

**CHANGING CHALK AND TALK:  
THE REFORM OF TEACHING METHODS IN  
VIETNAMESE HIGHER EDUCATION**

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SIT Study Abroad  
Vietnam: Culture and Development  
Independent Study Project Paper  
Spring 2009

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## **ABSTRACT**

Since the outset of the Doi Moi reforms in the late 1980s, the government of Vietnam has vocally recognized the need to reform the broken system of higher education. The Ministry of Education and Training has since embarked on the compilation of a number of policy proposals, education laws, and resolutions to clearly articulate the series of changes that need to occur. Presently Vietnam rests on the edge of a recent history of spectacular economic growth and on the brink of uncertainty in regards to future developments. In order to help sustain economic growth and development, the knowledge base of Vietnam needs to be drastically expanded and universities must better prepare graduates to function and compete in the global workforce. The aim of this research is to examine the current status of higher education reform in Vietnam with particular focus on the renovation of university teaching methods. By observing university classrooms, interviewing persons involved with the reform process both within and outside of university communities, and conducting extensive secondary research, this study hopes to gain perspective into attitudes and opinions about the success and future of higher education reform. Teaching methods are of particular interest to this project, as they constitute a most foundational element of how and what students are taught and subsequently how their capacities to think and reason independently and creatively are shaped. In addition, the purpose and potential of higher education reform is examined in the context of national socio-economic development in terms of the role universities can play in promoting and contributing to Vietnam's economic prowess.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

My ISP period has been a wonderful academic and personal growth experience made possible by a number of individuals. First and foremost I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to Duong Van Thang and Tran Thi Nguyen Thuy for their unwavering support of our individual research projects and of the safety, security, and happiness of our group as a whole. Beyond ISP, this semester has been so incredibly rewarding and enriching as a direct result of their hard work. I would also like to thank the staff of the department of economics and rural development at the Hanoi University of Agriculture. The team assembled to help myself and two other students with our ISPs provided me with a level of dedication and guidance that enriched my research to a great degree. I am so thankful for the kindness and academic support willingly given by this department and I hope that future SIT students can benefit from the resources of this institution.

I would further like to thank all of the interviewees that agreed to speak and discuss with me my research topic. Their honesty and candid assessments of the current situation of higher education reform in Vietnam contributed to my research a credible degree of accuracy and relevancy. Thanks are extended also to the professors who allowed me to observe their classes at Hanoi University and at the Hanoi University of Agriculture. These experiences were very telling and I am grateful for the openness and cooperation of the professors. Finally, I would like to thank all of the students I have met and interviewed in Vietnam. You have taught me so very much both about my research topic and about the importance of kindness and friendliness and I wish you all the happiness and success you deserve.

## **I.) INTRODUCTION**

### a.) Higher Education Reform in Vietnam

It is a considerable challenge to discuss virtually any issue related to contemporary Vietnamese society without incorporating mention of the totalizing economic reforms that were introduced in 1986 and are collectively known as *Doi Moi*, or “renovation”. Indeed the topic of higher education and the reform of the university system in Vietnam is no exception to this coupling. Higher education in Vietnam has both been greatly impacted by the country’s economic opening to the rest of the world and is currently facing a crisis in terms of its inability to meet the demands of the burgeoning economy. As early as 1991, the government, through the channel of the 7<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, publicly acknowledged the importance of reforming the higher education system to match the needs of the economic changes that were beginning to impact Vietnam: “With sciences and technology, education in general and higher education in particular, is considered as the first national priority policy, as the driving force and the basic condition in ensuring the realization of the socio-economic objects, and of building and defending the Fatherland” (Sloper and Le 67). Such rhetoric demonstrates an advanced understanding by the government of Vietnam of the inextricable importance of higher education to social and economic development. To date, similar calls to recognize higher education reform as a pressing national concern continue to sound throughout the country. While the government has taken some preliminary steps to address the myriad issues and problems linked to higher education reform, the pace of their efforts and the sum of their current achievements falls short of what is desperately needed to propel Vietnamese universities to a suitable level to satisfy the country’s swift development.

The education system of Vietnam has a somewhat tumultuous history due to the many external influences that have impacted teaching and learning philosophies throughout the country. The 20<sup>th</sup> century saw a particularly varied period of educational styles in Vietnam due to the different, but overlapping impacts of the French, Soviet, and American systems, which paralleled the political influences that each of these countries exerted in Vietnam (Luu 4). In addition to the difficulty of coping with diverse educational styles, Vietnam also faced the great challenge in 1975 of standardizing the education systems of the north and the south when the country was reunified after the Vietnam-American War. During the wartime period from 1954-1975 Northern Vietnam was predominantly influenced by the Soviet model, which took a very top-down, centralized approach. In terms of higher education, the Soviet influence is visible in the prevalence of mono-disciplinary universities that focus on specialization in one particular discipline (Interview, Le Quang Minh). Higher education in Southern Vietnam bears more resemblance to the French system of education, although it should be noted that this system also played an important role in the development of higher education in Northern Vietnam. The French system is based on a program of general studies in the first year of university and then a deep specialization in a certain faculty for the remainder of undergraduate studies and into post-graduate pursuits. When the country was reunified in 1975, Soviet style higher education was spread throughout the country. Thus while characteristics of universities in Vietnam depend to an extent on geography and associated political influences of the region, mono-disciplinary institutions exist throughout the country as do universities based on the French style (Ibid.).

Today higher education in Vietnam is generally moving away from the Soviet style that has long been the paradigm for universities towards the more liberalized French system. There are also a relatively small number of universities that have adopted characteristics of the American higher education system, but these are found mostly in urban areas and more so in the private sector of higher education (Ibid.). Although certain progressive and forward thinking university administrators and government officials have made efforts in recent years to collaborate with American institutions, the legacy of the Soviet and French university systems are considerably difficult to undercut. The majority of senior professors trained abroad received their education in the Soviet Union or Europe, not in the United States. They are habituated to focus on the teaching of theoretical knowledge, a remnant of both the Soviet and French systems. Additionally, the institutions themselves are hardly conducive to the introduction of American style higher education. Today in Vietnam there are two national universities in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City that enjoy relative autonomy from government control, three regional universities (Hue University, Danang University, and Thai Nguyen University), over thirty private institutions of higher learning, and over one hundred mono-disciplinary universities throughout the country. In recent years leaders of Vietnamese higher education have certainly come to the realization that the success of their university systems depends on the adoption of reforms based on Western models. This change is seen as necessary to enhance the capacities of Vietnamese universities to better direct their objectives to benefit the development patterns of the country.

## b.) Higher Education and Development

The current trends of globalization and international economic integration have brought about a concomitant transformation of the global labor force and the skills required to succeed in this arena. As Lee Solider notes, “the knowledge base of the world has greatly expanded and increasingly more complex skills and competencies are needed to be competitive in the global marketplace.” The development of these new skills and capacities occurs in institutions of higher education, given that universities have the resources to effectively prepare citizens to compete in and contribute to modern socio-economic conditions. Unfortunately, many if not most universities in the developing world fail to meet these responsibilities: “In much of the developing world, higher education delivery is woefully unsuited to the demands of globalization. Existing systems satisfy neither the requirements of the global labor market nor domestic social and economic needs” (Bloom 142). Universities, like governments and markets, are also required to adapt and remodel their infrastructures and objectives to function more efficiently and purposefully in the modern era of globalization. As David Bloom purports, “Higher education is essential to promoting sustainable human development and economic growth. It is no longer a luxury that only rich countries can afford, but an absolute necessity for all countries, and especially for poor ones” (140). Higher education is a necessary and implicit component of development that requires deep consideration from developing nations.

The modern world experiences a constant flow and exchange of ideas, information, and creativity. Knowledge has come to be seen as a commodity that societies as a whole strive to attain, retain, and improve. The comparative advantages of



nations are increasingly focused on the application of knowledge in technological and scientific pursuits and less on the availability of natural resources (Luu 2). The World Bank extensively uses the term “knowledge societies” in its reporting on tertiary education systems around the globe. A 2002 report defines a knowledge society “as one that puts a premium on solving problems and adding value through the analysis, adaptation and evaluation of existing knowledge, and its innovative application to unfamiliar problems” (1). Such societies are innovative, leaders in creative thinking, and always looking for the chance to build on existing foundations of knowledge and expand the learning process in terms of both depth and breadth. Bloom agrees that the societal quest for knowledge has become a sort of status marker: “Knowledge has become an increasingly important determinant of wealth of nations, and access to knowledge, together with the ability to disseminate it, has become a major source of competitive advantage” (140). Thus knowledge today is connected with notions of competition and leadership and with the idea that not just individuals, but societies as a whole can possess and advance bodies of knowledge.

This abstract concept of knowledge as a societal good can be better defined and understood in the context of the university. Institutions of higher education are the primary locales for the acquisition and development of societal knowledge: “In a fast-changing world, higher education institutions must teach their students not only what is known now, but also how to keep their knowledge up to date. Flexibility and a grasp of new knowledge-gathering technologies are vital, but sadly lacking in most of the developing world” (Bloom 142-3). University staff, including professors, administrators, researchers, and boards of directors are largely responsible for not only the preservation

of knowledge and its transmission to students, but also for remaining on the cutting edge of knowledge development. The developing world is thus faced with a serious issue: as these countries continue to develop and work towards global economic integration, market liberalization and better standards of living for their people, their trajectories are hampered by the poor quality of higher education. Certain points of view, however, recognize that the shortcomings of higher education in the developing world may be the result of larger structural imbalances in the global marketplace: “Drawing on dependency theories, they argue that educational opportunities in developing countries are severely constrained by structural inequalities in the global economy and these countries’ dependence on multinational corporations and international organizations” (Buchmann and Hannum 81).

Regardless of whether contemporary government policies or socio-economic conditions left over from modern historical events are to blame for the substandard quality of higher education in the developing world, the present challenge is to modify and where necessary completely overhaul systems of higher education to play a role in development. Higher education institutions are not simply responsible for churning out trained members of the workforce; they also contribute to the very foundations of human and socio-economic development for society as a whole. The expansion and maturation of knowledge capabilities and research capacities have the potential to impact efficient agricultural production and distribution, the use of biotechnology to provide enough food for growing populations, scientific and technological capabilities to positively affect life expectancy, sanitation, healthcare, and the effects of climate change (Knowledge Societies). Thus the betterment of higher education is the concern of not only a few select

representatives in the Ministry of Education, but indeed of the entire country. Universities play a multifaceted role in developing societies with the potential to improve standards of living for all citizens through their research innovations and development of human capital.

