Vietnam HE system more integrated with regional and the world (ibid).

Although the introduction of credit-based HE system promises a better future of teaching and learning, HE institutions face some difficulties in their implementation. It is difficult to change methods of learning and teaching immediately. It takes time for the Vietnamese students to get used to the idea of 'learning how to fish' instead of 'being given the fish' by teachers. Students are expected to develop their own ability to self-study and autonomy in studying. Likewise, methods of teaching should be diversified from giving-lectures, task-based teaching approach to enquiry-based one. Whether Vietnamese students and lecturers are ready to change their traditional ways of teaching and learning is still unknown. There is no research until in Vietnam giving answers to this question. Besides, not all HE institutions in Vietnam can have equal access to learning materials and research articles. Until now there are only three 'so-called' high quality learning resources centers in Vietnam that is one each in Can Tho University, Hue University and Thai Nguyen University. Vietnam HE institutions are still in desperate need of more sources of

advanced knowledge so that they can meet the demands of teaching and learning in credit-based system.

c) The emergence of quality assurance and accreditation in primary processes of teaching and learning in Vietnam HE

In 2004, MOET decided to adopt US quality assurance and accreditation system in HE (Nguyen, Oliver, and Priddy: 2009). The reasons for their choice were that American accreditation model is considered as the oldest and the best of high quality (ibid, 2009: 7). Peer review, self-study and external evaluation are the three key elements in the Vietnamese accreditation model. Ten standards are presented comprising 53 criteria that covered all activities of HE institutions (ibid, 2009: 11):

1. Missions and objectives of the university (two criteria)
2. Organization and management (five criteria)
3. Training programme (four criteria)
4. Training activities (five criteria)
5. Managerial staff, lecturers and staff (10 criteria)
6. Learners (nine criteria)
7. Scientific research and technology development (five criteria)
8. International cooperation (three criteria)
9. Library, learning equipment and other facilities (seven criteria)
10. Finance and financial management (three criteria)

Nguyen *et al.* (2009) also credited the help of international and national education experts during conferences and workshops, the newest accreditation system with 10 standards and 61 criteria (53 previous and eight newly added criteria) which was established in November, 2007. Vietnam universities are also introduced *self-studies* criteria. According to the official Regulations for Higher Education Accreditation, the set of standards is to assist universities to conduct their self-studies. The purpose of self-studies, according to the regulations, is to: maintain and continuously improve educational quality (quality improvement); account for the educational quality to official organizations (accountability); recognize universities that achieve the training objectives (recognition); and assist students and educational clients to obtain basic information for selecting universities (transparency) (ibid, 2009: 11-12). In spite of their existing problems, these sets of standards for accreditation are considered an innovation in the Vietnam HE system. They can, to some extent, raise

the quality of teaching and learning in the long run. Nguyen *et al.* (2009: 12) claimed that the establishment of Vietnam accreditation system “*indicates that Vietnam has started down a path begun by other countries, especially the US some decades ago*”. Some concerns are also presented towards the impacts of quality assurance and accreditation on teaching and learning. There are still not many research studies until now to give confirmation that Vietnamese HE is moving towards the right direction. There should also be more established strategies and mechanism to simultaneously improve quality in HE teaching and learning (ibid).

Conclusion

Under the influence of the expectation of Vietnam society, the booming number of private and foreign HE institutions, funding from foreign donors, primary processes of teaching and learning are changing positively. Vietnam starts on the very early path of credit-based system, quality assurance and accreditation towards American models with the hope of raising the HE quality. Many institutions also focus on their innovation and improvement of curricula, teaching methodologies and facilities. Although Vietnam HE still face numerous challenges, the Vietnamese hope that their HE system can be well-developed in the near future.

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