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VIETNAMESE HIGHER EDUCATION:

CRISIS AND RESPONSE

I. Overview

This short paper seeks to provide the American members of the bilateral Higher Education Task Force with an opinionated analysis of the crisis in Vietnamese higher education. We begin by analyzing the magnitude of the crisis and its root causes. Next, we consider how key actors—the Vietnamese government, the Vietnamese people, and the international community—are responding to the situation. We conclude by stressing the importance of institutional innovation as a necessary component of an effective reform platform. A short essay on Vietnamese higher education and science by a prominent Vietnamese scientist is included as reference in an appendix.

This memorandum is informed by Harvard’s experience building and operating the Fulbright Economics Teaching Program, a center of public policy teaching and research located in Ho Chi Minh City.¹ At present the Ash Institute is a partner in a research project lead by The New School that is studying the institutional barriers to higher education reform in Vietnam.

II. Dimensions of the Crisis

It is difficult to overstate the seriousness of the challenges confronting Vietnam in higher education. We believe without urgent and fundamental reform to the higher education system, Vietnam will fail to achieve its enormous potential.² The economic development of East and Southeast Asia reveals the close relationship between development and higher education. Although each of the most prosperous countries in the region—South Korea, Taiwan, the city states, and more recently China—have followed unique development paths, their single-minded pursuit of excellence in higher education and science is common theme in their success. The relatively less successful countries of Southeast Asia—Thailand, the Philippines, and Indonesia—offer a cautionary tale. These countries have generally not achieved excellence in higher education and science and they have failed to developed advanced economies. It does not bode well for the future that Vietnamese universities lag far behind even their undistinguished Southeast Asian neighbors.

¹ The Vietnam Program is situated within the Asia Programs unit of the Kennedy School’s Ash Institute. The Ash Institute’s mission is to promote innovation in government and public policy. In Asia Pacific, this mandate is carried out through extensive initiatives in China and Vietnam and other countries.

² For a systematic, comparative analysis of the policy challenges confronting Vietnam see “Choosing Success: The Development of East and Southeast Asia and Lessons for Vietnam.” Available at: <http://www.innovations.harvard.edu/showdoc.html?id=98251>.

Table 1. Publications in Peer-Review Journals, 2007

Institution	Country	Publications
Seoul Natl. University	Republic of Korea	5,060
Nat. University of Singapore	Singapore	3,598
Peking University	China	3,219
Fudan University	China	2,343
Mahidol University	Thailand	950
Chulalongkorn University	Thailand	822
University of Malaya	Malaysia	504
University of the Philippines	Philippines	220
Vietnam Nat. University (Hanoi and HCMC)	Vietnam	52
Vietnam Academy of Science and Technology	Vietnam	44

Source: Science Citation Index Expanded, Thomson Reuters

Vietnam lacks even a single university of recognized quality. 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, as the poor publication record displayed in Table 1 suggests and Professor Hoang Tuy powerfully illustrates in his essay.³

Vietnamese universities are not producing the educated workforce that Vietnam's economy and society demand. Surveys conducted by government-linked associations have found that as many as 50 percent of Vietnamese university graduates are unable to find jobs in their area of specialization, evidence that the disconnect between classroom and the needs of the market is large. With up to 25 percent of undergraduate curricula devoted to required coursework laden with political indoctrination, it is little wonder that Vietnamese students are ill-prepared for either professional life or graduate study abroad. Intel's struggles to hire engineers to staff its manufacturing facility in Ho Chi Minh City are illustrative. When the company administered a standardized assessment test to 2,000 Vietnamese IT students, only 90 candidates, or 5 percent, passed, and of this group only 40 individuals were sufficiently proficient in English to be hired. Intel confirms that this is the worst result they have encountered in any country they invest in. Vietnamese and international investors cite the lack of skilled workers and managers as a major barrier to expansion. The poor quality of undergraduate education has another implication: in

³ 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. The Vietnamese government is attempting to promote university-based research these efforts have met with little success, for reasons discussed below. As Table 1 suggests, Vietnam's research institutes are not performing very well either.

contrast to their Indian and Chinese peers, Vietnamese often cannot compete for slots in elite graduate programs in the US and Europe.

