

# Higher Education Reform in Vietnam: Current Situation, Challenges and Solutions

Nguyễn Văn Nhã<sup>1</sup>, Vũ Ngọc Tú<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*VNU University of Education, 144 Xuân Thủy, Cầu Giấy, Hanoi, Vietnam*

<sup>2</sup>*VNU International School, 144 Xuân Thủy, Cầu Giấy, Hanoi, Vietnam*

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**Abstract:** The comprehensive reform that has been vigorously carried out over the last decades in all sectors has achieved important results. In spite of many difficulties and challenges, “Vietnam’s GDP growth rates have been very strong compared to its South-East Asian neighbors” (Nuffic Neso Vietnam). That has been attributed to higher education reform as higher education has been considered a very important part of the renewal of the State. In other words, Vietnam’s higher education reform that has been carried out since the late 90’s of the last century has recorded remarkable achievements. Firstly, the university scope and network has better met the people’s learning requirements. Secondly, higher education quality has been gradually enhanced. Thirdly, equity of accessing higher education has been improved. Fourthly, university governance has changed for the better. Fifthly, teaching and administrative staff have considerably increased in terms of quality and quantity. Sixthly, private higher education has developed. Seventhly, investment in higher education has increased and lastly, higher education institutions’ physical facilities have improved (Education Development Strategy 2011-2012, June, 2012). However, there are still a number of issues to be solved chiefly in the training area in such a way that makes the higher education reform achieve its aims: (i) to produce human resources, raise people’s intellectual level, foster talent, conduct R&D in order to generate knowledge, create new products to meet the requirements of socio-economic development, national defense, security and international integration and (ii) to upgrade some universities to international standards and improve the competitive strength of the country’s human resources and economy (Higher Education Law, 2012). Key words: higher education, reform, objectives, challenges, solutions

## 1. Introduction

Vietnam’s integration into WTO has brought about changes in the economic structures and not only Vietnamese companies, joint ventures but also more and more foreign companies which have invested in Vietnam

require more and more highly qualified human resources for their developments. In order to meet these requirements, Vietnam has to speed up its higher education reform. Higher education reform in the years to come has to be mapped out in accordance with the Higher Education Law 2012 and the Education Development Strategy by the Vietnamese Government. Education and training, science and technology are regarded as necessary

<sup>1</sup> Email: nhanv@vnu.edu.vn

<sup>2</sup> Email: tuvn@isvnu.vn

foundation and active factors for the successful implementation of the socio-economic objectives, national construction and defense. Hence, investment in this field is also considered as one of the targets of investment policy of the Vietnamese Government (Higher Education Law, 2012). Although a lot has been done in terms of higher education reform and the quality of higher education has been positively improved, there are still many difficulties and challenges ahead which have to be surpassed. This paper, therefore, looks at (i) the current situation of Vietnam's higher education, (ii) higher education reform in general and reform in the training area in particular, (iii) and challenges facing higher education and (iv) some solutions for further development.

## 2. Current situation of Vietnam's higher education

Thanks to the higher education reform which started in the late 90s of the last century, Vietnam's higher education system has steadily developed. The number of higher education institutions has increased and the training quality has gradually improved. From the system consisting of only narrowly specialized universities with only Bachelor and PhD degrees following the former Soviet model, now many of them have changed to multi-field, multi-disciplinary/comprehensive universities offering Associate/college, Bachelor/university, Master's and PhD programs.

### 2.1 Types of higher education institutions

It is stated that Vietnam's higher education (HE) consists of the following 5 types:

- (i) Colleges;
- (ii) Universities, academies;
- (iii) Local universities, national universities;
- (iv) Scientific research institutes eligible for PhD training;

(v) Foreign-invested universities (Higher Education Law, 2012).

However, in the authors' viewpoint, national universities should be considered as a separate type as they operate according to their own Regulation on Organization and Operation promulgated by the government. Moreover, they are clearly stated in one separate article in the Higher Education Law 2012 as comprehensive, high quality training and R&D centers which are given priorities for development by the government.