### c.) Education and Development in Vietnam

Vietnam is no exception to the above discussion of the vitally important role of higher education in developing countries. In fact Vietnam is currently posited in a particularly interesting position: the country has experienced impressive economic growth for over a decade and now the strain of its undereducated population is being felt. As companies continue to invest in Vietnam and open plants and factories throughout the country, Vietnamese workers must be trained and prepared for these new employment opportunities or the jobs will be diverted to foreign workers. In 2006 the world's largest semiconductor manufacturer, Intel, announced it was tripling its investment in its Vietnamese projects to \$1 billion. The company was looking to hire hundreds of new engineers to help in the expansion and over 2,000 Vietnamese potentials were interviewed. From this pool, however, less than forty of the Vietnamese engineers were found to be qualified for the positions and the remainder of the engineers had to be brought in from abroad (Interview, Le Quang Minh). This example illustrates how immediate the need is for higher education reform in Vietnam. If the country does not make swift efforts to heighten the competitiveness of its workers and general knowledge base, it will surely lose out on key opportunities to further its development at such stellar rates (Pham 149).

The obstacles standing in the path of totalizing and successful higher education reform are numerous and will be discussed in depth later on. A preliminary point of encouragement, however, is the fact that the government and university administrations throughout the country have publicly and repeatedly acknowledged both the systematic shortcomings of Vietnamese higher education and the fact that higher education is part and parcel of Vietnam's future development. Although the typical explanation for the lack of action to address these concerns is that such intensive and foundational change takes time, time is not particularly a luxury that Vietnam has to spare in this regard. Government Resolution 14 "On Substantial and Comprehensive Renewal of Vietnam's Tertiary Education in the 2006-2020 Period" adopted in November 2005 smartly articulates the many areas of concern related to Vietnam's university system and introductory visions as to how these issues can be corrected. The success of this resolution is largely limited to its rhetoric, however, and despite the document's title, there is little realistic understanding of the actual timeline of the reforms. Reforming higher education in Vietnam will undoubtedly be a difficult and painstaking process as educational traditions are deeply rooted in history and culture; but if Vietnam is to continue to embrace with such fervor economic liberalization and globalization, considerable bravery on the part of the MOET and university leaders to pursue the modernization of Vietnamese universities will be utterly necessary.

#### d.) Presentation of Research Question

This research is interested in examining the current trends of higher education reform in Vietnam and evaluating the present implementation and success of these

policies. The government recognized the need for reform over two decades ago and it is important and necessary to investigate the current status of these reforms in the context of Vietnam's continuing development. Specific attention is to be paid to the issue of teaching methods currently used in Vietnamese universities. It is widely documented that much of the learning that occurs in Vietnamese universities is done by rote memorization, or "chalk and talk", and that students are not typically required to employ analytical skills and creative thinking. An attempt will be made to examine the effectiveness of these teaching methods and determine if and how students, university staff, and the government see reform of these methods as necessary and more importantly feasible. Finally, the topic of higher education reform in Vietnam will be analyzed in the context of the country's overall development. The goals and means of Vietnam's development are tightly linked with the successful reform of its higher education system. If the people of Vietnam are to optimally reap the benefits of the country's economic growth and high levels of investment, it is crucial that universities are capable of preparing them to compete in the global workforce.

The topic of higher education reform not only in the case of Vietnam, but virtually in all parts of the developing world, is most contemporary and pressing. International development has both achieved great successes and suffered grave failures, which often result from poor planning and misunderstandings of structural pre-requisites for successful and sustainable growth. Higher education is one such piece of the larger development puzzle that in Vietnam was unwisely neglected at the outset of the economic reforms. Today, even though some progress has been made in reforming higher education in Vietnam, it still lags egregiously behind the economic transformations due

to its late start relative to Doi Moi as well as the painstakingly slow process of institutional reform (Interview, Le Quang Minh). Thus it is crucial that immediate and progressive attention is paid to the topic of higher education reforms in Vietnam, if for no other purpose than to articulate the urgency of the matter. The government and its policy makers are well aware of the deep crisis that higher education is posited in, but their response is rather ineffective. The process of overhauling the university system of an entire nation is of course no easy task, but after more than fifteen years of rhetoric, the time for action is nigh.

The specific issue of teaching methods rests at the foundation of higher education. If universities are to prepare students to think, reason, and compete effectively in the workforce, it is the means of teaching and learning that ultimately determine success in this area. The simple introduction of new methods of instruction is by no means a sufficient solution to this problem; complexly linked to the reform of teaching methods is a number of additional issues including curricula revisions, teacher salaries and workloads, and the technological, information, and research capacities of universities. Thus before teaching method reforms can be successfully implemented, a number of key prerequisite conditions must be established to ensure a conducive environment for the new methodologies. Nevertheless, it is imperative that government reforms and individual universities pay much more attention to the modernization of teaching styles, the training and re-training of current teaching staff, and the recruitment of professors who have been trained abroad and can contribute to the diversification of teaching methods. Additionally, the introduction of new teaching methods and higher education reforms in general should be done with consideration to the specificities of Vietnam's

learning culture: “educational changes have to be reflective of the society served and the existing socioeconomic and political context that prevails” (Solider). It is my hope to gain a much increased understanding of the perception of university teaching methods in Vietnam today and what measures are seen as necessary to renovate teaching styles to more effectively train and develop the capacities of students.

## **II.) BACKGROUND**

### **a.) Priorities of Higher Education Reform**

Since 2005 when the Higher Education Reform Agenda was produced by the MOET, system wide changes instituted by the government have not been the propellers of higher education reform. Instead, individual universities and administrative leaders have introduced certain changes, such as renovated teaching methods, the credit system, and partnerships with foreign institutions. Thus far, university leadership has proven to be the most proactive factor in reforming universities and in adapting university objectives to meet local contexts and economic needs (Tran Ngoc Ca 30). While these examples demonstrate impressive innovation and initiative on the part of individual institutions, the fact is that only a very small margin of universities have undergone reforms and the majority of the higher education system remains locked in the ineffective relics of Soviet style instruction and learning. The MOET has produced an impressive set of goals and policy suggestions, but to date its actions to implement these reforms have been limited to discussion and debate.

The issue of higher education reform is multifaceted and intertwines myriad concerns about the renovation of institutions and personnel. Government Resolution 14 (see Appendix 1) of 2005 states that the overarching goal of higher education reform is

“to closely combine the [renewal] of tertiary education with socio-economic development strategy, consolidation of defense and security, the country’s demand for high-level human resource and the scientific and technological development trend.” The government clearly recognizes that higher education plays a complex and intricate role in society and to utilize its full potential universities must reform on a number of different, interconnected levels. Resolution 14 defines seven main areas of concern that reforms should address: planning and networking among higher education institutions, change in teaching methods and learning processes, improvement in training and evaluation of professors and administrators, focus on scientific and technological capabilities of universities, finance, management, and international cooperation and integration. The specificities of these key points will now be examined in greater detail with teaching methods and the training of lecturers addressed separately in the following section as the focus of this research.

Vietnam suffers from a very disjointed system of higher education institutions. The mono-disciplinary nature of many universities renders cooperation and exchanges between institutions of differing foci difficult and somewhat inutile, because students are forced to study so strictly within the confines of one faculty. Additionally, there is a huge quality gap between universities that makes efforts at standardization and student and resource exchanges somewhat obsolete (Interview, Le Quang Minh). Tran, Lam and Sloper note that, “the single most critical issue facing higher education derives from the number and size of institutions and their lack of integration at the system level. Based on the earlier decision to follow the Eastern bloc model...many colleges and universities are too small, academically dispersed, and unarticulated to make the most efficient use of



resources” (77). While networking and cooperation between universities remains difficult, coordination among the colleges within single universities is also an issue of concern. There are a number of universities in Vietnam that were formed from the merger of several smaller mono-disciplinary institutions. These mergers often occurred haphazardly, however, and simply with a view to attain the “modern” façade of a multidisciplinary university. The result is thus in many cases that these institutions are only multidisciplinary in name and the individual colleges continue to function largely independent of one another.

The scientific and technological capabilities of a university are most certainly markers of prestige in the world today. The establishment and advancement of such facilities benefit universities and societies in general in a number of ways. Scientific and technological equipment benefits students first and foremost by allowing them hands on experience and active learning opportunities. Certain technologies, such as computer and Internet access, have the potential to enhance learning and benefit students across all disciplines. Other, more advanced technology such as science labs, provide practical experience and career preparation for students studying in the fields of science and technology. University facilities for science and technology also provide valuable research opportunities for graduate and post-graduate students and faculty. As previously mentioned, universities can play a central role in providing scientific and technological innovations that can better societal standards of living and contribute to human and economic factors of development. In Vietnam, however, universities largely lack the funding to make such improvement to their facilities. Tran Ngoc Ca points out that, “In terms of infrastructure and other teaching and R&D facilities, although there is some

investment for upgrading lately, this tends to be restricted to the largest universities. Many universities still use equipment and facilities in place since the mid-1960s or 1970s” (11). Even when facilities such as computer labs or scientific equipment are available, the volume of students is often so great that they are not permitted sufficient access (Interview, Nguyen Cong Thiep). Additionally, the research skills of professors in Vietnam are generally quite limited and they are thus unable to make the best use of the minimal resources as their disposal (Ibid.).

The issue of finance is most central and fundamental to the problems associated with higher education and its reform process in Vietnam. University budgets at present are closely monitored and controlled by the MOET and although Resolution 14 vows to “create conditions for tertiary education institutions to enjoy a greater autonomy in revenues-expenditures”, these reforms have not been widely implemented. Although universities require greater autonomy and control over their own budgets and revenues, government subsidies for universities are still necessary to support higher education activities. Vietnam, however, spends a relatively lower proportion of its government budget on higher education compared to other countries in the Southeast Asian region (Tran, Lam & Sloper 67). Due to the aforementioned problem of substandard research and technological capabilities, universities generally have not yet been able to extend their revenue sources to the fields of technology transfer and research and training contracts. Another solution for the financial constraints of universities that is often suggested is to raise student tuition fees, which at present are the largest contributor to university revenues. This proposition, however, has resulted in intense public outcry in recent years. Dr. Le Dong Phuong explained that every year the same proposal is brought

before the National Assembly to raise university tuition fees and every year it is denied. Dr. Le noted that Vietnam is an international leader in one aspect of higher education: producing graduates as the lowest cost possible. It is a frustrating paradox in that there is widespread, public distress over the low quality of higher education in Vietnam, but individuals are unwilling and unable to take on a heightened financial responsibility to contribute to university development. Jeffrey Waite, the lead education specialist at the World Bank offices in Hanoi, emphasized, however, that if raising tuition fees is to be considered a viable solution, it must be regarded in conjunction with measures to improve student financial assistance programs.

