

HIGHER EDUCATION REFORM IN VIETNAM: SITUATION AND SOLUTIONS

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Abstract: *higher education is a subject of public interest since it trains high-quality human resources for a country. Vietnam's academic training has gained significant achievements since the Doi Moi policy was implemented, yet there are still restrictions and flaws. Based on the current analysis of the higher education reform that has been conducted since 2013 in Vietnam, the authors propose a system of measures to promote this process for the country's development goals and international integration.*

Keywords: *higher education, reform, Vietnam, education policy.*

Like other countries, education in Vietnam in general, and advanced education in particular, is an aspect that directly connects to each individual and family. Therefore, its progress is of interest to the whole society. Since the Temple of Literature (Van Mieu- Quoc Tu Giam) was established in 1070, tertiary education in Vietnam has existed for over a thousand years. The post-secondary education of the revolutionary education formed since the August Revolution (1945) has undergone more than 75 years of development. During the Doi Moi period (from 1986 until now), the Communist Party of Vietnam has consistently affirmed: Education and training are the top national policies. Investing in education is investing in development, and education must take precedence over all programs and plans in other areas. The 8th session of the XI Central Conference (on November 2013) of the Communist Party of Vietnam approved Resolution No. 29-NQ/TW on a foundational and comprehensive renovation of education and training to meet the urgent requirements. Since then, we have implemented a higher education reform to bring elementary and profound changes in the quality and efficiency, build and defend our nation, and meet the learning demands of the people. Resolution No. 29 also sets out a goal for Viet Nam's higher learning to be advanced in the region by 2030. The renovation of education in general and tertiary-level education, in particular, has been implemented for more than seven years. Therefore, assessing the condition of higher education reform and introducing measures to enhance this process in the future are vital requirements.

There are many definitions of university training, but the most common is post-secondary education such as colleges, universities, and postgraduate. In the era of scientific and technological revolution and knowledge-based economy, university education plays a crucial role in the education system. It is also a measure of that country's intellectual level and scientific achievements.

Reasons for reforming higher education in Vietnam

The country's progress and the general tendency of the world are contributed to the importance of higher education reform in Vietnam. The Doi Moi has lasted for more than three decades (since 1986) and gone into depth. The requirement to transform the economic model from breadth to depth and restructure the economy in terms of quality, efficiency, and competitiveness has required post-secondary education to meet the learning needs of the people and quickly train highly qualified personnel. Without innovating tertiary education, the labor force's quality will be diminished, causing a major hindrance to the country's development.

Vietnam has actively integrated into the world because it recognizes the objectivity of this process towards human development. Therefore, after emerging from the socio-economic crisis in 1996, it has progressed from international economic integration to a massive and far-reaching one. To have "global citizens" who are competitive enough in the global human resource market, it is critical to update higher education while keeping its local features and reaching worldwide standards. Thus, Vietnam's internal growth requires an intense "change" in education at the university level.

The urgent internal requirements are combined with the external trend that is the robust advancement of Industry 4.0. Industry 4.0 is based on the interconnection of physics, digital, and biology to digitize and automate production, creating the emergence of the Internet of Things, artificial intelligence, self-driving robots, three-dimensional printing, super-intelligent computers, smart factories, and new materials. Its achievements have significantly influenced every aspect of each nation's social life, as well as changed people's lives and work. According to international experts: "We are on the verge of a technological revolution that will radically change the way we live, work, and communicate. In its depth, scale, and complexity, fluctuations will be unprecedented throughout human experiences" [5, pp.31-32]. The Fourth Industrial Revolution has provided opportunities for many developing countries, including Vietnam, to "vert" their rank in the global economic map if they know how to grasp and take advantage of its power. On the contrary, it will increase the backwardness of countries that don't actively engage. Due to its impacts, professional knowledge becomes obsolete rapidly, and new understanding and scientific information will be created with exponential growth and stored in incredibly compact devices. In the "digitized" environment, advanced education will change drastically from the philosophy and its goals to the role of teachers and from teaching methods to learner-centered classrooms. Therefore, educational innovation in general and higher education reform, in particular, is a global trend, and Vietnam must catch it up. Currently, the competition among countries is the one in workforce and science and technology. However, science and technology are created by humans, so it is the competition for human capital's quality. A country with talents and a labor pool will have many chances for improvement and vice versa.

Therefore, Vietnam has decided to innovate essentially and predominantly education in standardization, modernization, socialization, democratization, and international integration. Higher education reform focuses on training highly rated human resources, cultivating talents, developing learners' quality, self-study capacity, and creative thinking. Besides, it also aims to perfect the network of educational organizations and the structure of professions and make some schools and training disciplines be up to regional and international levels.

