

# Obstacles to Lifelong Learning in Vietnam and Some Suggested Solutions

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**Abstract:** Vietnam education is moving on the way of lifelong learning (LLL) development. It has achieved significant progress in broadening the scope of education, diversifying modes of delivery, developing networks of educational institutions throughout the country, and renovating ways of learning. However, evidence shows there are still many weaknesses and shortcomings in the change process, especially in human resources development responding to the socio-economic needs of the country. Taking into account that LLL development is country specific, this article focuses in the analysis of different obstacles, namely conceptual, institutional, structural, financial, and individual obstacles to LLL development in Vietnam. The identification of these obstacles enables to provide solutions for a rationalization of existing LLL system in view of making it function as foundation for the building of a learning society in Vietnam.

*Keywords:* Lifelong learning; formal learning; non-formal learning; informal learning.

## 1. Introduction

The idea of LLL was introduced in Vietnam education policy since 1993. At that time, laying down the guiding principles for a continued reform of education, the *Central Committee Resolution* (Vietnam Communist Party [VNCP], 1993) [1] required “to implement a permanent education for all, and to assign that LLL is a right and obligation of every citizen” (p.62). Five years later, LLL was institutionalised in the *Education Law* (National Assembly, 1998) [2], according to which non-formal education should help people not only in their in-service training but also in their continuing and LLL “for refinement of their personality, broadening their understanding,

and for educational, professional, operational enhancement with a view to improving their quality of life, employability and adaptation to the social life” (p.56).

On the implementation plan, LLL and building a learning society were explicitly stipulated in successive Education Development Strategic Plans 2001-2010 and 2012-2020, according to which one of the guiding viewpoints of Vietnam education development is “to build a learning society, to create conditions for everyone of all ages and all levels to pursue continuing and lifelong learning”. This guiding viewpoint was put into action through the issuance of The Prime Minister Decisions on approval of the Building a Learning Society National Framework for 2005-2010, and recently for 2012-2020.

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All this and other related official documents create a legal framework for an active development of LLL in Vietnam. It has gained significant achievements such as establishment of a unified and diversified education system at all levels from pre-school education to doctorate training, expansion of the educational network throughout the country, diversification in forms of educational institutions and modes of delivery, increased access to education, improved articulation between different strands of education, reduced educational gap between regions in the country, enhanced social equity in and social participation to education.

Taken into account the relationship between enrolment ratios and national wealth as shown in *Global Education Digest* (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2005) [3], it has to recognize that although in income Vietnam has just escaped from the level of a low-income country, it has already attained for about a decade the level of educational development characteristic of a low-middle-income country. This means that LLL in Vietnam is moving one step ahead compared to its economic development level.

However education development in Vietnam is rather an extensive one. This places the quality and effectiveness of education at risk. Actually, these are the critical issues of Vietnam education development. The *Global Competitiveness Reports* (World Economic Forum, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012) [4], for many consecutive years, warned that the factor of having an inadequately educated workforce was constantly figured among the five most problematic factors for doing business in Vietnam.

There is also concern if Vietnam education development is seen within an international perspective. According to the *EFA Global Monitoring Report* (UNESCO, 2008) [5], during the period from 1999 to 2005, Vietnam EFA Development Index (EDI) decreased from 0,902 to 0,899 and the ranking of Vietnam fell

from 64/127 in 1999 to 79/129 in 2005. The school life expectancy, after raising from 7,5 years to 10,3 years during the period 1990-1998, remained stagnant at 10,5 years during 2001-2004. Now, if EDI only incorporates indicators for the four goals of universal primary education, adult literacy, gender parity and the quality of primary education, then a broader view of education development can be obtained from the use of the subcomponent education index (EI) in Human Development Index (HDI). Here, with EI which incorporates indicators related to adult literacy rate and combined gross enrolment ratios at all levels of education, the remark is the same: Vietnam EI increased from 0,80 in 1994 to 0,84 in 1999, then decreased to 0,81 in 2004 and still was there in 2006; its rank in education development was correspondingly 86/175 in 1994, 71/162 in 1999, 100/177 in 2004, and 112/179 in 2006 (UNDP, 1996, 2001, 2006, 2008) [6]. According to UNDP (2011, p.2) [7], “growth in Vietnam’s education index appears to have slowed over the past decade, in particular from 2004 to 2008”.

Using time series analysis, it was shown in a study concerning the positioning of Vietnam education on the world map of education (Pham, 2008, 2013) [8, 9] that with data available until 2010, Vietnam education tended to develop slower than that of some other countries in the region, than economic development, and than development in some other areas of the country such as ICT.