The two national universities: Vietnam National University, Hanoi (VNU) established in on December 10, 1993 by amalgamating some leading mono-disciplinary higher education institutions and Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City (VNU-HCM) established on January 27, 1995 by merging nine higher education institutions. VNU and VNU-HCM have several member universities (7 and 5 respectively), research institutes (5 and 1 respectively), some schools and a number of centers. The model of national universities has been stabilized by the Government's decision to reorganize the two national universities in 2001.

At present, there are 498 higher education institutions out of which 93 are private [[https://vi.wikipedia.org/wiki/danh\\_sach\\_cac\\_truong\\_dai\\_hoc\\_vien\\_va\\_cao\\_dang\\_tai\\_Viet\\_Nam](https://vi.wikipedia.org/wiki/danh_sach_cac_truong_dai_hoc_vien_va_cao_dang_tai_Viet_Nam)].

### 2.2 Organization of higher education institutions

According to Higher Education Law (2012) Vietnam's higher education institutions are organized into State-owned public and private. State-owned public HE institutions are established by the government and receive budgets for their infrastructure, facilities and operational expenditures from the government. Private HE institutions are possessed by social organizations, socio-professional organizations, private economic organizations or individuals and invested and built by social organizations, socio-professional organizations, private economic organizations or individuals. The government supports public HE institutions to

ensure that they always play a key role in the national education system.

### 2.3 Levels of higher education

Vietnam's higher education comprises the following levels: Associate/College, Bachelor/University, Master's and PhD.

(i) Associate/college is from 2 to 3 years depending on disciplines and is for students with upper secondary education certificates, 1.5 to 2 years for students with secondary vocational certificates of the same training disciplines.

(ii) Bachelor/university is from 4 to 6 years depending on disciplines and for students with upper secondary education certificates.

(iii) Master is 2 years for students with Bachelor degrees.

(iv) PhD is from 2 to 4 years for students with Bachelor degrees and Master degrees respectively.

Colleges normally offer three-year programs and award Associate diplomas to those who graduate. About two-thirds of Vietnam's colleges specialize in training teachers for lower levels of the education system. Colleges are small and the students in these colleges make up a small pan of the total enrollment of public higher education institutions.

### 2.4. Higher education management

It might be right to say that HE management is characterized by a very high level of centralization. The Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) has significant power over higher education and determines the curriculum, student enrolment, academic assessment, awarding of degrees, staff appointments, budget decisions, infrastructure and facility maintenance (Hayden, 2005). Universities have little experience in managing themselves or pursuing their own goals. There still exists a severe lack of close links between higher education institutions and scientific research, businesses, industries and employers.

However, it is worth noting that Vietnam's HE institutions are not only managed by the Ministry of Education and Training but also by various ministries and provincial people's committees: namely by Ministry of Education and Training (56), by other ministries such as Ministry of Public Security (11), Ministry of Defense (25) [[https://vi.wikipedia.org/wiki/danh\\_sach\\_cac\\_truong\\_dai\\_hoc\\_vien\\_va\\_cao\\_dang\\_tai\\_Viet\\_Nam](https://vi.wikipedia.org/wiki/danh_sach_cac_truong_dai_hoc_vien_va_cao_dang_tai_Viet_Nam)] and by provincial people's committees. 40/63 provinces and cities have universities accounting for 63.3%, 60/63 provinces have colleges making up 95.2% (MOET, August 2012). Most of Vietnam's college-level institutions are managed by provincial people's committees.

## 3. Vietnam's higher education reform

The contents of Vietnam's HE reform which touch upon all the training and research disciplines focus on reorganizing the system of universities and colleges: their structures and training scope; renewal of learning and teaching, writing a new system of course books, making teaching and research closely linked; training and retraining faculty members; modernizing the equipment and facilities in order to make it possible for Vietnam's higher education to gradually integrate into the regional and world higher education community and meet the requirements of the country's socio-economic development.

### 3.1. Specific objectives for development of Vietnam's higher education

The specific objectives for development of Vietnam's higher education (HE) may be summarized as follows:

To consolidate some highly qualified universities by giving them the priority in human resources, investment, cooperation with prestigious universities in the world so that they can offer high quality training programs of regional and international standards. Up to 2020 Vietnam's higher education will basically reach

the regional standards with some world-class universities;

To continue reforming HE management/governance;

To combine training with research and practice;

To increase the proportion of faculty with Master's and PhD degrees in the whole country;

To increase the number of students per 10,000 inhabitants, and the number of Master students and that of PhD students; more ambitiously, to train 20,000 PhD till 2020, half in Vietnam and half from overseas;

Then what should be done to achieve the above-mentioned objectives?