Linkages between universities and industry are also a popular, contemporary suggestion for bettering the financial situation of higher education (Solider). The Hanoi University of Agriculture has embarked in recent years on such a path by creating contracts between business and certain faculties of the university that stipulate that the company will pay for a student's tuition if the student then agrees to work for the company after graduation (Interview, Quynh). Such programs have far reaching potential, but also depend heavily on the ability of universities to effectively prepare students for the demands of the workforce. Vice president Le Quang Minh of the National University of Ho Chi Minh City points to four short-term solutions to address the budget shortage. He suggests increasing student admissions, raising tuition fees, building more linkages to industry, and putting greater pressure on the government for support. All of these options most certainly have their consequences, however, but without sacrifice in some area the situation will surely remain stagnant (Interview, Le Quang Minh). A final point related to university budgets and finance is the paradox of staff salaries. Universities spend more of

their budget on staff salaries than on any other single item. Despite this, teaching faculty in Vietnam hardly make enough money to live comfortably and are often forced to work multiple jobs apart from their university employment to raise their income to a suitable level. Until university professors and lecturers in Vietnam are paid a decent salary that allows them to focus wholly on their teaching and research obligations, institutions of higher education will face considerable difficulties building solid reputations.

Management of universities is a rather contested issue in the realm of higher education reform in Vietnam because despite the MOET's statements that it aims to grant greater autonomy to universities, it still retains primary control. Hayden and Lam note that to date only the two national universities of Vietnam have been granted any measure of institutional autonomy, while the rest of the country's public universities are directed and controlled by the MOET. Dr. Le Dong Phuong proclaimed that, "we need to liberate higher education in Vietnam" from government control. Ultimately, the MOET is intellectually and rationally aware that it cannot retain centralized control of the higher education system are large-scale reforms to succeed (Interview, Waite). The problem, however, is that asking government officials to give up power, no matter how accurate their understanding of the situational reality, is a near impossible endeavor. Due to the majority of university budgets originating in government funding, universities are under the direct control of the MOET and required to gain permission from the Ministry for virtually all of their activities (Interview, Le Dong Phuong). Institutional autonomy for universities by no means aims to exclude the MOET from university undertakings, but the role of the Ministry needs to be largely re-worked to that of a strategist, quality inspector, and regulator on a macro level. A World Bank report wisely notes that,

“Academic freedom can make a significant contribution to promoting the quality of both institutions and the system as a whole, but it needs to be understood and respected, both within institutions and by the bodies to which they are accountable” (Peril and Promise 60). This principle extends beyond the realm of academic freedom to other areas of university life such as financial oversight, the hiring of faculty and staff, and admissions requirements. Both universities and the MOET need to reach mutually agreeable terms of autonomy for the universities and the oversight role of the Ministry.

The final objective of Resolution 14 is that of international cooperation with foreign institutions of academia and research. Since the opening of the Vietnamese economy and society in the 1990s, a number of foreign programs for higher education have been established throughout the country and have continued to attract larger volumes of students each year. In addition, the number of Vietnamese studying abroad has steadily increased with the total number today estimated around 30,000 (Ashwill). Exchanges and linkages with foreign programs must be expanded, however, to broaden the opportunities available for students and lecturers at Vietnamese universities, whether public or private. Foreign universities in Vietnam and study abroad opportunities typically provide quality educational experiences, but only to the select few who can afford such programs. Vietnamese universities need to seek out partnerships with foreign institutions and help their students and faculty gain access to foreign language training, particularly in English. University students in Vietnam have quite varied levels of English proficiency. Many university students have studied English for upwards of five years, but have virtually never practiced the language orally. English instruction needs to be renovated to give students and faculty the practical skills needed to function in the

global workforce. Such results could be achieved in a number of ways including English language course offerings and exchanges with English speaking universities. In specific regard to teaching methods, effective reform can be achieved in this area through the expertise brought back to Vietnam by teaching faculty who have studied abroad (Interview, Le Dong Phuong).

#### b.) Teaching Methods

As the focus of this research is on the teaching methods used in Vietnamese universities and the current efforts to reform styles of instruction, more detailed attention will now be paid to how this issue fits into the overall agenda of higher education reform in Vietnam. It is the opinion of this research that effective teaching methods constitute not only the basis for a successful system of higher education, but also for the positive development of society. Teaching methods involve both the ways in which professors and lecturers convey information to their students and also to the skills that students acquire from the learning process. It has become globally accepted that the dynamics of the globalized workforce demand of employees a creative and flexible skill set that allows them to think critically and respond effectively to spontaneous changes in the work environment. The World Bank has described these modern conditions quite accurately:

The learning process now needs to be increasingly based on the capacity to find and access knowledge and to apply it in problem solving. Learning to learn, learning to transform information into new knowledge, and learning to translate new knowledge into applications becomes more important than memorizing specific information...The new competencies that employers value in the knowledge economy have to do with oral and written communications, teamwork,

peer teaching, creativity, envisioning skills, resourcefulness, and the ability to adjust to change (Knowledge Societies 29-30).

The skills required for successful and competitive employment are clearly acquired through education, most importantly through the formative years at university when preparation for career placement takes place.

Teaching methods in Vietnam today are largely outdated in light of contemporary workplace dynamics. Recent figures show that less than 20% of university graduates enter the workforce in the field they have been trained in, causing a substantial waste of time and money on the part of students, universities and employers (Pham 150). The style of teaching across educational levels in Vietnam has virtually always been dominated by rote learning, that is memorization and reproduction of information provided in lecture format. For centuries Vietnamese education has been rooted in the Confucian tradition, similar to a number of other East Asian and Southeast Asian societies. Confucian ethics emphasize the supreme knowledge of the teacher and the duty of the student to be passive, obedient and to learn by heart the information provided by the professor (Interview, Nguyen Cong Thiep). In addition to Confucian influences, which continue to exert underlying albeit strong tides in Vietnamese society and education, the periods of French and Soviet influence also impacted teaching styles. Both systems similarly depend primarily on teaching by lecture and rote memorization. Students are expected to sit in lecture and take notes on what the professor says and then reproduce the information typically verbatim in a final exam that counts overwhelmingly as the sole means of evaluation for the course. Seeing as the majority of universities in Vietnam today are still

mono-disciplinary and continue to follow the Soviet model, rote teaching and learning are also the most common means of instruction.

It is perfectly clear to both insiders and outsiders of the higher education system in Vietnam as to why these teaching methods are ineffective and dangerous to the future development of human capital. Students lack motivation, encouragement, and the chance and challenge to think independently and critically and formulate their own opinions and thoughts. Although the MOET has crafted a clear vision as to why and in what ways teaching styles need to be reformed, no systematic changes have been introduced. Certain universities and individual professors have taken on the initiative to renovate styles of teaching, but other less progressive institutions do not face any pressure to modernize in this area. Even in the universities that have chosen to forge ahead with the reform of teaching methods, it is largely done so on a voluntary basis. Indeed it may be the case that university leaders can have a more direct and timely influence on the “institutional culture” as a whole as opposed to changes introduced from the government level (Luu 5). In general young professors and those who have been trained abroad are most receptive to introducing interactive teaching styles, using technology in the classroom, and promoting student involvement and participation. Senior lecturers and those equipped with outdated knowledge and skills, however, are much less willing to make the change. Often times even when lecturers are able and willing to use technology in the classroom, it is more so for their own convenience than out of concern for the quality of the teaching methods (Interview, Le Dong Phuong).

The students themselves are also an obstacle to the success of new teaching methods in universities, yet largely by no fault of their own. Vietnamese students are



typically described as passive, shy and unwilling to ask questions or speak up in class. This is widely accurate, although one can hardly blame students for such a demeanor when it is what has been expected of them all their lives. Rote teaching does not only dominate the university system in Vietnam, but is the means by which students are taught from a very young age. Additionally, as mentioned Confucian ethics dominate the mindsets of both students and professors in Vietnam and thus students are expected to accept the knowledge provided by the instructor as truth. The contemporary problem with this situation is that the knowledge of many professors is very outdated and irrelevant (Interview, Le Dong Phuong). It is important that university professors try and activate their students to think critically and develop analytical skills, but in Vietnam the difficulty of this task is much heightened by the fact that for many students university is the first situation in which they would be asked to think in such ways. Students around the world are required to upgrade and sophisticate their learning and thinking styles when they enter university, but in many cases, they already have a background in independent study, research, critical thinking, and analytical information processing.

The reform of teaching methods is a complex process that requires commitment and flexibility from professors, students, and administrators. Requiring professors to use PowerPoint in class or to design a lesson around computer research is far from effective. Just as students need time to adapt to new styles of learning and to develop the skills to study actively and independently, professors also need the appropriate training and background in new teaching methods, their applications, and how to achieve the desired results of motivating and challenging students. Approximately half of the lecturers teaching in Vietnam today have not undergone any type of teacher training course

(Interview, Le Dong Phuong). Universities often waive the requirement of a teaching training certificate for young lecturers because the demand for university teaching staff is so high. Thus not only do university lecturers face difficulties in learning about and utilizing new teaching methods, many in the profession have never received any measure of training about teaching. While some universities have been successful in introducing new teaching methods, other efforts to improve the teaching capacities of professors have been misguided. The MOET in recent years has sent groups of professors and university administrators to Japan for one-week trainings about teaching methods. This program is seriously flawed in that the education system in Japan is as broken if not more so than that of Vietnam and the span of one week is entirely too short for any effective results to be achieved (Interview, Le Quang Minh).

While it is admirable that many universities and professors in Vietnam have decided not to wait for systematic changes in teaching methods and instead introduce new teaching methods at their own, quicker pace, it is difficult to give much credence to the success and sustainability of these reforms. There are a number of institutional conditions that are required before modern teaching methods can be successfully implemented. As discussed, universities still widely lack the physical facilities and technological capabilities that are required for practical experience in many academic disciplines. Additionally, students need to enter university with an idea of what it means to be an active learner and the ability to conduct their studies and research independently. These skills can be furthered in university, but it quite a challenge to create them from scratch in a four year period. Finally, professors in Vietnam need the motivation to reform their teaching styles for the benefit of their students and their societies. Until

professors make a decent living that allows them to completely focus on their primary profession of teaching and until they are provided with the adequate training and background of how to implement modern teaching methods, it is hard to expect lasting results.

### **III.) RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The research that constitutes this project was quite evenly divided between a thorough overview and analysis of secondary sources and primary field research. As the sources list demonstrates, a variety of secondary sources were utilized to gain a holistic understanding of a number of main themes. The key areas of interest are: current trends in higher education reform in Vietnam, higher education as an agent of development, and the effectiveness of teaching methods used in Vietnamese universities. Information was obtained from academic journals accessed through online databases, books and development reports from libraries in Hanoi (notably the UNDP library and the Vietnam Development Information Center), and a variety of government documents, conference reports, and presentations used at academic and intergovernmental conferences which were provided by interviewees. By studying a wide range of secondary documents, I was able to gain perspective into this topic from sources working both inside and outside of the higher education reform process in Vietnam as well as from both Vietnamese and foreign points of view.