This situation is not only undesirable but also critical, raising concern in the society.

## 2. Aim of the study and methodological reflections

It is universally recognized that LLL is a paradigm shift in education development. As such, Vietnam education is in a change process.

It is a process of transformation from a traditional education system to LLL system. However, the above-mentioned actual state of Vietnam education makes evident that the process is problematic and impeded.

In change management, one of the main questions to be addressed during the process is what are the obstacles to change. Therefore the main aim of this study is to get a deeper understanding of obstacles to LLL in Vietnam. That is to answer the question: What are the deficits hindering Vietnam education to meet the demands of LLL?

To do so, the study has to get consensus about LLL concept and to place Vietnam LLL into this perspective.

The official concept of LLL is usually traced back to the UNESCO Faure Report in 1972. Since then the debate concerning its meaning, role, importance, dynamics, and benefits attracts the participation and contribution of the OECD, EC, WB, international and regional organizations, governments, civil societies, NGO, organizations and individuals all over the world (See for example Dahlman, Zeng, & Wang, 2007 [10]; Delors et al., 1996 [11]; EC, 1999 [12]; ILO, 2000 [13]; ILO, 2003 [14]; OECD, 2003 [15]; Thai, 2009 [16]). While there are still disparities in interpretations, it is universally recognized that a LLL system encompasses learning from early childhood to post-retirement; includes formal learning, non-formal learning and informal learning; and requires democratic participation as well as responsibility of the individual, civil sector, and employment world.

The above concept requires a consensus of terminology concerning the meaning of formal, non-formal, and informal learning. In this paper, the definitions published by OECD (2007) are used [17]:

Formal learning can be achieved when a learner decides to follow a programme of instruction in an educational institution, adult training center, or in working place. Formal learning is generally recognised in a qualification or a certificate.

Non-formal learning arises when an individual follows a learning programme but it is not usually evaluated and does not lead to certification. However it can be structured by the learning institution and is intentional from the learner's point of view.

Informal learning results from daily-work related, family or leisure activities. It is not organised or structured (in terms of objectives, time, or learning support). Informal learning is in most cases unintentional from the learner's perspective. It does not lead usually to certification (pp 25-26).

Viewed from the so-called school education, family education and society education as stipulated in the Vietnam Education Law (National Assembly, 2005, pp. 119-121 [18]), all the above-mentioned kinds of learning are facilitated and encouraged in Vietnam. However the actual education system in Vietnam, recognizes only formal education and continuing education (which is both formal and non-formal in the above-mentioned meaning). May be in long term the Vietnam LLL system shall move towards the way of including informal education, but actually and in medium term it is more realistic to rationalize and improve the existing LLL system with its formal and non-formal components so as the whole system will be more functional and performant.

Thus the first point to be clear in methodological approach of this study is to limit only on the identification of impediments to the progress of the existing LLL system in Vietnam.

The second methodological point is to make clear what we mean by progress of the existing LLL system. Structural speaking, the existing LLL system in Vietnam encompasses four periods of education and training: pre-primary education, basic school education, education and training after compulsory education, and continuing training after the completion of initial schooling. (In international LLL systems, there is still a 5<sup>th</sup> period, that of learning after working life). It is now commonly shared in LLL studies that “if we are to abide strictly to the principle of lifelong education for all, then all five periods should receive equal attention from decision-makers and social actors” (UNESCO, 2005, p.78) [19]. Therefore, the notion of progress of LLL in Vietnam means not only progress towards its intended goals stipulated in official documents, but also and particularly progress towards an equal attention to different strands of LLL.

With the above-mentioned LLL central concepts and methodological reflections in mind, in the following sections we shall try first to identify conceptual, institutional, structural, financial, and individual obstacles to LLL in Vietnam, and then suggest in the conclusion some solutions for LLL development.

### **3. Conceptual obstacles**

In Vietnam, LLL is still a vague concept. By reviewing Vietnamese literature related to education in general, LLL in particular, and published in these last five years in Vietnam Educational Review and Vietnam Journal of Educational Research, we can discern the following:

(1) Although LLL is commonly used, the concept has not yet been clearly defined. It is rather understood in a common sense of the

term, not in any rigorous interpretation as is the case in international debate. Even in the educational research sector, there is not yet a shared and agreed interpretation of LLL, formal education, non-formal education, and informal education.

(2) LLL is not yet conceived as a new paradigm of education development which will be best suited to replace the old one based on fixed careers, established competences, one-time schooling, rote memorization, teacher-directed learning, and “bad learners” left behind.

