Ms. Luna Iacopini

Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences

University of Geneva

Boulevard du Pont d'Arve1211 Genève 4

Tel. + 41 22 379 9623

[Luna.Iacopini@unige.ch](mailto:Luna.Iacopini@unige.ch)

## Higher Education in Viet Nam: The Influence of the Privatisation and Internationalisation Policies and the Cross-cutting Issue of Quality

## The higher education system in Viet Nam

Viet Nam is home to the oldest higher education system in South-east Asia, its first university having been established in 1076 at the Temple of Literature in Hanoi during the Ly dynasty. More recently, the evolution of the Vietnamese higher education system has reflected the political changes undergone by the country, a system that has experienced the influence of different countries: France, the former Soviet Union, and the USA.

Since 1993, higher education in Viet Nam has undertaken major reforms. The Soviet model, characterised by a multitude of specialised higher education institutes with very little autonomy, was abandoned and a new national system with large, multidisciplinary universities established. One result of this renovation process was the establishment of two national and three regional universities. Moreover, for the first time, universities were granted power by the government to levy tuition fees. In spite of the strict limitations with regard to these tuition fees, this change introduced, for the very first time, an element of market demand in the provision of higher education in Vietnam (Hayden & Khanh, 2010). Finally, the adoption of the socialisation policy and other changes in the legal framework allowed the founding of non public universities and colleges, diversifying the supply of higher education.

The number of Vietnamese students enrolled in universities is constantly increasing and higher education appears as one of the priorities identified by the Vietnamese government. In fact, as shown in chart 1, the number of university and college students has doubled in less than 10 years. However, the number of university students in Viet Nam is still low in comparison not only to OECD countries, but also to Asian countries such as China and Thailand. Nevertheless, the increase has been remarkable.

**Chart 1: Evolution of the number of university and college (public and non public) students 2000–2008**

The implementation of both the *Doi Moi* and the *Open Doors* policies has had major impacts on the education sector generally and on higher education more specifically. At present, higher education in Viet Nam is experiencing two new processes, namely, the internationalisation and the privatisation of the supply of education.

**The internationalisation process**

Appearing at the beginning of the 1990s, the internationalisation of higher education represents a relatively recent phenomenon in Viet Nam, since until the adoption of the *Open Doors* policy the country was isolated from the international scene. This situation was reflected in the education sector as well.

Varghese (2009) identifies three different forms through which the internationalisation of higher education is implemented: 1) cross-border institutional mobility; 2) cross-border teacher mobility; 3) cross-border student mobility. Other authors distinguish between “internationalisation abroad” and “internationalisation at home” (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009; Knigth, 2004).

In Viet Nam, the internationalisation of higher education takes place mainly through cross-border student mobility and cross-border institutional mobility. Concerning student mobility, one notices that every year an increasing number of Vietnamese students leave the country to study abroad, especially at master’s and PhD levels. This tendency is also stimulated by the wide availability of public scholarship programmes to study abroad. According to the latest data available, between 2000 and 2009 the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) sent 7'039 students abroad to undertake master’s or PhD studies (Ministry of Education and Training of Viet Nam, 2009). However, the real number is probably higher[[1]](#footnote-1) since these figures do not take into account the students who have funded their studies either privately or through foreign scholarships (Nguyen, 2009).

Concerning cross-border institutional mobility, the strengthening of international cooperation with foreign universities appears as one of the MOET’s priorities to improve the quality of Vietnamese higher education and to promote the integration of Vietnamese universities into the international arena (Ministry of Education and Training of Viet Nam, 2010). In fact, the establishment of foreign education programmes run either entirely by foreign universities or through cooperation with Vietnamese institutions is growing rapidly (Institute of International Education, 2004). In this context, Australia represents by far the largest higher education provider to Viet Nam (Wilmoth, 2004).

Apart from the development of the aforementioned joint-venture programmes, Viet Nam has opened up the education sector to foreign providers. In 2000, it was the ratification of Decree n. 06/2000/ND\_CP, which made incentives available for foreign investments in several sectors including education and training, that was at the origin of the sharp expansion of this sector (Institute of International Education, 2004). In the same year, the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) opened its first campus in Ho Chi Minh City, followed by the founding of a second one in Hanoi (Duggan, 2001; Wilmoth, 2004).

**The privatisation process**

The appearance of non public universities in Viet Nam started in 1986 with the adoption of the *Doi Moi* renovation policies that, for the very first time, opened up the higher education sector to private actors. The first non public university founded in Viet Nam after the reunification of the country was Thang Long University in Hanoi, created in 1988 by a group of six intellectuals worried about the poor quality of higher education in Viet Nam at that time. However, for the first six years, Thang Long University was granted only temporary authorisation by the Prime Minister. During this period of time, the university was supposed to demonstrate its validity and efficiency in order for the temporary authorisation to be transformed into a permanent one.