Table II. Innovation Index

Country	Patents Awarded in 2006
Republic of Korea	102,633
China	26,292
Singapore	995
Thailand	158
Malaysia	147
Philippines	76
Vietnam	0

Source: World Intellectual Property Organization, 2008 Statistical Review

III. Causes of the Crisis

A. Historical Legacy

The problems Vietnam faces in higher education today are in part a consequence of the country's tragic modern history. The French colonial regime that ruled Vietnam from the latter half of the nineteenth century until 1945 invested very little in tertiary education, even in comparison with other colonial powers. As a result, Vietnam missed the wave of institutional innovation in higher education that swept across much of Asia during the early 20th century, when many the region's leading institutions of higher learning were established. As a result, after independence Vietnam had very weak institutional foundations to build on. (This is in stark contrast to China, where, even today, most of the country's top universities were established well before the revolution.) This period, marred first by war and then by an era of heavy handed socialist rule, were not conducive to building quality institutions of higher learning.

B. Governance

The most immediate cause of today's crisis is profound governance failure. Quality universities, from Boston to Beijing, enjoy certain core features that are presently lacking in Vietnam.⁴

Autonomy: Vietnamese academic institutions remain subject to a highly centralized system of control. The central government determines how many students universities may enroll, and (in the case of public universities) how much university instructors are paid. Even decisions as core to the operations of a university as promoting faculty are controlled by the center. This system denies universities and institutes the incentive to compete or innovate. Remuneration is based on

⁴ Our analysis of the governance failures in Vietnam has been influenced by the findings of the Task Force on Higher Education, which was convened by the World Bank and UNESCO and co-chaired by Professor Henry Rosovsky of Harvard and Professor Mamphela Ramphele of the University of Cape Town. In its final report, *Peril and Promise: The Challenges of Higher Education in Developing Countries*, the Task Force concluded that governance is often the primary barrier to better outcomes. (Available at <http://www.tfhe.net>.) Professor Rosovsky is an advisor to the Ash Institute's ongoing work on institutional innovation in Vietnam.

seniority, and official salaries are so low that university instructors must moonlight excessively to support themselves. In contrast to China, Vietnam does not yet offer incentives to foreign educated Vietnamese.

Merit-based selection: Corruption is rife and it is well known that degrees and titles can be purchased.⁵ University personnel systems are opaque and promotion is too often based on non-scholastic criteria such as seniority, family and political background, and personal connections. Faculties and the upper levels of administration tend to be dominated by individuals trained in the Soviet Union or Eastern Europe who cannot speak English and, in not a few cases, are hostile to younger, western educated colleagues.

International links and standards: Knowledge generation is a borderless enterprise, but Vietnamese academic institutions lack meaningful international connections. Indeed, young foreign educated scholars frequently cite the concern that they will be unable to stay current in their fields as a reason why they wish to avoid careers in the Vietnamese academy. As Professor Hoang Tuy describes, the Vietnamese academy is very inward looking and does not evaluate itself according to international standards.

Accountability: Vietnamese universities not accountable to outside stakeholders, including, critically, employers. Within the public system, funding is not tied to performance or quality in any meaningful way. Similarly, government research funding is awarded uncompetitively and is primarily a form of salary supplementation. Because university slots are so coveted—only one in ten Vietnamese of college age are enrolled in post-secondary institutions—Vietnamese universities do not feel pressure to innovate. They have a captive market, for whom study abroad is an option for a tiny minority.

Academic freedom: Even in comparison to China, Vietnam is notable in the degree to which its universities lack intellectual dynamism. Even as universities have gradually been accorded greater space, a web of formal and informal controls and constraints ensures that universities have remained intellectually moribund while the public discourse has grown more vibrant.

There are several implications of the above discussion. *First*, the principal barrier to improved outcomes in higher education is not primarily financial. In fact, as a percentage of GDP, Vietnam spends on more on education than many other countries in the region. This figure does not include the large sums that Vietnamese families invest in the education of their children, at home and abroad. How the money is spent is another matter. *Second*, investments in foreign study are not enough to improve the system. Unless the professional environment is overhauled, it is unlikely that more than a handful of foreign trained Vietnamese will return to the academy.