(3) LLL is equated chiefly to adult education, non-formal education or out-of-school education.

(4) LLL is still considered as the duty and responsibility of only the education sector; it does not yet get sustainable and conscious cooperation from other public sector as well as sufficient interest, participation, contribution, and responsibility from the private sector, especially from the industry and business community.

Therefore while much has been said about LLL, the concept is still far away from what has been widely recognized internationally. This conceptual obstacle may be considered as primary cause for other obstacles identified in this study.

### **4. Institutional obstacles**

Compared to countries in the developed world, institutionalization of LLL in Vietnam is still in its initial stage of development. Even compared to other countries in the region, the development of legal documents for LLL in Vietnam is still backward. Korea has passed its Lifelong Education Law since 1999, Thailand has instilled the concept of LLL thoroughly in

its 1999 National Education Act; both cases show not only the change in the legal system but also a paradigm shift in the idea of LLL.

In Vietnam, due to the underdevelopment of LLL at the conceptual level, institutionalizing LLL is rather a matter of “good will” policy than research-based policy. This leads to a fragmented development of LLL with the following obstacles at the institutional level:

(1) Actually, there are four laws in education and training: the Universalization of Primary Education Law, the Education Law, the Vocational Training Law and the Higher Education Law. As before said, the term LLL has already been introduced in laws as well as in guidelines and other legal documents, however, based on what make the difference between a traditional model and a LLL model (World Bank, 2003, p.58 [20]), we can see that the dominant mindset in institutional development is still that of a traditional learning model. That is, although the scope of education has already encompassed formal and non-formal education, the content of education is still curriculum driven with emphasis on acquisition and repetition of knowledge, and the delivery of education is still limited with focus on formal institutions, supply driven, and uniform centralized control.

(2) Coordination between line ministries in the government is weak and unefficient within a compartmentalized, sectoral approach. In the above-mentioned Prime Minister Decision Nr112, it was stipulated that the Ministry of Education and Training should coordinate with the Ministry of Labor, Invalid and Social Affairs in giving guidance to other ministries in the development of appropriate projects and programs for implementation towards the goal of building a learning society during the period 2005-2010. However, a mid-term review report as well as the final report observed that the Project “has not yet received any active

response from agencies at the central level. Although the Ministry of Education and Training (MoET) has sent official correspondence Nr 8255/BGDDT-GDTEX on 14 September 2005 to government ministries and central agencies of mass organizations in view of giving guidance for implementation of the “Building a learning society for 2005-2010” Project, however until now no ministry has developed a concrete plan of action”(MoET, 2008, p.17 [21]).

(3) Cooperation between education sector and employment sector is almost absent. In the last five years, in view of making training responsive to social needs, attention was paid to creating university-industry linkages, however there is still a long way to go before forming effective partnerships with the industry and business community. Some incentives for enterprises when they invest in on-the-job training were stipulated in the Education Law (National Assembly, 1998, Article 91 [2]) sixteen years ago, however until now, there is not any significant contribution to LLL from in-company training. On one hand, most Vietnamese enterprises are still used with a “subventionary behaviour” in recruiting ready-trained employees from the labor market, they pay little attention to training needs analysis as well as training activities in their strategic plan. On the other hand, at the policy level, there is not yet any national program, or at least any effective mechanism for the encouragement and implementation of in-company training.

## 5. Structural obstacles

According to law, the Vietnam education system consists of formal education and continuing education. There is however an important difference in meaning between the Vietnamese and international understandings of the related terms, as follow:

<i>Terms</i>	<i>International understanding</i>	<i>Vietnamese understanding</i>
Formal education	Education leading to certification (certificates, diplomas, degrees)	Education in full-time and leading to certification
Non-formal education	Education with intended learning, and not leading to certification	Term used in Education Law 1998 and replaced by that of continuing education in Education Law 2005. Include part-time intended learning, leading or not leading to certification.
Informal education	Education with unintended learning, and not leading to certification	Not yet considered.

It is commonly understood in Vietnam that LLL is equated to continuing education. This leads to the following structural obstacles:

(1) Primary and secondary education are not yet conceived as foundation for LLL. Although there are great and continuous efforts to transform learning from passive, teacher-directed learning to active, learner-centered learning, Vietnam primary and secondary education are still a kind of traditional education aiming chiefly for exam preparation, university entrance and degree acquisition. This education is ill suited to providing people with the skills they need and to preparing them as lifelong learners. Communication and problem solving skills, learning to learn skills, and required attitudes for the workplace have not yet received sufficient attention in teaching and learning. ICTs applications are greatly encouraged, however the whole picture is still simply through the introduction of computers into the learning setting. Career guidance is of bad quality, unattractive, mostly time-wasting and under-estimated by pupils, parents and the community.