3.2. *Developing multidisciplinary/comprehensive higher education institutions with 1-2 world class universities (top 200) and gradually distributing HE institutions rationally throughout the country*

It is obvious that Vietnam's higher education still has a lot of specialized HE institutions which focus on a certain single area of study, such as economics, banking, law, technology, agriculture, forestry, fishery... They were said to be suitable for the centrally planned economy rather than the market economy. Therefore, over the last years, quite a number of multidisciplinary HE institutions have been set up by amalgamating the existing institutions, for example, the two national universities in 1993 and 1995 respectively, the three regional universities: Hue, Da Nang and Thai Nguyen in 1994 or upgrading existing colleges into universities like Vinh University in 2001 (formerly Vinh's Teacher's Training College) or Quy Nhon University in 2003 (formerly Quy Nhon Teacher's Training College), just to name a few. The two national universities were established possibly with the hope that they would become world class universities.

In addition, it is really urgent to appropriately distribute HE institutions all over

the country as at present, some cities and provinces have more HE institutions than needed. For example, out of about 498 HE institutions, 188 accounting for 37.7 % are located in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City or Bac Ninh province with the population of less than 1.1 million has 11 HE institutions not to mention other provinces like Hung Yen and Nam Dinh. This has led to the fact that those universities can only recruit very few new students each year. In 2014, Bac Ha International University and Kinh Bac University (Bac Ninh province) could recruit only 400 new students each. [[https://vi.wikipedia.org/wiki/danh\\_sach\\_cac\\_truong\\_dai\\_hoc\\_vien\\_va\\_cao\\_dang\\_tai\\_Viet\\_Nam](https://vi.wikipedia.org/wiki/danh_sach_cac_truong_dai_hoc_vien_va_cao_dang_tai_Viet_Nam)] & [[https://www.google.com/webhp?sourceid=chrome-instant&rlz=1C1GIWA\\_enVN608VN608&ion=1&espv=2&ie=UTF-8#q=tuoi+tre+online](https://www.google.com/webhp?sourceid=chrome-instant&rlz=1C1GIWA_enVN608VN608&ion=1&espv=2&ie=UTF-8#q=tuoi+tre+online)]. In that connection, the rational distribution of HE institutions over the country should be paid more attention to.

3.3. *Establishing private higher education institutions*

It is obvious that the increasing expansion of upper-secondary education has put a great pressure on Vietnam's HE system. The number of upper-secondary students grew more than double from 1,019,500 in 1995-1996 academic year to 2,589,600 in 2003-2004 academic year. While annually, more than 1,100,000 upper-secondary graduates applied for the national entrance examination, the quota for admission was only about 120,000-140,000. In 2004, the number of candidates was 888,479 while the quota of admission was only 139,813. In 2005, the number of applicants for the national higher education entrance examination was 1,537,252 of which 1,120,209 (73%) applied for universities and 4-year colleges, while the quota of admission was only 230,507. That similar situation has prolonged until now. Clearly, getting a study place in a higher education institution is always highly competitive. In

order to meet the youth's excessive demands for study in higher education institutions and ease the public budget burden, in 1993 the Vietnamese government decided to establish private HE institutions. Private HE institutions have created jobs for thousands of permanent faculty numbers and a similar number of support staff as well as thousands of learning places for students.

As was mentioned above, Vietnam now has 93 private HE institutions accounting for 18.6 % of the total of Vietnam's higher education institutions. In terms of administrative apparatus, the key players are experienced, retired administrators of public universities and colleges and government's education agencies. In training, they also are the main faculty of public institutions.

However, it is obvious that although the number of private higher education institutions is growing rapidly, many are plagued by poor management, low quality of teaching and research, and inadequate equipment. For lack of qualified academic staff, facilities, equipment and special laboratories, quite a number of private HE institutions are not allowed to offer programs in such fields as law, architecture, journalism and medicine.