The scope of the primary research was also directed at gaining a range of perspectives on the issue. This part of my research was divided into two main categories, interviews and classroom observations. The interviews were conducted with former and

current officials of the MOET, persons affiliated with NGOs that work with the issue of higher education reform, university administrators, professors, and students. Prior to beginning the ISP period I had hoped to spend one week studying at and with Hanoi University in the international studies department and one week at the Hanoi University of Agriculture (HUA). I hoped that by spending time and studying at two different universities that focus on quite divergent areas of study, I could look into the question of different teaching methods being used in different disciplines. Also, although one month is a rather restricted time period to conduct a research project, I felt it was important to observe the workings of at least two universities for purposes of comparing and contrasting.

During the ISP period, I was able to spend time at both universities, although not in the full capacity that I had expected. I had hoped to observe four classes in total: two classes at each university, one class taught in English at each university and one class taught in Vietnamese at each institution, all for students in the third year, and I had hoped to visit each of the four classes twice. I was only able to observe three classes, one in English at each of the two universities and one in Vietnamese at HUA. I observed classes of first year students, second year students and third year students and I was able to visit each class once. In the end I do not think these shortcomings greatly impeded by research and results, but the “controls” that I tried to establish were damaged.

While at HUA I observed a first year class taught in English by a Vietnamese professor. It was a course titled “Calculus and its Applications”. I also observed a class in the science and technology department for second year students, which was taught in Vietnamese. At HUA I met with a group of three students for a formal interview who

studied in the faculties of biotechnology, business and accounting, and economics and rural development, and I was also able to acquire information informally through the time I spent with other HUA students while staying on the campus. Additionally I was able to interview the Vice-Rector of HUA (also a professor of plant biotechnology), a young lecturer of the economics and rural development department, the deputy head of the administration office, the deputy director of the academic affairs office who is also a lecturer of veterinary microbiology, and a professor in the department of entomology. I was glad to both observe classes and conduct interviews with students and faculty that represented a variety of departments to gain a somewhat comprehensive understanding of the opinions about higher education reform in the university as a whole.

At Hanoi University I was able to observe a class in the international studies department as I was connected with the faculty of this department prior to the start of ISP. I observed a class taught in English by an American professor on the subject of American History and Culture. Unfortunately the connection I had established with the Dean of the international studies department before the ISP period fell through once I began my research as she left the university suddenly. Thus I was forced to rely on my limited connection with the students of this department and with one professor I had been introduced to. My research at Hanoi University was thus much less extensive and I was only able to interview one professor whose class I observed.

I also had the opportunity to interview employees of the MOET and two persons who work in the non-governmental sector. In Ho Chi Minh City I had the opportunity to meet with Dr. Le Quang Minh, vice president of Vietnam National University- Ho Chi Minh City. Dr. Minh is also a member of the task force for higher education reform

headed by the Minister of education and training. In Hanoi I was able to interview Dr. Le Viet Khuyen of the Vietnamese Association of Non-Public Higher Education Institutions and Dr. Lam Quang Thiep, the former director of higher education at the MOET. I also met with Dr. Le Dong Phuong of the Center for Higher and Vocational Education of the Vietnam Institute for Education Sciences. Finally, I was able to make contact with two representatives of NGOs, Mr. Jeffrey Waite of the World Bank and Dr. Pham Thi Ly, the director of the Center for International Education and Culture Exchange and Research (CIECER). I interviewed Dr. Ly via email as her office is located in Ho Chi Minh City and I met with Mr. Waite in person for a formal interview in Hanoi.

The goals of the classroom observations conducted at HUA and Hanoi University were multifold. Firstly, I wanted to experience the setting of a typical university classroom in Vietnam. I wanted to perceive student behavior and attitudes and gauge levels of enthusiasm, attentiveness and participation. Most importantly I wanted to witness first hand the teaching methods used in Vietnamese universities. Of course I had access to a limited sample of teaching methods, but I think it was ultimately very valuable to observe professors in their element and to study through observation the relationship between professors and their students. By attending three classes being taught about three different topics, I also was looking to determine, if any, the difference in teaching methods used by professors of varying disciplines and use it as a basis for comparison.

During the interviews I used a series of questions to help guide the discussions and draw on the three key themes that I outlined at the beginning of this section (see Appendix 2). For the interviews with students, I largely focused on their personal

experiences at university and their knowledge of any efforts to change or reform the higher education system. I asked questions about their favorite professors, their favorite classes, the methods of teaching they felt were best suited to their learning styles and the skills they believe they have acquired at the university level. I wanted to gain a general understanding of their workload and typical school routine and the level of agency and ownership they felt they exercised in their education. The questions used in the interviews with professors were focused on teaching methods. I asked about their preferred styles of teaching, how the majority of professors conducted their classes, what efforts were being made by the university or the government to change teaching methods and what kind of support they as educators received in terms of training and updating their skill sets. The questions for university administrators also discussed teaching methods, but focused more so on the general process and agenda of higher education reform, what measures had been taken by their university and how their institutions viewed the efforts of the government to address this issue. The interviews with MOET employees and NGO representatives focused on two main topics, the current state of higher education reform in Vietnam and the role of higher education in development. The questions for this group of interviewees were designed to gain information about the background of higher education reform, the present obstacles and priorities, and the realistic expectations for implementation and tangible progress.

I am largely satisfied with the outcome of my research and feel as though my methods were appropriately varied to gain a comprehensive and detailed understanding of the three areas of concern: higher education reform in Vietnam, higher education and

socio-economic development, and the modernization of teaching methods in Vietnamese universities.

#### **IV.) FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

##### **a.) Classroom Observations**

The classroom observations I was able to conduct at HUA and Hanoi University comprised a very interesting aspect of my research that allowed me to directly witness the usage and effects of teaching methods in Vietnamese universities. After spending several weeks researching Vietnamese higher education and speaking to a variety of individuals about higher education reform and teaching methods in particular, it was very useful to enter the classroom with a solid knowledge base and to contextualize my observations in my prior research. As mentioned, the three classes I observed spanned three different disciplines, two universities, two languages of instruction and three ages of students (first, second, and third year).

A first and crucial point about the classroom observations is that all three professors employed methods of instruction that were varied, used technology, and did not adhere to the typical conception of rote memorization. At Hanoi University I observed an American History and Culture class taught by an American professor, Douglas Jardine. This class was taught in English to third year students and was part of the curriculum for the international studies department. This class is held once a week for 3.5 hours. The first half of the class is called “lecture” and the second half is referred to as “tutor session”. In the lecture portion of the class, Professor Jardine spoke with his students about the history and causes of the Great Depression. This “lecture” was really more of a discussion in which Professor Jardine would provide and suggest key points



and ideas and then ask questions and encourage students to provide comments about details and other supplementary information. In this class of approximately fifty-five students, at any given time during the 1.5-hour lecture I noticed only one or two students who were not fully engaged in and listening to the discussion and taking notes. Professor Jardine wrote keywords and drew simple diagrams on the blackboard to facilitate the explanation of main concepts. His demeanor was very enthusiastic and encouraging and instead of remaining at the front of the classroom during the lecture, he walked freely throughout the room, making eye contact with all of the students and frequently asking questions to maintain interest and involvement. In the second part of the class, the tutor session, Professor Jardine showed the film The Great Gatsby to provide the class with a visual impression of the Roaring 20s in the United States. During the film the vast majority of students were engaged and interested in the story and also appeared to have a very clear understanding of the plot. When I spoke with Professor Jardine after class, he said he typically uses the tutor session for more interactive learning involving multi-media. This ranges from slide shows, to video clips, to analysis of photographs.

Observing this class was a very eye-opening experience as I think it is very telling of the capacities and drive of students in Vietnam. It must be noted that the international studies department at Hanoi University is a unique program in that it is taught in English, involves a number of foreign faculty and is geared toward progressive and modern styles of teaching. What I found interesting while observing this class, however, is that even though the class was taught in a language that was not the students' mother tongue and for the first twelve years of their education they were likely not exposed to such interactive learning methods, they were largely responsive and proactive. There were

indeed a few students who dominated the answering and posing of questions, but nearly the entire class appeared interested and invested in the subject matter. My time spent at Hanoi University strengthened my belief that even though professors, administrators, and outsiders of the university system complain that Vietnamese students are too passive, it is the rigidity of the system itself that causes such meek behavior and the students, when given the chance, are capable of much more engaged learning and independent thinking.

While at HUA I had the opportunity to observe a class in the department of agrobiology. The class was taught in Vietnamese to second year students by Professor Nguyen Thi Bich Thuy. Before the session began at 7:30 am, the nearly 50 students in the class were very noisy and talkative. As soon as the teacher was spotted in the hallway walking towards the classroom all of the students scrambled for their seats, sat down, and ceased speaking immediately. When Professor Nguyen walked through the threshold, the entire class stood up and remained standing in silence until the professor signaled for them to be seated about fifteen seconds later. Although this initial routine is not indicative of the teaching methods used in the class, it is interesting to note the difference in professor-student formalities between the situation at HUA and that which I observed at Hanoi University.

This class was also divided into two 1.5-hour segments, the first part being a lecture and the second half of the class was referred to as the “student seminar” (Professor Nguyen spoke English superbly and thus was able to explain to me the class proceedings). The class that day was about plant growth regulators and Professor Nguyen used a PowerPoint presentation to explain the function of each chemical, the steps of the chemical processes, and the applications of these processes in nature. The slides,

although quite plain, included many pictures and diagrams that the professor referred to frequently. All of the students also had a copy of the PowerPoint presentation so that they were not required to take notes, but could instead look at the information and pay attention to the lecture. During the first forty-five minutes of the lecture, the majority of the class was attentive to the professor's comments and the presentation slides. As the lecture progressed, however, students began chatting amongst themselves, using their cell phones and reading books unrelated to the class. I was sitting in the back of the class and it became very difficult to hear Professor Nguyen.

This shift in the students' behavior is somewhat understandable as during the 1.5 hours of lecture, not one question was posed to the class. Given that no students offered up questions or comments of their own I am not in a position to speculate as to whether Professor Nguyen finds question asking during lecture to be useful or appropriate; but the students were merely expected to sit quietly and listen and there was no engagement between the professor and the students. Unlike in Professor Jardine's class at Hanoi University, the students of this class were not being encouraged or expected to actively question and engage with the subject. Another aspect of this situation is that Professor Nguyen did not make an attempt to control the students that stopped paying attention or to reduce the noise level in the classroom. Given that they are university students and if they choose not to pay attention it will ultimately harm them come the time for the final examination, I found it interesting that virtually no effort was made to encourage students to listen and focus on the lecture and to more importantly respect the professor when she is speaking.