IV. Responses

A. Government policies

⁵ It should be emphasized that the one component of the university system that is not hobbled by corruption and nepotism is the university entrance examinations. The government devotes significant resources to ensure that the examination process is not compromised. As a result, admitted students are talented and many succeed in augmenting the obsolete curricula through self study.

For much of the period since 1986 when Vietnam embarked on *doi moi*, its process of economic reform and liberalization, the pace of reform in higher education has been glacial. During this period quality stagnated to the degree that some Vietnamese scientists believe that the quality of instruction in the core disciplines like the basic sciences has declined.⁶

In the past three years the government has attached a higher priority to education reform. In 2005, the government adopted the policy statement Resolution 14 on the “comprehensive renovation of higher education” by 2020. It is a turning point, calling for governance reforms, including greater institutional autonomy and more merit-based selection mechanisms. While it is difficult to gauge Resolution 14’s impact on the policymaking process, but the pace of change remains slow.

More recently, the government has announced an initiative to establish a series of new institutions with international partners and has expressed a willingness to commit funds borrowed from multilateral lenders like the World Bank. While this policy represents a welcome recognition of need to build new institutions of higher learning, many questions remain. The Vietnamese educational authorities retain a strongly “state-centric” view of higher education collaboration in which governments, not institutions, are the primary counterparts. This approach is particularly ill-suited for working with the highly decentralized American system in which individual universities are the primary actors and the role of government limited. Secondly, the government has displayed a “central planning” mentality in designing these institutional development initiatives, including by predetermining the fields in which each new university will specialize (initial proposals suggest a pronounced focus on science and technology related fields, perhaps to the exclusion of the humanities and many social sciences). Thirdly, although the initiative is predicated on the concept that international partners will provide administrators and faculty, the funding mechanism is uncertain; it is not clear whether funds borrowed from multilateral donors would be available for the international partners. Finally, it remains to be seen how much actual autonomy these new institutions will be accorded.⁷

B. Exchange

Vietnamese people have studied abroad in increasingly large numbers since 1986. In the early years of *doi moi*, most studied abroad through bi- and multilateral scholarship programs such as the Fulbright program, the World Bank program etc. As Vietnamese society has grown wealthier, Vietnamese families have begun to self-finance the education of their children. Recent years have witnessed an especially rapid rise in students going to the US; according to the Institute for International Education, Vietnam ranks among the top twenty country sending students to the US. Vietnamese economists estimate that Vietnamese families are spending at least one billion dollars a year on study abroad.

Foreign study is an important response to the crisis in Vietnamese higher education, but is by no means a solution. First and foremost, foreign study is only an option for the tiny minority who either have the ability to pay or are fortunate to win a scholarship. There is a wide and growing opportunity gap between urban and rural and between a wealthy elite and the great majority who

⁶ In recent years private universities have proliferated. However, these institutions are still subject to many of the same controls as public universities. Almost all are profit seeking ventures and rely on tuition payments to generate revenue; as a result, quality is uniformly low.

⁷ The “Vietnam Germany University” is the first of these new institutions. It is described as a joint project of the Vietnamese and German governments.

remain poor. Vietnam is a large country and cannot possible “outsource” higher education to foreign universities. Second, as long as Vietnamese universities continue to offer appalling working conditions and unattractive incentives, individuals who study abroad will continue to avoid university careers. Informal polls of Vietnamese graduate students in the US reveal that a strong majority will not return to existing Vietnamese universities but would consider returning if the professional environment were more attractive.

C. International Actors

International donors have supported individual exchange for many years. At the request of the Vietnamese government, donors are now investing heavily in the higher education system. In our view, donor efforts in this area have been ineffective because they have done little if anything to address governance issues. Donor funds have not been awarded on a competitive basis, and recipient institutions report that they have had little say in how funds can be spent.

International universities are encouraged to establish training programs in Vietnam, either independently or (most commonly) in partnership with domestic institutions. With few exceptions, these initiatives are revenue-driven and as a result are concentrated in a handful of applied fields for which there is ready market demand (such as marketing, management, computer programming, etc.). Admission is largely based on ability to pay, and beyond the reach of all but a small minority. At best it could be said that these ventures occupy one niche in the higher education ecosystem. They are not filling the demand for high quality education.