Since the establishment of the first private HE institution, there have been quite a few regulations/policies on the management of private HE institutions such as Decision No. 61/2009/QĐ-TTg and Decision No. 63/2011/QĐ-TTg, Decree No. 141/ND-CP dated 24 October, 2013 and Decision No. 70/QĐ-TTg dated 10 December, 2014 and that is not enough. The lack of a regulative framework and the weak awareness of management hinder government's agencies from effectively supervising private HE institutions. Some private HE institution administrators irresponsibly take an advantage of this gap and run their institutions in an unprincipled way [Student finance and accessibility, <http://www.gse.buffalo.edu/org>].

Whatever happens, it is obvious that the establishment of private HE institutions has proved to be an encouraging result of Vietnam's higher education reform.

#### 3.4. Internationalizing higher education

Globalization and internationalization can be analyzed along four main dimensions: technological, educational, economic and political. Relating to Vietnam's higher education, internationalization can be seen through the establishment of foreign invested universities and foreign training programs run either entirely by foreign universities or through cooperation between a foreign and Vietnamese institution. This sector received a large boost in 2000 with the enactment of Decree No 06/2000/ND-CP dated March 6, 2000 which provided incentives for foreign investment in several areas, including education and training (Kristy Kelly; The Higher Education System in Vietnam; WENR; 2000).

The first university with 100% foreign investment is the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) International University Vietnam. This university has two campuses: one in Ho Chi Minh City set up in 2001 and the other in Hanoi set up in 2004. The university offers training programs which fall under the areas of education, business, computer science, information technology, multimedia and engineering. The third campus is under development at Saigon South with the total investment amount of 20,000,000 USD. The second one is the British University Vietnam (2009)... In addition, over the last years, Vietnam has set up some Vietnam - foreign universities: (i). Vietnam-German University (2008); (ii). Vietnam – France University or the University of Science and Technology (2009); VNU Vietnam – Japan University (2014), Fulbright University Vietnam (2015), Vietnam – Russia University (2015)... These universities are modeled after existing modern universities in the world and thus meeting international standards ranging from curricula, teaching methods, assessment methods and training

management. The idea behind this is to build a higher education that is multi-tiered and that includes HE institutions operating under different ownership model (public, private and mixed). These universities are said to be Vietnam's first research-oriented universities which are more autonomous than other Vietnamese universities and they will be the first universities to hire administrators and 50-80% foreign lecturers

Moreover, a number of foreign institutions have also entered into joint programs with Vietnamese institutions, many of which consist of a study abroad component, and those are referred to as "sandwich programs". They include the Fulbright Economics Teaching Program, a collaboration between the Harvard Kennedy School's Vietnam Program and the University of Economics, Ho Chi Minh City; University of Hawaii's MBA program in partnership with VNU's School of Business, Troy State University's undergraduate degree in collaboration with the VNU's University of Economics, Washington State University's MBA program with the National Economics University, University of Houston's undergraduate degree with the Hanoi University of Technology. Among the "sandwich" programs, the most highly appreciated by MOET are those conducted by VNU's University of Science in collaboration with the University of Greifswald, Germany, Hanoi University of Technology with Sydney University of Technology, Australia, and the University of Civil Engineering with Liege University, Belgium, just to name a few.

In terms of scholarships for overseas study, according to a report of the Institute of International Education, there are only few full scholarships available to study overseas. Each year, there are approximately 10 Canadian government scholarships, 70 UK, 200 French, 150 Australian, 70 short-term and 10 long-term Thai and 60 Japanese scholarships. In addition, there are also 25 Fulbright Fellowships and around 50 scholarships from US Government Vietnam Education Foundation (VEF).

Fellowships for Master students. A significant number of students receive scholarships and other types of awards directly from foreign universities, non-governmental organizations, foundations or corporations. The Vietnamese Government, through MOET, also provides approximately 400 scholarships annually for state employees to study abroad. It is worth mentioning that quite a number of students study abroad at their own expenses.