The second part of this course was reserved for students to give prepared presentations about previously designated topics. The students worked in groups of two or three and prepared presentations approximately 10 minutes long. Three groups of students presented that day and all of their presentations followed the same format. The group of two or three students would sit at the front of the classroom behind the computer that was connected to the projector. One student from each group would read what was written on the PowerPoint slides, all of which were a plain white background with standard black text. After the presentation the professor and the rest of the class had the chance to ask the presenters questions. During this question and answer session, there were a number of students in the “audience” of the class that posed questions to their classmates. Several times the students exchanged remarks and although I did not fully comprehend what exactly they were saying due to the language barrier, it did appear as though they were having a dialogue about the subject matter. I found this portion of the class interesting for a number of reasons. Firstly, I think it demonstrates significant progressive thinking on the part of Professor Nguyen to require her students to work in teams, use technology in an academic setting, and self-prepare a project and be able to subsequently defend it in front of the class. Additionally, watching this process led me to ponder how I would have conducted the assignment differently. Since primary school, I have been encouraged to make the appearance of my schoolwork unique and eye-catching. Also, from a young age, I have been taught about public speaking and how to effectively present in front of and engage a group of people. It struck me that in Vietnam students are likely not required to take public speaking courses that help them to develop these skills. Thus while it is a step in the right direction that students are asked to give

such presentations, they are lacking a crucial foundation that renders the entire process more stimulating.

The third and final class I observed was a calculus class at HUA and was part of the curriculum for the faculty of business and accounting. This course was taught in English to first year students by a Professor Kim Anh. Professor Kim received the entirety of her training in Vietnam and except for a four-day trip to Malaysia, has never left the country. She spoke English very well, but it was clear from the sentiments she expressed to me that she is unconfident in her English skills and believes that her capacity can only be improved by going abroad. Unlike the agro-biology class I observed at HUA, the atmosphere in this class was much less formal. When the professor entered the room the students continued talking among themselves as she took her place at the front of the class. As professor Kim set up the computer and projector before beginning the class, a student in the class, Chi, explained to me that PowerPoint is typically not used in this class. Chi said that the students told professor Kim that they prefer to not use PowerPoint because it makes the material difficult to follow and to process quickly enough. Usually, according to Chi, professor Kim just uses the blackboard and is very lively and dynamic. When there are visitors to the class, however, as I was that day, professor Kim always uses technology and is more subdued. Chi also mentioned that professor Kim told the class to tell anyone who asks that PowerPoint is used in every class because she has been asked by the administration to use technology in the classroom. I found this information slightly disheartening as I did not want professor Kim to alter the class proceedings due to my attendance and because a professor should be

allowed to use whatever teaching methods best facilitate her students' learning and comprehension.

During the class, however, professor Kim also used the board to write formulas and provide sample equations. The PowerPoint slides were predominantly used to display word problems for the class to solve. For each problem, professor Kim would call on a student in the class (there were approximately 60 students in total) to come to the board and solve the problem. When the selected student had finished, professor Kim would ask the class if they thought the answer was correct, and then she would go over the equation step-by-step. Professor Kim appeared to be quite young, perhaps in her early 30s, and the rapport between her and the students was rather informal and amiable. She walked around the class while the students were working on solving the equations and many students freely asked her questions. Despite the use of the computer and projector, it seemed as though professor Kim took the time to ensure complete understanding of each problem before continuing to new examples. The students seemed largely engaged and diligently tried to solve each problem, often working together in small groups to derive the answer. While the teaching methods used in this class appeared to be quite effective, I did notice that although professor Kim spoke English during the entire class, students would often ask her questions in Vietnamese. Time and again at HUA professors, students, and administrators expressed to me how crucial English language skills are to a successful education and how lacking their university is in this area. Providing classes taught in English is a positive measure to address this issue, but if students are not required to speak in English and utilize not only their listening, but oral abilities, the

different facets of their English language skill sets will develop unevenly and the overall progression of their capacity will be slowed.

#### b.) Interviews

The results of the primary research provide a very interesting matrix of ideas and opinions for further discussion and analysis. The views expressed during the interviews were far from uniform both among members of the same group (i.e. university professors) and across the different groups interviewed. Several prominent themes did emerge from the discussions, however, which represent some of the contemporary concerns and priorities of higher education reform and specifically university teaching methods among members of the university community and those working on the issue of reform at the government and non-governmental level.

#### *Reform: It's going to take some time*

A most common topic that was discussed with nearly all of the interviewees was the timeframe of the proposed reforms for higher education. Multiple interviewees when asked about their thoughts of a realistic timeframe for the implementation of the measures proposed in Resolution 14 plainly admitted that, “It’s going to take a very long time” (Interview, Le Viet Khuyen). Dr. Le Quang Minh noted that “university traditions die hard” and this is indeed the case in Vietnam where the foundations of the education system are rooted in the history and political culture of the nation and have been as such for decades. Since 1987 higher education reform has been on the agenda of the central government and most certainly the MOET. It is indeed unfair to assert that no progress has been made in the last two decades, but many would argue that the system today still

bears close resemblance to many features of the university system that existed at the beginning of the Doi Moi period (Interview, Le Dong Phuong). Nonetheless the interviewees, although almost unanimously doubtful of the possibility of any short-term results, did demonstrate a very balanced understanding of the achievements that have been made to date and the obstacles that still lie ahead.

One of the fundamental flaws in the reform agenda is the stability of the strategic planning of the MOET. From the outset of the reforms in the late 1980s and early 1990s, there has been a lack of a long-term vision for higher education reforms. It is clear that the MOET and university leaders alike recognize the fundamental flaws in the system, but the long-term planning and the short-term sacrifices required to address this crisis have not been properly undertaken. Dr. Le Viet Khuyen expanded on this issue during our meeting: “I acknowledge that policy makers were nervous of higher education reforms and focused on the short term to get immediate results. Their willingness and eagerness are not enough. The goals that they have set are unrealistic and unreachable.” Dr. Le explained that policy makers at the MOET are in a sort of limbo, not knowing what their priorities are and unsure how to reconcile their abstract, grandiose visions with the harsh realities of the situation. For instance, one of the goals of the current MOET agenda is to establish a world-class university in Vietnam by 2020. The cost and resource allocation of such a project would be astronomical and would exacerbate to an absurd degree the quality gap between this one hypothetical institution and the remainder of the country’s higher education system. Dr. Le Dong Phuong noted that many of the proposals set out in Resolution 14, such as enrolling four million students in the higher education system by 2020, are today largely recognized as impossible and the relevancy of this



resolution is a major topic of contemporary debate at the MOET. Dr. Le Viet Khuyen and other interviewees, such as Dr. Lam Quang Thiep did emphasize, however, that the MOET's recognition of the systemic problems and its sustained willingness to engage, albeit theoretically, with the issue of higher education reform was an achievement in and of itself.

Particularly in regard to teaching methods I found that there is a widespread belief that immediate reform is virtually unfeasible. It was the view of many of the interviewees that young lecturers are generally quite progressive in their teaching styles and willing to attend workshops and seminars provided by their universities to better their understanding of using technology in the classroom and how to transform students into actively engaged learners (Interview, Bui Tran Anh Dao). Relying solely on personal initiative to bring about a revolutionary change in teaching methods is devastatingly insufficient, however. The clauses concerning teaching methods in Resolution 14 serve as guidelines for the changes that should take place, but any measures of implementation rely on the universities and the professors themselves. Indeed some universities, like HUA, have programs to help re-train professors to use more modern methods. Professor Ho Thi Thu Giang, for instance, was provided the opportunity through HUA to spend three months at the beginning of 2009 in a teacher-training course at the University of California, Davis. HUA also organizes seminars and workshops for its teaching staff to introduce new teaching methodologies. While both of these programs are impressive and action-oriented, their success relies on the voluntary willingness of the professors to take part. Professors are faced with multiple challenges such as overburdened workloads and overcrowded classes that do not make the prospect of experimenting with new teaching

methods very appealing (Interview, Le Dong Phuong). Thus older faculty, who have less of an incentive and a desire to change, are in no way required to adopt these reforms.

The Vice Rector of HUA, Dr. Vu Van Liet, brought to my attention an innovative means of updating teaching methods that he employs in the department of crop science, in which he is an associate professor. He requires all faculty members to research and present five different curricula or teaching methods used abroad which are then discussed as to how they can be implemented in the context of HUA. He also encourages professors to use lecture series from foreign universities, a strategy which he himself employs with information gathered during his visits to the United States. While this approach is impressive in its creative and open-minded capacity, it relies heavily on the foreign language abilities of the teaching staff to be able to comprehend and synthesize the teaching materials from abroad.

Although I often found in my interviews a deep concern for the level of difficulty of reforming teaching methods, I was also surprised to find that many interviewees were somewhat resigned to the belief that little could be done to change the mindsets of traditional professors and administrators who are unwilling to change (Interview, Le Viet Khuyen). There was never suggested any means by which the MOET or university administrations could forcibly bring about reform in this area; the widespread understanding is simply that the change will develop organically among young, outward-thinking teaching staff and eventually spread and take root as older teaching staff leave the system. The sentiments of Professor Lam Quang Thiep accurately echo views expressed among other interviewees in that, “We want to change teaching methods in the direction of active learning, but this process will not just take years, but decades and

generations.” Additionally, Jeffrey Waite underscored that in the current conservative political context of Vietnam, administrations do not come to power with a new electoral mandate that they are bound to adhere to and thus their policies do not often differ drastically from historical precedents. Hence without changes to the political norms of the country there will not be a big bang paradigm shift in higher education and any reform that does occur will be incremental and gradual (Interview, Waite).

*Infrastructure and Management: A need for collaboration*

A most fundamental concern expressed by many respondents when asked about the priorities of higher education reform was the need for viable university infrastructure and stable institutional management. Dr. Le Quang Minh noted that, “we need to build up the critical mass of universities before we can introduce new teaching methods.” He continued to explain that there are a number of structural and ideological prerequisites that need to be in place before the specific issue of teaching methods can be addressed. University facilities in Vietnam are largely inadequate in that the buildings are old and outdated and with increasing volumes of students entering university every year, the classrooms and other learning spaces are simply not large enough. Professor Douglas Jardine noted that at Hanoi University several buildings are only a few years old and yet it is clear from the cracking foundations and the buckling floor panels that there are serious structural inadequacies (Interview, Jardine). Like all components of reform, however, it is wise to examine university infrastructure in its historical context and relative to former conditions. Professor Lam Quang Thiep underlined that although facilities are often not up to foreign standards, material conditions and physical infrastructure have been greatly improved in the last twenty years and these achievements

should not be discounted. Dr. Pham Thi Ly, director of the CIECER summarized pointedly that, “Institutional reform should be the main focus of HE reform. Without an appropriate institutional structure, resources would not be well utilized and people would have no motivation for creativity.”

At HUA many departments related to science and technology need to provide their students the opportunity to experience practical learning in laboratories and the agricultural space available on the school’s campus. Vice Rector Vu admitted, however, that the science materials and equipment needed to provide students with a decent standard of experiential learning were simply too expensive and thus most students at HUA have very little practical laboratory experience. He explained that the students who have the best access to scientific equipment are those who are able to study abroad and they in turn constitute the best opportunity for relaying such knowledge and technology back to Vietnam. Despite the financial and structural constraints at HUA, the university does make efforts to provide students and faculty with hands-on learning experiences. Professor Ho Thi Thu Giang noted that HUA encourages professors to keep abreast of new technologies in their fields of study and to engage with and learn from businesses and organizations outside of the university.