The privatisation of higher education in Viet Nam is accomplished through the introduction of a favourable legal framework. Three elements are crucial in this process: 1) the adoption of the law on the promotion of domestic investment (1998) which, for the very first time, recognises private property; 2) the law on foreign direct investment (2000), which encourages the development of foreign investment in the country; and 3) the so-called “socialization” (xa hoi hoa) of the costs, which is defined by the Vietnamese government (1997) as follows:

Socialization is to broaden the sources of investment, to exploit the potentials in human, material and financial resources in the society, to develop and effectively use the various resources of the people, create conditions for educational, medical, and cultural activities to develop more quickly and with a higher quality (p.1).

In consequence, the diversification of financial resources in the education sector is essentially achieved through the increase in both tuition fees and families' participation in the funding of educational activities. As in many other Asian countries (Bray, 2005; Bray & Kwok, 2003), private tutoring has become widespread in both urban and rural areas.

New stakeholders thus appear in the higher education sector, contributing to the creation of new types of universities besides the public ones: 1) semi public institutes (ba cong); 2) people founded institutes (dan lap); and 3) private institutes (tu lap)[[2]](#footnote-2). Only the last two do not receive public funding, and all operating costs have to be covered through tuition fees.

**Chart 2: Evolution of the number of students attending non public universities 2000–2010**

According to the latest data available, currently in Viet Nam there are 77 non public universities providing education to 249’000 students.

**Quality of Vietnamese higher education**

Despite the increase in the number of university students, higher education in Viet Nam still has several challenges to face, the issue of quality appearing to be the most crucial. Difficulties in recruiting qualified lecturers, low salaries, lack of accurate data, few resources allocated to academic research, and strong governmental control on curricula are some of the factors contributing to this situation.

According to UNESCO data, Viet Nam higher education presents a student/faculty ratio of 30/1, which is considered very high not only according to international standards, but also when compared with the other countries in the region[[3]](#footnote-3). This is the result of the low salary for faculty members and the very heavy and difficult procedures for promotions, which do not sufficiently reward academic and personal achievement. In fact, it has to be noted that “a large percentage of academic staff in Vietnam maintain the rank of lecturers and likely do not hold doctoral degrees” (World Bank, 2008, p. 31). In this situation, a highly qualified person would definitely receive a higher salary in the private sector. Consequently, it is difficult for universities to attract and keep qualified professors and faculty members.

An important factor that has to be addressed when analysing the quality of higher education in Viet Nam is the need for improved data and data collection techniques. This is an essential issue in order to improve the quality of higher education on the basis of more accurate information, therefore guaranteeing more effective and efficient reforms, especially in terms of linkages with the business world.

Another issue affecting the quality of higher education in Viet Nam is the need for more updated curricula. A common criticism is that curricula do not meet the requirements of the labour market, which is continuously evolving. With the exception of the two National Universities, in Viet Nam curricula are established at the central level by the MOET. However, internationally, the power of elaborating curriculum frameworks is generally in the hands of higher education institutions.

Finally, the learning unit system adopted in 1993 and currently applied by most public and private universities does not include a standardisation of the calculation of the learning units among the different universities, making its transfer from one university to another relatively difficult.

**Conclusion**

In the Vietnamese higher education context, the emergence of new national and international actors on the one hand points out the weaknesses of the Vietnamese university system; on the other, it represents an opportunity to address some of the main problems affecting the university system, especially concerning the current low quality of higher education.

Growing collaboration with foreign universities could foster the establishment of a national accreditation system based on international standards, allowing for increased harmonisation within the higher education system in Viet Nam and wider integration into the international arena.

The emergence of new stakeholders in the field of higher education has contributed to the creation of a broader offering of curricula; new curricula have been introduced and a larger number of students are able to enrol at universities, increasing access to higher education.

Through collaboration with international and foreign universities, Vietnamese students and faculty members are familiarised with new teaching methods. Besides student enhancement, this could eventually lead to the introduction of new pedagogical methods, allowing for greater creativity and diversity within teaching in Vietnamese universities.

It goes without saying that for all these improvements to take place, the strong commitment of the Vietnamese government is indispensable. A well defined policy agenda, more resources, increased efficiency and effectiveness are crucial elements that only the government is able to guarantee in order to improve the university system in Viet Nam and to prevent an increase in social inequalities within Vietnamese society. In fact, in a context such as Viet Nam’s, where cost-free education is no longer guaranteed, the costs of education become a decisive factor in the reproduction of social inequalities. The relationship between living standards on the one hand, and both the quality and duration of schooling on the other, underlines the fact that in Viet Nam education can no longer be considered a guarantee of social promotion[[4]](#footnote-4). Moreover, one can observe an increase in social inequalities the higher up the education level one goes. Consequently, higher education represents by far the education level most affected by the issue of social inequalities.

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1. It is estimated that every year about 60'000 Vietnamese students leave the country to study abroad. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Starting from the academic year 2006/2007, semi public institutes have been reconverted into either private or people founded institutes. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The student/faculty ratio is respectively 23/1 in the Philippines, 20/1in Malaysia and 15/1 in Indonesia. (UNESCO: Global Education Digest, 2006) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. On the relationship between education and social promotion, see, among others, the work of Duru-Bellat (Duru-Bellat, 2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)