### 3.5. *Improving the national entrance examination*

As was stated, higher education entrance examinations in Vietnam have always been highly competitive and put great pressure on students and their parents as well as the staff of HE institutions. In 1987, MOET published batteries of higher education entrance examination items for HE institutions and colleges to use in national entrance examinations. That would prevent negative phenomena like cheating that sometimes happened in national entrance examinations in the past. But in 2015, MOET dropped the "3 general examination" and replaced it by the national high school examination thus enabling proactive school enrollment under the scheme approved by MOET. In May, 2015 VNU organized the first "proficiency examination" as its own entrance examination for over 43,000 high school students. And in August, 2015 VNU organized the second "proficiency examination" for nearly 170,000 high school students. This sort of examination has received a lot of support from the public as it has been considered to be effective, less time consuming and more economical.

### 3.6. *Improving the training area:*

#### 3.6.1. *Renovating the training process*

For a long time, Vietnam's HE institutions used the Soviet's model of curricula which was suitable for the centrally planned economy. The main feature of this kind of curricula is that it focused too much on narrow specialization. Although some HE institutions had tried to

renovate their curricula, yet their results had not been up to expectation because their teaching and management staff lacked the knowledge of curriculum design and there was a great shortage of necessary materials and information as well as merging knowledge of offering those specialized disciplines.

Up till now, MOET and many HE institutions have spent considerable time studying relevant theories to initiate a real renovation relating to the aims and contents of curricula. For example, in 1993, MOET promulgated the regulation on structure and block of knowledge in higher education curricula which clearly states that:

- The ratio between the knowledge of general education and that of professional education in a 4 year undergraduate program must be about 4/6;

- The minimum block of core knowledge depends on each specialized discipline;

- Knowledge of the major must include minimum block of 45 *learning units*. Knowledge and skills of the concerned specialized discipline must be offered in such a way that students can choose specific courses under their lecturers' guidance;

- Knowledge of the minor may not be in the curriculum, but it must contain at least 25 *learning units*;

- For basic sciences and pedagogy, part of the knowledge of the major or minor may be placed in the block of general education;

- A *learning unit* represents 15 hours of theoretical lectures (one hour of lecture plus two hours of preparation and one hour of self-study per week, over a 15-week semester), or 30-45 hours of practical work, or 45-90 hours of field work, or 45-60 hours' preparing graduation theses or projects. Four - year programs normally require a total of 210 *learning units*, five-year programs require 270 *learning units* and six-year programs require 320 *learning units*.

In order to give more autonomy to HE institutions and to make training products relevant to and acceptable by the society, MOET requires that the contents of programs must be compiled with the participation of the faculty of an institution and of employers or "consumers" of the products. Based on this assumption MOET devolves the curriculum management as follows:

- MOET directly designs and manages the content of Marxist-Leninist courses, national defense, and physical education;

- Higher education institutions manage the rest of the courses of general education, core and required courses in each curriculum;

- Faculties or departments design and manage electives.

At present, curriculum development is an issue of the government's concern. On 6<sup>th</sup> September, 2004 the government issued Document N<sup>o</sup>1269/CP-KG entrusting key HE institutions with the task of designing "*advanced curricula*". This is understood as the curricula used at prestigious universities of developed countries and appropriate for the requirements of the country's socio-economic development. Then, on 21 October, 2004 by issuing another document, MOET instructed key HE institutions to carry out this important task. A number of universities have submitted their own curricula to MOET for selecting the best to be applied by using the government's funds.

### 3.6.2. Introducing two-phase education and its failure

At the beginning of the HE reform, MOET introduced a two-phase degree program, whereby the first three to four semesters constitute the general education, preparing students for more specialized studies during the second phase. The aims of this two-phase education were: (i) to standardize and improve the quality of basic knowledge of general education; (ii) to provide learners with an opportunity to choose the appropriate profession after two years of general education;

and (iii) to help to popularize higher education. In Phase 1, students take general subjects such as Foreign Language, Physical, Military Education, and Political Theory, as well as core subjects related to their intended training field. There were seven core groupings: Mathematics and Physics, Chemistry, Biology, Social Sciences, Humanities, Business and Management, Economics and Foreign Languages.

Having completed Phase 1, students were awarded a Certificate of General Education which made it eligible for students to take the examination to Phase 2 - the specialized education. At the end of Phase 1, students' status and scholarship were reviewed.