In recent years the World Bank has instituted a number of programs in Vietnam to better the quality and volume of university research, scientific, and technological institutions. The Bank is currently one year into the implementation of the Second Higher Education Project, which supports a \$60 million competitive fund scheme (Project Appraisal Document). Through this initiative, individual universities submit project proposals worth up to \$5 million that aim to improve some aspect of their research or

teaching environment. Projects that have been approved by the Bank include equipping modern science labs, training for the use of new technologies, overseas training and study opportunities for faculty, the improvement of information technology infrastructure and networking, and the updating of library holdings. The unique nature of this project is found in the autonomy it provides universities to conceptualize and implement their own projects that are specifically tailored to their individual needs (Interview, Waite). While most universities in Vietnam receive some degree of public funding, it is largely directed to faculty salaries and institutions do not typically have much discretionary funding at their disposal. Thus the Second Higher Education Project works to both build up the quality of research and teaching resources and to introduce some autonomy into the financial dealings of universities.

Increased university autonomy is a foremost stipulation on the reform agenda, which many believe could drastically improve the financial situation of universities in Vietnam (Lam and Hayden). By allowing universities greater control of their budgets and the opportunity to solicit investments for research and development, universities could advance their scientific and technological capabilities and expand and upgrade their facilities. Indeed the core of Resolution 14 addresses university autonomy and governance, but as is that case with most other aspects of reform, this good idea has not left its theoretical form (Interview, Lam Quang Thiep). Dr. Le Viet Khuyen expressed concern about granting universities more autonomy under the present system of hierarchy and leadership. Dr. Khuyen suggested that, “in Vietnam if more autonomy is given to universities, it will all go to the rector or the president and decision making will become a monopoly.” For nearly a decade Dr. Khuyen has tried to develop an understanding of the

implications of establishing boards of directors in Vietnamese universities. Like the system in the United States, he believes that boards of directors could more democratically and effectively take on decision-making roles and help to advance the interests of universities in their entirety. To date nine universities in Vietnam have introduced boards of directors, but there are widespread complaints about the functionality and reliability of these boards (Interview, Dr. Le Viet Khuyen). Unlike in the United States where university presidents are elected by the board of directors, in Vietnam, university rectors and presidents are appointed by the MOET and thus are in many ways exempt from oversight by other university entities. The debate on how to best achieve heightened university autonomy in Vietnam will surely continue at the forefront of the reform agenda, but it is crucial to recognize the different forms autonomy can assume and to take into account the interconnected and interdependent positions of university leadership.

Another concern related to the appointment of university leaders by the MOET is the disjointed legacy this creates among successive presidents and rectors. University presidents beginning their terms are not held accountable for the actions of their predecessor nor are they expected to honor and build upon previously laid foundations and policies. Dr. Le Viet Khuyen explained that when university leaders enter their positions they are eager to make their mark and introduce their own policies that will differentiate them from previous administrations. Thus they often forge ahead with new policies without regard to already founded projects. Dr. Khuyen further noted that once university presidents are able to implement their own ideas and policies, their term expires and the problem starts again. While at Hanoi University I learned of an instance

characteristic of this problem. The former chancellor of Hanoi University was very reform minded and was largely responsible for pioneering the unique and progressive international studies program (Interview, Jardine). When his term concluded, however, the newly appointed chancellor was not interested in continuing the policies of reform. The new chancellor was trained in the Soviet Union and did not share the former chancellor's desire to pursue outward-thinking reforms. Professor Jardine expressed very serious concern that the quality and potential of the international studies department was in jeopardy and that the program may cease to exist in the near future.

While the quality of university management is varied and debatable and certainly a pressing issue on the reform agenda, the management and steering of the reform process itself is also a topic of interest. When I initially began researching this topic, I assumed that because of the virtually ubiquitous presence of the government in most aspects of Vietnamese society that the MOET was mainly responsible for crafting, directing, and implementing the reforms. Indeed the MOET is a central player in the higher education reform process, but I have come to find that there is not only a certain level of collaboration between the MOET and universities, but that universities also exercise considerably initiative in propelling the reforms. According to the views expressed by many interviewees, the official reform statements produced by the MOET, such as Resolution 14, serve as the guidelines for the reforms that universities are responsible for implementing (Interview, Lam Quang Thiep). Professor Lam Quang Thiep and Dr. Le Viet Khuyen both noted that the MOET is not capable of directing the implementation of reforms because it suffers from such poor collaboration among the levels of its policy makers and it lacks the needed experts and specialists. For instance,

the MOET has begun a nation-wide impetus to introduce the credit-system to universities, similar to the Bologna process in Europe, which aimed to standardized credit systems and facilitate international educational exchanges (Interview, Lam Quang Thiep). Universities themselves are in turn responsible for moving forward with the implementation of the credit system and such efforts have been made at HUA. Vice Rector Vu explained that last year a university committee decided to introduce the credit system at HUA and they were required to submit a report to the MOET, but did not have to obtain specific permission to begin the process. Hence although the cooperation strategies between the MOET and individual universities are not established officially, but on a case-by-case basis depending on the willingness of the university to introduce reforms, there does appear to be an understanding that if reforms are going to be successful, the universities themselves must initiate implementation.

*Student Attitudes: Developing ownership of Education*

Clearly a central theme to this research is the impact of higher education reforms on the lives and education of university students. Ultimately the reform of universities and certainly the improvement of teaching methods are aimed at enhancing the primary goal of institutions higher learning: providing the best possible education to their students. I have already noted how students in Vietnam are typically criticized by others and among themselves for being too passive in the classroom. Indeed Dr. Le Quang Minh stated that for the reform of teaching methods to be successful, “we need a different type of student.” While I cannot dispute that students in Vietnam need to adapt new learning styles and classroom demeanors, the rhetoric surrounding this issue is dangerously flawed. From the sentiments I deduced from the interviews and from general



conversations about education during my three months in Vietnam, it often seems as though students are blamed for their passive behavior and professors are frustrated by their students' lack of engagement, but do not understand how to facilitate change. Students cannot suddenly self-transform into active classroom participants because their professors decide to use modern teaching methods, however; students also need a training background in active learning and they need to develop a sense of agency in their educational journey.

During my interviews with current and former employees of the MOET, I asked about the collaborative partners MOET works with to develop broad-based and holistically suitable reform solutions. I learned that MOET works closely with domestic and foreign universities, governmental counterparts abroad, and NGOs such as the World Bank. Whenever I would expand the question to ask if students are involved in the reform process, however, the answer was always negative. Indeed students are not policy makers and there already exists a widespread understanding of why the system needs to reform, but considering higher education policies impact the educational experience of students, it seems as though their input and points of view could be constructive. At the very least, students should be educated about the changes taking place in their universities so that they can properly anticipate what impact the new situation will have on their education. The deputy head of the administration office at HUA, Mr. Nguyen Cong Tiep, explained that his university organizes workshops to foster dialogue between professors and administrators, and students so that the latter party can better understand reforms like the introduction of the credit system and the utilization of new teaching methods. When I asked HUA students about these workshops, however, I did not find one student who had

any knowledge of these opportunities. For the reform of teaching methods to garner any success, it will be crucial for universities to prepare both professors and students to fully comprehend and properly adapt to the changes.

When I spoke with students in formal interview settings and casual conversations, I tried to learn about what aspects of their university education they really enjoyed and were interested in. When asked about her favorite professor, Linh from HUA, a biotechnology major and third year student, responded that she most enjoyed her plant biotechnology class and the methods used by this professor to make the class interesting. Linh explained that in this class the professor assigns students topics to research independently and then present in class. Linh relishes this opportunity for self-directed study and likes being required to actively engage with the subject, rather than just taking notes on the professor's lecture in class. In her major of biotechnology, Linh spends time working in the laboratory facilities. She admits that the labs are not of the best quality, but that it's still important for the students to have the practical experience. A second student interviewed at HUA, also named Linh, is a business and accounting major and in her third year of study. She explained that her favorite classes in which she learns the most are those that focus on practical, experiential learning as opposed to theory. In one of her classes Linh had the opportunity to spend time observing the work environment at a local business to study the practical application of business skills and management. Each student was then required to write a report of the experience and present it to the class. Linh found this experience very exciting and useful in terms of understanding the nature of her future employment. The third student I formally interviewed was Thao from the department of economics and rural development and also a third year student. Thao

said that her favorite professor of economics contextualizes the theory that they learn in class in real-world applications. The class often discusses economic news and events to understand how models and theory are manifested in the actual economy.

The student interviews conducted at HUA demonstrate that students are most excited about and willing to engage with topics that incorporate practical and experiential learning. This is corroborated by the enthusiasm of the students at Hanoi University in Professor Jardine's class in regards to his encouragement of student involvement in discussions and his use of multimedia in the classroom. The HUA students I spoke with also raised a number of concerns about the general attitudes towards learning among their peers. Linh the business major explained that a lot of her classmates did not have a plan for after graduation nor were they concerned with future career goals. She said that they just chose to come to HUA because they like the school or it's convenient, but not because they were concerned about how it could prepare them for the future. She noted that there are so many new businesses developing in Vietnam and students just assume that they can find a job working with a company, but they don't have a specific interest in the field of business and accounting nor a defined idea of how they want to apply their degrees. Linh the biotechnology major echoed these sentiments in saying that students just attend university because their parents want them to or because they feel like they have to obtain a certificate to find a job, but they don't actually know what career path they want to pursue.

On the whole, students in Vietnam do not have a sense of ownership of their educational experience. Dr. Le Dong Phuong offered his belief that, "Vietnamese students do not consider themselves to be a part of their education." Parental influence or

a sense of responsibility or duty often drive students to study certain disciplines that may not be their primary academic interest. I met a first year student at HUA whose mother and father are both professors at the university. Although she is very interested in film production and music, her parents required that she attend HUA and study in one of the faculties that they teach in, neither of which is remotely aligned with her interests. Mr. Nguyen Cong Tiep of the administration office at HUA expressed concern that students in Vietnam think their studies are for the benefit of others, not for themselves. In order for students to be actively engaged learners, they must feel a sense of pride and motivation about their studies. The means for achieving such a mental transformation are surely a topic for a separate sociological discussion, but in order for students to respond positively to new teaching methods and curriculum, they need to be able to exercise choice and freedom in their education.

## **V.) CONCLUDING REMARKS**

There was once a Buddhist master who received an academic to discuss the practice of Zen. The master served his visitor tea and when the cup was full, he continued to pour. The academic watched the cup overflow in angst until he could stand it no longer and proclaimed, “the cup is full, it can’t hold anymore!” The master replied, “You are like this cup, full to the brim of your own opinions. Thus how can I teach you anything when there is no more room for new ideas?”