Achievements:

After implementing this policy for seven years, post-secondary education has achieved some notable accomplishments. First of all, Vietnam has gradually institutionalized the viewpoints and contents of Resolution No. 29 on educational reform into laws and policies of the State. In particular, between 2018 and 2019, the Law amending and supplementing some articles in Law on Higher Education (2018) and Law on Education (2019) drafted by the Ministry of Education and Training was approved by the National Assembly and applied in life, creating a legal corridor for innovation activities in academic training. Another achievement is that higher education institutions have been spread throughout the country, improving the fairness in access to this type of education.

In terms of governance and management of the higher education system, Vietnam has strengthened the autonomy of educational establishments. The most remarkable thing is that the quality of tertiary education has been constantly improved and approached international standards. In 2019, Vietnamese university training ranked 68th/196th globally (an increase of 12 levels compared to 2018). The inspection and quality assurance are becoming increasingly routine. On December 31, 2020, 149 universities and nine colleges met the accreditation standards under the criteria for higher education quality (accounting for approximately 55% of all national training establishments). In which international accreditation organizations had recognized seven higher educational institutes. It is the first time Vietnam has had three schools entering the top 1000 best universities globally (including Vietnam National University, Hanoi; Vietnam National University - Ho Chi Minh City; and Hanoi University of Science and Technology). Eight advanced training institutes were on the list of leading universities in Asia.

The increase in the university rankings is associated with improvements in the teaching staff's quality according to international standards. Previously, Professors, Associate Professors, and Ph.D. were not required to publish their papers in international journals. However, since 2018, the new regulation has forced them to publish their research in prestigious journals like ISI or Scopus. Therefore, in 2019, the total number of Vietnamese scientific articles published on the ISI/ Scopus system reached 12,475, ranking 49th globally (an increase of 2.7 times compared to 2015) [1]. In 2020, the percentage of lecturers holding the title of Professor or Associate Professor in Vietnam's education system was 6%. The percentage of lecturers with a doctorate was 22.7%.

Tertiary institutions' outstanding achievement is that information technology, and digital transformation have been effectively deployed. In the 2020-2021 school year, all universities have conducted online teaching due to the complicated developments of the Covid -19 pandemic. Thanks to that, learning progression is still guaranteed, and the school year continues and ends on time.

Besides the achievements, higher education in Vietnam still lags behind other nations in the region and the world. Its progress has not kept pace with the demands and tasks, and it has failed to meet learners' needs. The document of the Congress XIII of the Communist Party of Vietnam (in 2021) stated: "Training first-rate personnel has not fulfilled economic and social development goals" [2, pp.82-83]. At this time, it's vital for us to identify the limitations and weaknesses of post-secondary education in Vietnam to find appropriate solutions, taking it to the next level. Here are some of the most prominent issues.

Firstly, higher education is focusing on equipping professional knowledge. The academic institutions are organized according to specialized universities such as ThuyLoi University, Medical University, University of Pharmacy, University of Economics and Finance, and Foreign Trade University. Even though they have begun to offer multidisciplinary training, they are still specialized universities. Their educational program "pays more attention" to theory and "underrates" practice and application of knowledge.

Secondly, the quality and effectiveness of education and training have not met socio-economic development requirements and lacked cohesion with the labor market. Currently, institutions of higher learning only provide what they "have," not what "society requires." Therefore, in 2020, 225,000 bachelors, engineers, and masters did not find a job or did a job not related to the field of training, causing a massive waste of the workforce. According to the survey results at 60 enterprises specializing in industrial services in Ho Chi Minh City about "Evaluating the satisfaction level of enterprises about the quality of students trained in the first five working years after graduation" (the set of criteria for evaluation includes theoretical knowledge, practical skills, foreign language proficiency, working style, and professional skills), 5% of the total students participating in the survey are rated as very good. 15% of employees belong to a good level. Workers at the average level scored 30%, and 40% of staff failed [4].

Thirdly, colleges have not yet embraced "student-centered learning" in terms of educational approach and forms. There is little contact between teachers and learners since teachers continue to take the lead and learners remain passive. The "knowledge overload" and continuous curriculum change result from a teaching method emphasizing particular knowledge. Unfortunately, the understanding is regularly updated. In recent years, thanks to the new policy of the Ministry of Education and Training, most universities in Vietnam have started training under the credit program like in other countries around the world. However, according to many experts, credit-based training in Vietnam is not proper in its nature. Specifically, students' initiative is limited and educating, testing, and assessing methods are outdated and incorrect. The education on ethics, lifestyle, and working skills has not been paid more attention to. The teaching strategy at university has not yet made a "real difference" compared to general education levels. Therefore, people often

suppose that “teaching at university is teaching level 4” (Primary school is level 1, Secondary school is level 2, and high school is level 3), which is unreasonable because general education and tertiary education aim at different goals. While general education provides learners with essential knowledge and develops their basic qualities, advanced education trains their practical skills and creative thinking. At university, lecturers must teach students how to learn and research, but “copying what teachers read” is prevalent.