In Phase 2, students took more specialized subjects. Based on the seven core groupings for Phase 1, each HE institution compiled the list of courses for each specialized discipline to be offered. This phase ended with a graduation thesis or project or graduation exams. Formerly, writing graduation theses was only for the best students, but now it is required of all students in many HE institutions as it is considered to be a good way to improve the training quality.

The two-phase HE system had been applied for about ten years until it was strongly objected by the public. Many parents did not want their children to be dismissed from a HE institution that they had to pass a very competitive national entrance examination to get into if they did not pass the examination for the second phase. Theoretically, it was also possible for students to move to another institution after the first phase, but in practice this was restricted because of the nature of the core subject groupings.

Having not achieved its aims, MOET abolished the two-phase education in 1998.

### 3.6.3. Applying the credit system

The term "credit system" has been introduced into Vietnam's higher education for over the last 10 years, yet many people working in this field still lack adequate knowledge and an accurate image of as well as experiences in

this system although it was developed by western universities many years ago. They have understood this system as follows:

- The credit system is supposed to be a system where each student after completing a course will be given a certificate. If a program consists of 70 courses, for example, students must accumulate 70 certificates to be recognized as having completed the program and they will be awarded a degree. It is considered unimportant what and when a student studies in the program. It is also assumed that it is necessary to move to that system because it would make the training process more flexible and would be easier for students to raise the sense of creativeness and activeness in making their own study plans.

- The *learning unit* system advocated by MOET more than 10 years ago is the same model as the credit system used in overseas universities.

Under MOET's regulation on curricula, each undergraduate program must consist of 210 learning units including 90 units of general education and 120 units of specialized education. Each course has a number of learning units. The courses are of two kinds: obligatory and elective. The purpose of implementing a "learning unit system" is two-fold: (i) to provide students with the flexibility in their study rather than sticking to a fixed and rigid academic year, raising their sense of creativeness and activeness, and (ii) to allow students to transfer to another institution or take courses at another institution.

It is fair to say that this system has not yet helped to achieve realize the set objectives nor to bring any changes in the training process at HE institutions in Vietnam because of the following reasons:

All most all courses (subjects) in curricula are obligatory;

Each study week is full of required courses (subjects); students cannot choose other courses they wish to learn;

Although some institutions announce electives in their curricula, they do not have enough faculty to teach those electives;

Institutions do not have technical staff to organize classes according to students' registration for each course;

Institutions cannot provide enough classrooms for courses that students register.

In fact, many HE institutions have used the so-called "mixed annual and credit" system.

Nevertheless, being aware of the benefits of the credit system, in September, 2005 MOET decided to set up regulations on organizing training process by the model of this system, to prepare guidelines for its application as well as the process of applying it in Vietnam's HE institutions and set an ambitious target: by 2020 all universities and colleges in Vietnam will have applied this system.

#### 4. Challenges facing Vietnam's higher education reform

It might be right to say that the overall challenge facing Vietnam's higher education is

that Vietnam lacks even a single university of recognized quality. That is why, without urgent and fundamental reform in the higher education system, Vietnam will fail to achieve its enormous potential (Valley & Wilkinson, 2008). Also according to them, no Vietnamese institution appears in any of the widely used (if problematic) league tables of leading Asian universities. In this respect, Vietnam differs even from other Southeast Asian countries, most of whom boast at least a handful of apex institutions. Vietnam's universities are largely isolated from international currents of knowledge. There is a severe lack of close links between HE institutions and scientific research, businesses, industries and employers. That is further confirmed by Hoang Tuy who states: "The Vietnamese university system is heavily influenced by the Soviet academic system, in which universities were primarily teaching institutions, while research was carried out by research institutes". All that is manifest in the poor publication record (Table 1).

Table 1. Publications in Peer-Review Journals, 2007

Institution	Country	Publications
Seoul National University	Republic of Korea	5.060
National University of Singapore	Singapore	3.598
Peking University	China	3.219
Fudan University	China	2.343
Mahidol University	Thailand	950
Chulalongkorn	Thailand	822
University of Malaysia	Malaysia	504
University of Philippines	Philippines	220
Vietnam National University	Vietnam	52
(VNU-HN and VNU-HCM) Academy of Science and Technology	Vietnam	44

Source: Science Citation Index Expanded, Thomson Reuters

Hayden (2005), MOET's World Bank consultant classifies challenges facing

Vietnam's higher education into four groups:

finance, management (governance), quality and equity of access.