(2) Continuing education, though being considered in law as on equal footing with formal education, in practice is regarded badly from various points of view. It is implicitly considered either as a kind of complimentary education reserved for illiterates, unlucky people, disadvantaged children or as a shelter for “bad learners”, a place to “buy” easily a

certificate or degree necessary for promotion in the career ladder, a legitimate way for teachers to increase their income. At the operational level, continuing education has not yet received equal attention compared to formal education. During these 27 years of education renovation, much has been done for the enhancement of quality and upgrading of facilities for all levels of formal education, but continuing education seems to be left behind. According to the findings of a research project (Nguyen, 2008 [22]), the state of Vietnam continuing education centers was alarming: no attention from the state sector, no investment from the private sector, and no motivation from staff.

(3) There is not yet an established linkage and articulation between formal education and continuing education. Actually this is a critical issue even within the formal system. Linkage, connection and pathways between vocational training, professional secondary education, and higher education are newly created on the basis of credit transfer and are still in pilot stage. Quality assurance and quality accreditation systems are still embryonic, not capable to lay bridges between formal education and continuing education, especially when the quality of in-service training remains greatly doubtful.

## 6. Financial obstacles

During all these years of renovation, Vietnam education is constantly facing a major

contradiction. That is the contradiction between increased access and high demand of quality on one hand and limited financial resources on the other hand. The state budget for education has received priority and increased over years, reaching now 20% of the total state budget, however it is still very much insufficient to respond to the demands of LLL.

One main and successful measure in Vietnam education policy to overcome that contradiction is the so-called socialization of education. The term “socialization of education” is translated word-by-word from Vietnamese, its core meaning is the well known process which is social participation to education. In Vietnam, this policy is institutionalized in the Education Law, according to which “it is the responsibility of all organisations, families and citizens to take care of education, to cooperate with educational institutions in realising the goals of education, and to build a sound and safe educational environment” (National Assembly, 2005, p.79 [18]).

Concretely, the financial mechanism for LLL is stipulated in Decision Nr 112. That is: “Expenditures for the implementation of continuing education activities shall be met chiefly from bringing into play the highest social participation to education” (The Government, 2005, p.17 [23]).

Under that policy, the civil and private sectors have contributed greatly to the achievements of LLL in Vietnam. Private educational institutions are actually present at all levels of formal schooling, opening new opportunities for learning, creating a healthy competitive environment for quality enhancement, and targeting to receive 40% of higher education students and 60% of vocational trainees by 2020. Of particular importance is the steady participation and contribution of civil society organisations, such

as the Association for Promoting Learning, the Women Association, and the Youth League in encouraging and facilitating LLL throughout the country, fostering contextual learning movements such as “eager-learning families”, “learning-promoted family generation”, “learning-promoted communes”, and building a network of LLL institutions including CEC, CLC, foreign language centers, ICT centers, etc...

However, due to the constraints of a low-level economic development of the country, it has to recognize the following financial obstacles to LLL development:

(1) Public-private partnership is still limited and concentrated chiefly in formal education through the establishment of private educational institutions. In continuing education, besides a poor assistance from public funds, a poor contribution from the civil sector, and a poor cost-sharing from learners, the private investment in continuing education development is insignificant. This explains partly why the state of continuing education is still very much to be desired.

(2) Education-industry cooperation in LLL is recently built, limiting only in the identification of industry needs for an efficient training of higher education institutions. Financial contribution of enterprises to LLL development, namely in-company training, is not yet seriously considered.

(3) International cooperation for LLL development is unequal, giving too much priority for formal education, and nearly neglecting continuing education. While there are many ODA and granted projects for different levels of formal schooling, there is not yet any significant project for continuing education.

(4) With the implementation of GATS (General Agreement on Trade in Services) in

education, Vietnam continuing education, as an education subsector open to market access, will face great challenges in trade competition due to its poor financial resources and backward state of development.

### **7. Individual obstacles**

These obstacles are obviously very various. They differ from individual groups (like learners, teachers, employers, administrators, etc.) and from individuals within a same group. Yet, there are some common obstacles characteristic of the majority of individuals in the context of LLL in Vietnam.