It was suggested to me during an interview that this proverbial Buddhist story serves as a telling example for the higher education system in Vietnam. The MOET has for years looked to a variety of sources for assistance and guidance in reforming its deeply broken university system. Many suggestions and proposals have been discussed

over the years and the MOET has been successful in creating a number of documents outlining the steps that need to be taken to modernize and reform Vietnamese universities. In terms of implementation, however, both the MOET and the general sum of university leaders have fallen short of letting go of their traditional ways of thinking and moving forward with the necessary changes. The educational culture of Vietnam is deeply founded in history and socio-political norms and by no means should all of the country's educational traditions be expunged; but a compromise needs to be reached in introducing helpful, progressive reforms in a Vietnamese context. In order for the Vietnamese higher education system to be better the quality of its students and its capacities in research and development for the sake of helping to sustain national economic growth, the leaders of the reform movement must be open to new ideas at the level of implementation.

This study has attempted to examine the current state of higher education reform in Vietnam with regard to the recent history, current proposals and pressing obstacles that are blocking the course of future developments. As the topic of higher education reform is complexly large and varied, a specific focus was given to the reform of teaching methods. Through secondary research, classroom observations and numerous interviews, I sought to develop an analytical understanding of the predominant styles of teaching, the current efforts to renovate methodologies and the concerns about the reform process in this particular area. This area of my research provided a number of interesting results. While rote learning and memorization are said to predominate in Vietnamese universities, I met a number of faculty and witnessed in three classrooms interactive, progressive methods that encourage student involvement and activity. Given that I was exposed to a

miniscule sample and that the interviewees wholly noted that although some professors and administrators are trying to introduce new methodologies, traditional methods are steadfast and widespread, it was very enlightening to witness the seeds of change in the classroom. Finally, the role of higher education in Vietnam was studied in light of the country's socio-economic development patterns. The sentiments expressed in a number of interviews demonstrate a widespread understanding of the interconnectedness between progressive higher education and economic growth. As Mr. Nguyen Cong Tiep of HUA rightly noted, "The motivation to change teaching methods comes from the very competitive labor market. Employers demand high knowledge and high skill and the university has to change to meet their demand."

Dr. Le Viet Khuyen underlined three main principles that should act as the guidelines for higher education reform in Vietnam and which I believe to be an appropriate, concluding thought for this study. He stated that continuity, a systematic approach, and the inheritance of Vietnamese educational traditions are crucial to a successful reform process. Reformers at both the government and university levels must establish long-term strategic planning to ensure that successive leaders and administrations adhere to the course and vision of the reforms. To date most efforts to reform universities have been scattered and largely piecemeal, despite aspirations for system-wide changes. Universities cannot be expected to implement reforms without guidance from the government, because in reality only those institutions led by progressive faculty will make any efforts to improve the system. Finally, reforms must occur in a Vietnamese context and under conditions that are suitable to the socio-political norms of the country. Many aspects of reform are drawn from Western models, but it is

crucial to recognize that these policy changes may need to be tweaked to best suit the Vietnamese situation. The timeline for tangible success of higher education reform in Vietnam is certainly unknown, but if leaders can recognize that their efforts are part of a long-term project that requires sacrifice and sustained dedication, perhaps the implementation of practical solutions can occur in the not so distant future.

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## Appendix 1

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**THE GOVERNMENT**

No: 14/2005/NQ-CP

**SOCIALIST REPUBLIC OF VIET NAM**

**Independence - Freedom - Happiness**

*Ha Noi , November 02, 2005*

### **GOVERNMENT RESOLUTION ON SUBSTANTIAL AND COMPREHENSIVE RENEWAL OF VIETNAM'S TERTIARY EDUCATION IN THE 2006-2020 PERIOD**

After 20 years of renew and 5 years of implementation of the Strategy on educational development in the 2001-2010 period, the tertiary education in our country has seen marked developments in terms of scale and diversity of educational types and forms, initial adjustments of its systematic structure and improvements of training programs and processes, and has mobilized numerous social resources. The quality of tertiary education in some disciplines and domains as well as in tertiary education institutions has seen positive changes, step by step satisfying the requirements of socio-economic development. The contingent of cadres possessing university and postgraduate degrees, almost all of whom have been trained in domestic educational institutions, has made important contributions to the cause of national renew and construction.

However, the above-mentioned achievements of tertiary education remained unstable, unsystematic and insubstantial, still failing to satisfy the requirements of national industrialization and modernization and international integration in the new period, and the people's learning demands. Weaknesses and inadequacies in the management mechanism, systematic structure, disciplinary structure, network of tertiary education institutions, training processes, teaching and learning methods, contingent of lectures and educational administrators, use efficiency of resources and negative phenomena in examinations, grant of diplomas and other educational activities should be soon addressed.

To expeditiously satisfy the country's requirements in the new period, the national tertiary education should be renewed in a vigorous, substantial and comprehensive manner. At the Government's July 2005 regular meeting, the Government resolved on the scheme on renewal of Vietnam's tertiary education with the following contents:

#### **1. The Guiding viewpoint:**

To closely combine the renew of tertiary education with the socio-economic development strategy, consolidation of defense and security, the country's demand for high-level human resource and the scientific and technological development trend.

To modernize the tertiary education system on the basis of inheriting the country's educational and training achievements, promoting the national identity, absorbing the mankind's cultural quintessence, and quickly approaching the world's advance tertiary education.

The renew of tertiary education must be practical, effective and synchronous; to choose processes to make a breakthrough, domains to give priority and key institutions to concentrate resources on in order to create marked progresses. The scale expansion must be in parallel with the quality improvement; the realization of social justice must go hand in hand with assurance of training efficiency; the renewal must be carried out thoroughly from educational objective, processes and contents to teaching and learning methods as well as methods of evaluating study results; there must be a transferability between disciplines, training forms and levels; to closely integrate general education with vocational education and create a driving force for further renewal thereof.

On the basis of renewing the way of thinking and the educational administration mechanism, to rationally and effectively combine the definite separation of state management functions and tasks with the assurance of the right to autonomy and enhancement of social responsibility and transparency of tertiary education institutions. To promote the activeness and initiative of tertiary education institutions in the cause of renewal with the contingent of lecturers and administrators playing the key role and the active response and participation of the entire society.

The renewal of tertiary education is a cause of all the people under the Party's leadership and the State's management. The State shall intensify the investment in, and concurrently step up the socialization of, tertiary education, and create favorable conditions in terms of mechanisms and policies for organizations, individuals and the entire society to participate in development of tertiary education.

## **2. Objective**

### **a. General objective:**

To substantially and comprehensively renew tertiary education and make substantial changes in education quality, efficiency and scale, thus satisfying the requirements of national industrialization and modernization, international economic integration and people's learning demands. By 2020, Vietnam's tertiary education shall attain the regional advanced standards, approach the world's advanced level, have a high competitiveness and suit the socialist-oriented market mechanism.

### **b. Specific objectives:**

- To perfect the national network of tertiary education institutions which shall be classified according to their functions and training tasks and assurance of rational structures of levels, disciplines and regions in suitability with the undertaking of educational socialization and the general planning on national and regional socio-economic development.

- To develop tertiary education programs under the research orientation and the career - application orientations. To ensure the transferability among these programs in the entire system. To work out and perfect solutions to ensuring the tertiary education quality and inspection system. To build several universities up to international standards.

- To expand the training scale, attaining the rate of 200 students and 450 students for every 10,000 people by 2010 and 2020 respectively, with around 70 - 80% of the total

number of students studying under career-application programs and around 40% of the total number of students studying at non-public tertiary education institutions.

- To build up a sufficient contingent of tertiary education lectures and administrators, who have ethical quality and professional conscience, high professional qualifications and an advanced teaching and management style; to keep the proportion of students to lectures in the whole tertiary education system at 20 or under. At least 40% then 60% of lecturers shall have obtained the master degree and 25% then 35% of lecturers shall have obtained the doctoral degree by 2010 and 2020, respectively.

- To markedly scale up and raise efficiency of scientific and technological activities in tertiary education institutions. Big universities must be powerful scientific research centers of the whole country; revenues from scientific and technological, production and service provision activities shall have represented at least 15% then 25% of the total revenue source of tertiary education institutions by 2010 and 2020, respectively.

- To perfect the policy on tertiary education development along the direction of guaranteeing the autonomous right and social responsibility of tertiary education institutions, the management by the State and the supervision and evaluation by the society over tertiary education.

### **3. Renewal tasks and solutions**

a. Renewal of training structure and improvement of the network of tertiary education institutions:

- To renew and evaluate the network of existing tertiary education institutions; to renew the work of network development planning, ensuring the achievement of tertiary education development objectives.

- To prioritize the expansion of career-application orientation programs; to apply flexible and transferable training processes, and combine the traditional model with the multi-stage model so as to increase learning opportunities and grade levels of human resources.

- To well carry out the transformation of the operation mechanism of public tertiary education institutions under the Government's Resolution No. 05/2005/NQ-CP of April 18, 2005, on stepping up the socialization of educational, healthcare, cultural, physical training and sport activities; to transform semi-public tertiary education institutions and a number of public tertiary education institutions into private ones; to improve the model of community colleges and formulate a regulation on continuing training from colleges to universities, and consolidate open universities in order to expand the scale of these two types of school. To encourage the establishment of tertiary education institutions in big groups and enterprises. To study the organizational model and adopt specific plans on merge of tertiary education institutions into scientific research institutions in order to closely associate training with scientific research, production and business.

- To concentrate investment on, mobilize domestic and foreign specialists and adopt an appropriate mechanism for, building universities up to international standards.

b. Renewal of training contents, methods and processes

- To restructure framework programs; to ensure the transferability of educational levels; to well resolve relationship in term of knowledge volume and learning time volume between fundamental study subject and vocational education subjects, thus

raising the training efficiency of each study subject. To renew training contents, and closely associate them with practical scientific research, technological and professional development in the society, satisfying the socio-economic development requirements of each branch or domains and approaching the advanced level the world. To promote the researching and creative potentials, professional skills and capability of working in a community and career prospects of learners.

- To renew training methods along three directions: equipping learners with learning methods, promoting their initiative, and applying information and telecommunications technologies in teaching and learning activities. To exploit open sources of educational materials and information sources in the internet. To choose and use advanced educational programs and teaching course of foreign countries.

- To set and implement a roadmap for the shift to the system of training credits, creating favorable conditions for learners to accumulate knowledge, change disciplines and fields of study, and be transferred to higher educational levels at home or aboard.

- To renew the mechanism of assignment of student enrolment quotas along the direction of associating it with conditions for ensuring the training quality, demands for human resources and the people's learning needs, and increasing the autonomy of tertiary education institutions.

- To improve the enrolment of students with the application of modern educational measurement technology. To expand enrolment sources and create more learning opportunities for subjects in difficult plight, thus ensuring social justice in enrolment.

- To rectify the organization of training and the renewal of training contents and methods so as to raise the quality of master and doctoral training.

c. Renewal of the planning, training, fostering and employment of lecturers and administrators:

- To work out and implement a planning on the contingent of tertiary education lecturers and administrators, ensuring sufficient quantity and raising quality thereof, satisfying the requirements of tertiary education renewal.