(i) The first challenge is to ensure that HE system must respond to the emerging demands of a growing economy, that is, to satisfy the requirements for human resources of the country's industrialization and modernization and people's learning requirements. Moreover, the training scope has not yet met the requirements of industrialization and modernization; there is imbalance between supply and demand;

(ii) The second challenge is the inappropriate structure of the higher education system, the network of HE institutions and research academies is separated thus reducing investment efficiency and the quality of training and research. Moreover, research is not paid due attention to, teaching is not yet closely linked with research and service for social life;

(iii) The third challenge relates to finance. The financial resources are limited, mainly relying on the State's budget. In addition, the centrally determined structure of funding proves to be inefficient and counter-productive. Most of HE institutions in Vietnam are inactive in finding other financial resources. Hayden (2005) states that the level of funding for Vietnam's higher education is small: only 0.41% of GDP in 2002 out of a total of 4.22% for all levels of education. In terms of expenditure on higher education, Vietnam compares poorly to the rest of the region and the rest of the world (average is 1.22%);

(iv) The fourth concerns training content and methods. It might be correct to say that training quality and efficiency are still low. Learning is not closely combined with practice, and therefore, human resources produced are not highly qualified. Training programs are inflexible focusing on theory rather than practice and slow in integration; learning and teaching methods are outdated, the training process is closed and inflexible. In general, HE institutions have limited research capacity; faculty qualifications are generally low and

vary significantly across types of institutions and regions. Although Vietnam's HE system has recently introduced internal quality measures, it still lacks external quality measures. The technological and administrative infrastructure seems to be inadequate, curricula do not meet the social requirements, teaching methods are backward, the level of articulation and global integration is low. The progress of renovation is slow because of the slow-changing mindset of teachers and their heavy teaching load (World Bank, 2007). That explains why about 50% of Vietnamese HE graduates cannot find jobs in their area of specialization.

However, it is obvious that there are other challenges which should also be considered as important and should be addressed as well. They include:

(v) The fifth challenge is that the teaching and administrative staff have not yet been able to meet the requirements of HE reform both in terms of quality and quantity. At present, there are only 77,000 higher education teachers/lecturers out of which only 9,126 have Ph.D. degrees and 36,347 have Master degrees; and 300,000 management personnel for the whole education system from general education to higher education (MOET, August 2012). There is a serious lack of research experts, and higher education policy makers. Moreover, many lecturers do not pay due attention to research;

(vi) The sixth challenge is management. Management is characterized by a very high level of centralization. MOET has somewhat significant power over higher education and determines matters as varied as the detailed curriculum, student enrolment, academic assessment, award of degrees, budget decisions, infrastructure and facility maintenance. The existing mechanism and policies have not yet created self-accountability, responsibility of HE institutions for personnel, revenue-expenditure balance, and quality of training products;

(vii) The seventh challenge is that healthy competition is not created for HE development. Moreover, HE institutions' development plans are not clear, just short-term rather than long-term and as was mentioned above, they are not rationally distributed over the whole country thus reducing investment efficiency;

(viii) The eighth is that HE reform has not been able to keep pace with economic reform and requirements for integration; HE management cannot keep pace with HE socialization;

(ix) The ninth is equity of access. Vietnam has always confirmed the equity of access very much in line with "admission to higher education should be based on the merit, capacity, efforts, perseverance and devotion and can take place in a lifelong scheme, at any time, with due recognition of previous acquired skills" (UNESCO, 1998). However, the fact is that at present, certain groups (women, ethnic minorities, the less privileged, those from particular regional areas) are not represented in HE proportionately in terms of their numbers in the population. The reason for this is that poverty in Vietnam has a geographical aspect, the poorer regions tend to have fewer HE institutions and people just cannot pay for their HE and this consequently results in a lower level of enrolment.