Fourthly, Vietnamese higher education is “closed,” meaning there is no link between domestic and international educational standards. Despite being under the direction of the Ministry of Education and Training, the capacity to transfer information among educational establishments poses complexities. Universities and majors are less likely to recognize each other’s training results. Therefore, it is tough for learners to move from this school or this major to another one. Moreover, transferring knowledge between domestic and foreign academic institutions is challenging due to discrepancies in training objectives, content, and methods (except for international affiliate programs as agreed). Currently, most other countries have not recognized university degrees and certificates trained in Vietnam. Therefore, it is arduous for Vietnamese students to study, settle, or work abroad.

Fifthly, despite reaching many recent developments, Vietnamese universities have less research published in international journals than many other countries in the region. With the rise of international integration, the number and quality of papers published in international scientific journals have become an essential indicator of a nation’s higher education quality. Although there are about 9,000 professors and associate professors, 24,000 doctorates, and more than 100,000 masters, Vietnamese international research is quite limited. Consequently, its impact index is lower than some Asian countries, such as Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore...

Lastly, although university autonomy has become a significant policy, the distinction between state management and school-based administrative activities is unclear. On October 24, 2014, the Government adopted Decree No. 77/NQ - CP to grant universities autonomy. However, there is a lack of a specific legal corridor for implementation. School councils have not played a vital role. In contrast, the State and its management agencies play an indispensable part in appointing the Head of School Council and Principal, deciding on the payroll and salary, and determining a budget for scientific tasks.

Higher education’s inadequacy is shown in several issues, including “redundancy of trainers, shortage of trainees,” commercialization of education, a lack of infrastructure, and incongruous compensation for people working in the education sector. Although funding for education and training accounts for 20% of the total expenditure of the state budget, the actual one is often lower than in some Southeast Asian countries. Furthermore, the funds are invested irrationally, resulting in low efficiency and huge losses due to corruption and waste issues. As a result, while university training has become a real economic sector globally, the “drain of foreign currency” and “brain drain” in Vietnam are increasing as learners lean towards foreign educational institutions.

Some solutions to promote higher education reform in Vietnam

It is clear that since the Doi Moi (in 2013), tertiary-level education has made great strides, but its results have not been commensurate with the requirements and tasks. Meanwhile, the Congress XIII of the Communist Party of Vietnam (in 2021) has identified that developing a highly skilled labor force is currently one of the three strategic breakthroughs [3, p.203-204]. If advanced education does not change thoroughly, the labor market will become less competitive, increasing the lag behind other nations. Consequently, it’s too difficult for Vietnam to become a developed country with a high income by 2045, as the set goal. However, it can be said that post-secondary education’s axiomatic and wide-ranging reform is the renewal of major, core, and urgent concerns, from perspectives and orientations to aims, contents, methods, mechanisms, policies, and contexts. It is needful to innovate from the Party’s leadership and the State’s management to the governance activities of each university. Moreover, reform must be systematic and have a long-term vision, as well as an appropriate roadmap. Renovating higher education radically and broadly does not mean starting all again, but promoting achievements, developing new factors, selectively absorbing the world’s experiences, and resolutely correcting misconceptions and wrongdoing. Through clearly understanding the situation and principles mentioned, we propose the following solutions.

Firstly, it is compulsory to change the philosophy of university education. Empirical study shows that the right educational philosophy plays a decisive role in the growth of the education industry. The question is: “What is the educational philosophy whose right and wrong is the cause that determines the success or failure of education?” There are many definitions of this concept, but in our opinion, the educational philosophy is the foundational principle that guides the set of goals, contents, and methods of carrying out educational activities and is summed up by brief sentences. We can understand that it responds to the question: Whom does that education want to educate? And in what manner? Before the tricky situation of Vietnam’s education, in general, and higher education, in particular, many people suppose that the lack of a solid educational philosophy is to blame for all of the current flaws and failures of education reforms in recent years. Therefore, it’s high time to renew education, from the one that takes knowledge as the primary goal to the one that trains skills, self-learning, thinking, and being a good person. In this teaching process, students must be active, and lecturers will guide and orient them on how to acquire knowledge and answer their questions if necessary. Next is a series of structural changes, from the framework program to the curriculum and teaching methods. Current education promotes creativity and doesn’t produce obedient citizens or “bookworms.” Therefore, lecturers must move from imparting knowledge to teaching how to learn and brainstorm. Albert Einstein said: “Education is not memorizing the obvious, but training the ability to think.” Therefore, instead of “stuffing” knowledge, teachers should equip learners with “scientific skepticism,” which can critique existing knowledge and create a new one. In addition, we must centrally change the assessment system from knowledge testing to capacity assessment. It is principal to appraise

the learning capacity of candidates. During the learning process, we must rate the students' ability to understand and creatively absorb understanding. Finally, schools shall evaluate graduates' ability to apply knowledge and practice in the new environment. At this time, training establishments must commit "program outcome standards" according to the requirements and demands of society, not "program outcome standards" determined by schools or teachers. Thus, tertiary education needs to be linked more closely with businesses to be attached to social demands.