- To vigorously renew contents, programs and methods of training and fostering tertiary education lecturers and administrators. To pay attention to raising the professional qualifications and pedagogical skills of lecturers, the strategic vision, creative capability and professionalism of leading officials and administrators.

- To renew the enrolment modes to make the enrolment more objective, fairer and more competitive. To perfect and apply the mechanism of long-term contracts; to ensure the equality between lecturers in public educational institutions and those in non-public educational institutions.

- To formulate and promulgate new policies towards lecturers, covering criteria for lecturers, labor norms, working conditions, scientific and technological tasks, the regime of long-term leaves from teaching activates for academic exchange and the mechanism of objective evaluation of working results. To promulgate policies and regimes toward part-time lecturers.

- To reform the procedures for appointment and discharge of professor and associate professor titles along the direction that tertiary education institutions shall carry out such procedures according to the general standards and conditions set by the State. To make periodical evaluations for re-appointment and discharge of professor and associate

professor titles. To reform administrative procedures for considering and accrediting lectures and principal lecturers.

d. Renewal of organization of scientific and technological activities:

- The State shall invest in upgrading existing capable research institutes in tertiary education institutions and building a number of new ones, with investment being concentrated on key universities for the immediate future. To encourage the establishment of research institutes, scientific and technological enterprise in tertiary education institutions. To encourage scientific and technological organizations and enterprises to invest in development of research institutions in tertiary education institutions.

- To intensify the research tasks of lectures, and associate the training of doctoral candidates with the execution of scientific and technological research subject. To adopt appropriate policies for graduate and postgraduate students to actively participate in scientific research.

- To allocate at least 1% of the annual state budget for tertiary education institutions to perform their scientific and technological tasks provide for in the Science and Technology Law.

e. Renewal of mobilization of resources and financial mechanism:

- The State shall intensify investment in building infrastructures for tertiary education; concentrate investment on building a number of institutions for public utility such as: the national data center, the system of electronic libraries, key laboratories, dormitories and cultural, physical training and sport facilities. Localities shall adjust the planning and reserve land fund for building modern tertiary education institutions which attain the regional and international standards.

- The State shall adopt policies on preferential treatment of, supports and incentives for, domestic and foreign investors to invest in tertiary education; and secure the lawful ownership right and material and spiritual benefits of investors.

- Tertiary education institutions shall take the initiative in diversifying revenue sources from contracts on training, research and development, technology transfer, and service, production and business activities.

- To reformulate policies on tuition fees, scholarship and student credits on the basis of setting principles for sharing tertiary education expenditures among the State, learners and the community. The State shall provide full or partial tuition fee supports for policy beneficiaries, the poor and allocate such supports directly to learners.

- To reform financial policies in order to raise the efficiency of investment from the state budget and exploit other investment sources for tertiary education. To research and apply the process of budget allocation on the basis of the society's assessment of tertiary education institutions. To regularly organize the evaluation of economic efficiency of tertiary education institutions.

- To conduct revenue-expenditure accounting in public tertiary education institutions, create conditions for tertiary education institutions to enjoy a greater autonomy in revenues-expenditures according to the principle of using revenues to make up for reasonable expenditures and making necessary accumulations to develop material foundations in service of training and research. To supplement and perfect financial regulations applicable to non-public tertiary education institutions.

f. Renewal of the management mechanism:



- To switch public tertiary education institutions to operate under an autonomous mechanism whereby they shall have the full legal person status and the right to decide on, and bear responsibility for, training, research, organization, personnel and finance.

- To abolish the mechanism of managing ministries, to formulate the mechanism of representatives of the state-owner at public tertiary education institutions. To guarantee the inspection and supervision by the community and promote the role of mass organizations, especially professional associations, in supervising the quality of tertiary education.

- To concentrate the state management on the formulation and direction of implementation of the development strategy; direction of operation of the tertiary education quality control and inspection system; perfection of the legal environment; enhancement of the inspection and examination activities; the macro-regulation of tertiary education structure and scale, satisfying the country's human resource demand in each period.

- To elaborate the Law on Tertiary Education.

g. Regarding international integration:

- To formulate a strategy on international integration, raise the cooperation capability and competitiveness of Vietnam's tertiary education in the implementation of international treaties and commitments.

- To organize teaching and learning in foreign languages, especially in English for the immediate futures; to improve the quality of training and research programs which can attract foreigners; in the world; to reach agreements on equivalent diplomas and training programs with tertiary education institutions in the world; to encourage various forms of high-quality training cooperation, and exchange of lectures and experts with foreign countries; to encourage overseas Vietnamese lecturers to give lectures in Vietnam; to increase the number of foreign students in Vietnam. To encourage study at home under foreign training programs; to adopt an appropriate consultancy and management mechanism to help Vietnamese students study overseas choose study disciplines, subject and schools, and achieve good study results and high efficiency.

- To create mechanism and favorable conditions for investors and prestigious tertiary education institutions in the world to open international tertiary education institutions in Vietnam or enter into training cooperation with Vietnamese tertiary education institutions.

#### **4. Organization of implementation**

a. To set up the Steering Committee for renewal of tertiary education which shall be headed by a Deputy Prime Minister for directing the renewal of tertiary education.

b. To work out detailed schemes on realization of objectives and tasks of, and solutions to, renewal of tertiary education.

c. To allocate funds for renewal of tertiary education from the state budget.

d. Responsibilities of the state management agencies:

- To organize the implementation of detailed schemes on renewal of tertiary education.

- The Education and Training Ministry shall assume the prime responsibilities for, and coordinate with relevant ministries and branches and People's Committees of provinces or centrally-run cities in, formulating specific plans and roadmap according to the stages of the five-years socio-economic development plans for implementation of

detailed schemes on renewal of tertiary education; guiding, inspecting, supervising and summing up the situation of tertiary education renewal and periodically reporting thereon to the Prime Minister. It shall organize the preliminary review of tertiary education renewal at the beginning of 2010 and 2015 and the general review thereof at the beginning of 2020; and organize the drafting of Tertiary Education Bill for submission to the Wit<sup>h</sup> National Assembly at its first session.

- The Planning and Investment Ministry shall assume the prime responsibility for, and coordinate with the Finance Ministry, the Education and Training Ministry and the Science and Technology Ministry in, formulating a mechanism for mobilizing investment resources at home and abroad for the tertiary education renewal; submitting to the National Assembly annual budget allocation plans for tertiary education institutions to perform scientific and technological tasks provided for in the Science and Technology Law.

- The Finance Ministry shall assume the prime responsibility for, and coordinate with the Planning and Investment Ministry, the Education and Training Ministry and relevant ministries and branches in, perfecting the financial policies towards tertiary education, and the financial autonomy mechanism applicable to tertiary education institutions.

- The Home Affairs Ministry shall assume the prime responsibility for, and coordinate with the Education and Training Ministry, the Science and Technology Ministry and relevant ministries and branches in, formulating an autonomous mechanism applicable to public tertiary education institution, policies toward university lectures; and proposing specific organizational models whereby tertiary education institutions shall be merged with scientific research institutes.

- The Science and Technology Ministry shall assume the prime responsibility for, and coordinate with the Education and Training Ministry and relevant ministries, branches and localities in, formulating policies and mechanism for bringing into full play potentials of the contingent of high-level scientific and technological cadres of tertiary education institutions.

- Minister, heads of ministerial-level agencies, heads of Government-attached agencies and president of provincial/municipal People's Committees shall have to coordinate with relevant ministries and branches in implementing this Resolution.

**ON BEHALF OF THE GOVERNMENT  
PRIME MINISTER**

**(signed)**

**Phan Van Khai**

## Appendix 2

### Sample Interview Questions

#### *For students*

- What are the methods of teaching most commonly used by your professors?
- What type of teaching do you find most effective for your personal learning style?
- Who is the best professor you have had in university? Why?
- Are different ways of teaching used for different subject areas?
- What do you think are the main problems with the university system in Vietnam?
- Are you aware of any efforts to reform higher education in Vietnam?
- Generally speaking, do you think professors in Vietnam are open to change in terms of their teaching styles?
- How do you think teaching styles in your university could be improved?
- Do you feel as though the way your professors teach help you to develop critical thinking skills and the ability to analyze situations from your own perspective?
- Do you feel comfortable asking your professors questions in class?
- How do you think higher education is related to the overall development of a country?
- How are the ways in which students are taught related to their ability to compete and function in the workforce?

#### *For professors*

- What are the most common teaching methods used in Vietnamese universities today? How long have these methods been the standard way of teaching?
- What teaching methods do you use in your classroom?
- What means of conveying information to your students do you find most effective?
- How much control do you have over how you structure your classes?
- What skills do your students develop from your classes that prepare them to be successful at their future careers?
- Do you think it is useful for students to ask questions in class?
- Do you think there is value in class discussions between students and the professor?
- Do you think Vietnamese students are able to intelligently express their opinions and analyze alternative points of view in an academic context?
- In your view, what should be the main focus of higher education reform?
- How, if in any way, do you think that teaching methods should be reformed?
- How does the higher education system in Vietnam impact the country's development?
- How are the ways in which students are taught related to their ability to compete and function in the workforce?
- What skills do you think the modern workforce demands of workers?

*For administrators*

- What are the most common teaching methods used in Vietnamese universities today? How long have these methods been the standard way of teaching?
- Do you think Vietnamese students are able to intelligently express their opinions and analyze alternative points of view in an academic context?
- Do you think your university adequately prepares its students to act competitively in the workforce, be it domestic or global?
- What are the most important skills your students receive from their university education?
- What are the main weaknesses of Vietnam's university system presently?
- In your view, what should be the main focus of higher education reform?
- How, if in any way, do you think that teaching methods should be reformed?
- What are the main obstacles to higher education reform in Vietnam?
- To what extent has the government successfully instituted higher education reform to date?
- How does the higher education system in Vietnam impact the country's development?
- How do teaching methods in universities contribute to or hinder a country's development?

*For MOET officials and affiliates and NGO representatives*

- What are the most common teaching methods used in Vietnamese universities today? How long have these methods been the standard way of teaching?
- What teaching methods do you think are most effective for preparing students for life and work in a competitive, global labor market?
- Do you think Vietnamese students are able to intelligently express their opinions and analyze alternative points of view in an academic context?
- What skills should a student receive from his university education? What skills do Vietnamese students obtain from their university education?
- What are the main weaknesses of Vietnam's university system presently?
- In your view, what should be the main focus of higher education reform?
- How, if in any way, do you think that teaching methods should be reformed?
- What are the main obstacles to higher education reform in Vietnam?
- To what extent has the government successfully instituted higher education reform to date?
- How does the higher education system in Vietnam impact the country's development?
- How do teaching methods in universities contribute to or hinder a country's development?
- What types of programs are envisioned to help reform teaching methods in universities? When and how will such reforms be implemented?