(x) In terms of training, the key challenges would be as follows:

a) Vietnamese curricula do not meet the needs of about 60% young laborers who graduate from training establishments need to be retrained for at least 6-12 months after being recruited" (Nuffic Neso/Vietnam).

b) Conflict between the expansion of HE system and quality assurance;

c) Outdated teaching methods and evaluation.

Although there are still many challenges as mentioned above, they have to be surpassed if Vietnam wants its higher education reform to achieve its objectives. What would be the solutions?

## 5. Solutions for Vietnam's higher education reform

In order to realize its objectives, higher education's most important mission entrusted by the Government: to produce highly qualified human resources to meet the requirements of socio-economic development, national defense and security, the following solutions for HE reform should be addressed in the most serious way.

(i) Making a master plan of the network of HE institutions in such a way that with their structure of professions and training levels, they are rationally distributed over the whole country and in each province in conformity with population density and strategies of socio-economic development, national defense and security.

(ii) In the immediate future, adjusting the existing system of HE institutions so as to make higher education suitable for the country's socio-economic development and the world's development trend;

(iii) Setting up a flexible and articulated training process, renewing the objectives, contents, teaching and learning methods in higher education;

(iv) Building up a contingent of highly qualified, devoted and capable teaching and administrative staff with advanced and modern teaching and management methods;

(v) Intensifying/speeding up R&D activities in order to improve training quality and directly solve problems arising from the process of socio-economic development and increasing revenues for each HE institution;

(vi) Reforming the financial mechanism for higher education with an aim to diversify financial resources and enhance investment efficiency;

(vii) Renovating HE management according to the orientation towards raising autonomy in such a way that Vietnam's HE institutions are no longer subject to a highly centralized system of control as the most immediate cause of

today's crisis in Vietnam's HE system is a profound governance failure. Quality universities, from Boston to Beijing, enjoy certain core features that are presently lacked in Vietnam (Vallely & Wilkinson, 2008);

(viii) Improving the competitive strength of the whole HE system in the integration process;

(ix) Strengthening quality assurance;

(x) Diversifying and effectively utilizing resources for higher education;

(xi) Closely combining training with research and production;

(xii) Expanding international cooperation as international cooperation is considered "as an integral part of the institutional missions of higher education institutions" and "international cooperation and exchange are the major avenues for advancing higher education throughout the world" (UNESCO, 1998). International academic cooperation has gradually helped to narrow the gap between Vietnam and other countries in the fields of science and technology and to improve understanding between individuals and between Vietnam and other countries. Broader international exchange would bring about an overall improvement in training and research quality as well as the change from the "brain drain" to "brain gain" in Vietnam. In that connection, each of Vietnam's HE institutions must set up an appropriate structure and/or mechanism for international cooperation.

It is believed that with the above-mentioned solutions and measures, Vietnam's HE reform will surely achieve its objectives thus making a worthy contribution to Vietnam's socio-economic development.

## 6. Conclusion

Vietnam's higher education reform has been paid special attention to by the Vietnamese Government since it was started nearly 30 years ago and it has recorded a lot of encouraging achievements. However, this

reform has to be sped up as "without urgent and fundamental reform to higher education system, Vietnam will fail to achieve its enormous potential" and there is a "close relationship between development and higher education" (Vallely, 2008). This paper has dealt with higher education reform in general and the reform in the training area in particular. Although there are still many challenges that have been pointed out, it is believed that they will be overcome so that higher education's management, efficiency, quality and responsiveness and quantitative capacity can surely be improved. With all that being done, Vietnam's higher education will ultimately realize its important missions very much in line with those set by UNESCO especially by Vietnam: (i) to train human resources, enhance people's intelligence; do science and technology researches in order to create knowledge and new products serving the socio-economic development, assure national defense and security and international integration; (ii) to train students that possess political quality, ethics; possess knowledge and professional practical skills, possess capability of doing research and applying science and technology corresponding to their grade; possess creativity, professional responsibility and adaptability to the working conditions, (iii) to help protect and enhance social values, and (iv) to contribute to the development of education at all levels, including through the training of teachers. In that connection, this paper hopes to make a worthy contribution to the success of Vietnam's current higher education reform.

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