Secondly, it is paramount to strengthen the autonomy and self-responsibility of universities, beginning with the large ones. Although Vietnam's Education Law stipulates that advanced training institutes have autonomy in 5 aspects, including:

- (1) developing curricula, syllabus, and teaching plans;
- (2) organizing enrollment and graduate recognition;
- (3) building the apparatus for the teaching process;
- (4) operating, managing, and using all resources, and
- (5) domestic and foreign cooperation, the degree of self-determination has not been specified.

State agencies, especially the Ministry of Education and Training, need to change their management methods to act as a "jurisdiction" to extend universities' self-rule and exclusive competence. Their main tasks are to orient tertiary institutions' activities under the law and create conditions for educational organizations to operate separately. Independence and exclusive competency are inextricably linked. If independence is expanded without a demand for exclusive competency, arbitrariness will increase, and quality will reduce in the pursuit of immediate benefits. In contrast, increasing accountability and limiting self-government will constrain educational establishments, making them operate unnaturally due to the lack of motivation and mechanisms. It also restricts their flexibility and capacity to satisfy society's demands.

Thirdly, it is important to enhance lecturers' quality and staff working in higher education and the field of management. In principle, the quality of tertiary education is always associated with the teaching staff's one. Developing planning and training plans and cultivating the current faculty plays an essential role in establishing and developing this team. It is compulsory to have the policy to attract excellent students to work at school after graduation. There must be a preferential regime and prolonging the working age of prestigious experts and scientists with academic titles and degrees. At the same time, schools shall screen, dismiss, and arrange other jobs for those who do not satisfy the teaching standards in other positions. It is vital to create conditions for Vietnamese scientists abroad and international specialists to teach and research at local universities. In addition to a team of lecturers with sufficient knowledge, teaching skills, passion, and high responsibility, we need to possess people in charge of education management with enough integrity, vision, and talent to employ candidates and adequately handle problems arising in advanced education in the spirit of democracy. Improving the compensation and policy for lecturers and educational administrators is significant because their current wage is still low. In addition to providing a decent salary for those who work in "the noblest and the most creative job," management agencies shall do better communication so that the society can understand and share with their difficulties and hardships, and preserve Vietnam's tradition of "respecting teachers and the knowledge they have taught."

Fourthly, we should encourage higher education to become more socialized and to intensify collaboration and international integration. Review, revision, supplement, and completion of documents, regulations, and laws are critical to attracting domestic and international investors to participate in Vietnam's university education. Currently, there are some foreign universities opening branches or affiliated with Vietnam, such as RMIT University (Australia), Vietnam Japan University, Swinburne University of Technology (Australia) affiliated with FPT Group, and Staffordshire University (UK) affiliated with British University Vietnam (BUV). It is indispensable to promote and create conditions for leading international institutes of higher education to open training centers in Vietnam, especially non-profit ones. Regarding global collaboration and integration, it is requisite to create opportunities for students to participate in exchange programs or "study abroad" in Vietnam. Schools should allow faculty members to draw on experiences of the world's top universities and conduct international seminars and workshops on expertise and educational techniques to raise academics and advanced teaching skills for teaching personnel. Furthermore, it is necessary to build systems and regulations to encourage scientists to actively publish their studies in prestigious international scientific publications, which should be used as a criterion for evaluating the completion of research conducted by lecturers and education institutes.

Lastly, we must accelerate the process of "digital transformation" in higher education. It is significant to effectively deploy databases, promote online teaching skills and quality, and set up online public services. In addition, we shall adequately use the system of exchanging electronic documents and digital signatures between the Ministry of Education and Training and educational institutions, as well as relevant individuals, to diminish complicated procedures for users.

In general, in the era of a knowledge-based economy, the quality of the workforce, a direct product of higher learning, has become an essential factor of development. If we win the "race" of university training, we will win the economic competition. It is the first time that Vietnamese advanced education has faced such great challenges and chances. Thus, the higher education reform is an urgent task, but it requires carefulness because the product of education is people, and it must not create "defective products." Furthermore, the results of innovation can only be determined by the quality of graduates, which takes time to verify. Therefore, Vietnam shall learn from the experience of advanced higher education systems globally to train "global citizens" but holding Vietnamese soul and spirit. National character and characteristics of the times age are key factors that education reformers must emphasize to create chances for Vietnam's sustainable development in the era of globalization and international integration.

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