(1) The most significant obstacle is the formalism in LLL awareness. The term LLL was used a long time ago in literature, documents and policy, however until now most people do not have a correct understanding of its meaning, importance, role and benefits. Learners think of it simply as a second-time learning if they do not succeed in their initial schooling. Teachers still think that the shelf-life of their degrees is long enough for their use in teaching; they are still far to be examples of lifelong learners for their students. Employers are not yet aware that in-company training is cost-effective and efficient; for them LLL is simply a matter of training institutions. Administrators do not conceive that LLL is in fact a paradigm shift in education development, this requires not only transforming learning but also making significant changes to both the governance and the financing of education. Therefore, in general, Vietnam LLL is still a kind of talk-show among people and rhetoric among politicians.

(2) Another persistent obstacle is the degree-illness in the society. Vietnam has a very precious tradition, that is the eagerness of

learning. This is in fact a good driver for LLL, however due to many causes not discussed here, this entails also a negative consequence, that is the pro-degree mentality. Young people learn for degrees, adults attend in-service training also for degrees. There is also the strange phenomenon of managers and officials hiring students to learn for them, take exam for them and receive diplomas for them. The degree-illness is so grave that it permeated also in the thinking of some policy-makers who were planning that by 2020 all head of sectors, departments and districts of Hanoi should be doctorate holders.

### **8. Conclusion**

In 2006, the 10<sup>th</sup> VNCP Congress gave the following directive for education development: “To gradually shift the actual education model to that of open education - the model of a learning society with LLL system, continuing training, and connecting all levels and sectors of learning; to build and develop systems of learning for all and flexible modes of learning and practising, responding the needs of permanent learning; and to create different possibilities and opportunities for learners, ensuring social equity in education” (VNCP, 2006, p.95 [24]).

One year later, after the entry of Vietnam into WTO, it was decided at the highest level to develop an overall plan for education reform in view of successfully responding to opportunities and challenges in the context of deep and broad international integration (VNCP, 2007 [25]). Guidelines for a radical and comprehensive renovation of education have just been approved, by the end of last year, through the issuance of the Resolution of the 8<sup>th</sup> Session of the Party Central Committee (VNCP, 2013 [26]).

It has been explicitly stipulated that such a reform should be oriented to build an open education system, a model of learning society with LLL system. That is we shall witness a paradigm shift from the existing education system to a genuine LLL system. Of course, there is still a long way to go before reaching that goal, however it is urgent from now on to rationalize the existing system within a LLL perspective.

Taking into account the above-mentioned obstacles, the following solutions are suggested for reflexion and consideration:

(1) To increase awareness in all segments of the society, especially in government ministries and enterprises, about the significance, importance, role and benefits of LLL. Research programs in the field of LLL should take the lead.

(2) To ensure a well-articulated vision and strong commitment for LLL development at the highest level.

(3) To develop a holistic strategy of education development within LLL perspective.

(4) To restructure the education system with appropriate governance and efficient instruments.

(5) To increase participation and contribution of stakeholders with active participation of the industry and business community as well as international partners.

(6) To improve quality assurance and quality accreditation systems for effective articulation of the system, and for sound recognition and validation of knowledge, competencies and skills of learners.

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## Học tập suốt đời ở Việt Nam: Rào cản và giải pháp

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**Tóm tắt:** Giáo dục Việt Nam đang chuyển động theo hướng phát triển học tập suốt đời (HTSD). Theo đó, đã có những bước tiến đáng kể trong mở rộng quy mô giáo dục, đa dạng hóa các phương thức cung ứng giáo dục, phát triển mạng lưới các cơ sở giáo dục trên quy mô toàn quốc, đổi mới cách dạy và học. Tuy nhiên, trong quá trình chuyển đổi, có nhiều bằng chứng chỉ ra rằng giáo dục Việt Nam còn nhiều yếu kém và bất cập, đặc biệt trong phát triển nguồn nhân lực đáp ứng yêu cầu kinh tế - xã hội của đất nước. Chú ý rằng phát triển HTSD không thể tách khỏi bối cảnh cụ thể của đất nước, bài viết này tập trung phân tích các rào cản trong HTSD ở nước ta, cụ thể là các rào cản về quan niệm, về thể chế, về cơ cấu, về tài chính và các rào cản cá nhân. Việc nhận dạng các rào cản này cho phép đề xuất giải pháp để định hướng cho sự phát triển hợp lý của hệ thống HTSD hiện có sao cho nó thực sự trở thành nền tảng trong việc xây dựng xã hội học tập ở Việt Nam.

*Từ khóa:* Học tập suốt đời; học chính quy; học không chính quy; học phi chính quy.