The government is keen to attract the participation of leading international, especially American, universities. We have argued that there are at least three keys to realizing this goal. First, the government must realize that quality universities will not enter Vietnam in the role of investors. Moreover, in the global race for talent American universities are highly sought after partners. Bluntly put, Vietnam must be willing to pay. Second, and equally importantly, we have stressed that reputable universities will not compromise their academic standards and the government must make an ironclad commitment to good governance, including permitting greater academic freedom and autonomy than is currently the norm in Vietnam. Third, because American higher education is so decentralized, the US government will necessarily play a limited role, facilitative role in promoting the participation of US universities.

IV. Conclusion: The Need for Institutional Innovation

Sweeping governance reforms are the key to improving Vietnamese higher education. However, reforming academic institutions anywhere is a long term process. This is why we believe that Vietnam must build a new institution of higher learning that from the outset incorporates good governance into its institutional DNA.⁸ Such an effort would have a transformative impact on Vietnamese higher education. A new institution could offer an attractive home to young Vietnamese scholars and scientists who are currently uninterested in pursuing academic careers in Vietnam. Second, a institution can be a model which other universities can learn from and emulate—as well as a source of healthy and much-needed competition. We believe that the Higher Education Task Force is uniquely positioned both to advance the reform process in

⁸ We have suggested to the Vietnamese government that it assemble a consortium of American universities to build a research college, initially providing undergraduate training and slowly launching graduate programs.

Vietnam by developing a more comprehensive and actionable roadmap for institutional innovation in Vietnam.

Appendix I.

Professor Hoang Tuy is widely regarded as one of the most accomplished Vietnamese scientists of the 20th century. A mathematician, he has published widely in international journals and a theorem bears his name. Professor Tuy has emerged as one of the most trenchant critics of Vietnamese higher education and science. The following essay appeared in *Tia Sang*, a Vietnamese journal published by the Vietnamese Ministry of Science and Technology. It has been translated from the Vietnamese by the Harvard Vietnam Program.

New Year, Old Story

A couple of months ago, in his speech to the National Assembly declaring his resignation, Prime Minister Phan Van Khai conceded that we have failed in education and science. And a few weeks ago, Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's outstanding politician, reminded us that success in education is a prerequisite for economic success.

In the bustling atmosphere of the country's WTO accession and preparations for international integration, we hope the comments from these two leaders will provide a strong new jolt for Vietnamese science and education.

The endless stagnation in Vietnamese science and education that has existed for years is indeed an objective reality that is easily observable. But it was the first time in a long time that this truth was officially acknowledged by the most senior official in the government. If we are honest with ourselves and do not lull ourselves with illusionary or exaggerated achievements, which is a prerequisite for success, then the former Prime Minister's assessment should not make us pessimistic, but to the contrary, should give us more faith in our country's future. That's because it tells us more clearly where we are and what we have to do to make up for lost time.

Singapore's meteoric rise from underdevelopment to modernity within three or four decades is mainly due to their early focus on education. Hence, their advice is more compelling than any theory. It must be acknowledged that we have had bright leaders who understood the importance of developing education, science and technology and viewed it as a "national priority." Nevertheless, the practice over past years shows that it is not easy to translate this priority into action. While policy statements and resolutions stress this priority, too many of the policies that are most relevant to science and education in fact reflect a very different spirit. We hope this time that these two synergistic comments from Vietnamese and Singaporean politicians will serve as a wake-up call to officials serving in every field so that they have a stronger commitment to the development of science and education for the sake of the country's prosperity.

1. Need for a strategic vision. Money is not the biggest obstacle to elevating education and science. The decay of our science and education is not due to a lack of money but to the fact that we do not know what to do or how to manage. Science and education is a complicated system that can be well managed only when its specific features are thoroughly understood and informed by the experience of the world and of preceding generations. Most important of all is a strategic vision for immediate and long-term objectives, direction, demand, capacity relevant to development trends, guiding ideology, and a general path of actions; this constitutes a philosophy of science and education in the present world. Without systematic thinking and a comprehensive, strategic vision, one could easily make himself busy with trivia and a here today there tomorrow approach, endlessly "reforming" in a fragmentary and inconsistent way, exacting huge costs but

resulting in nothing more than complicating a system that is already crippled and devoid of vitality. Given the fact that the present world is changing rapidly, the development of science and education requires leaders who are not only well-intentioned and honest but who also have the ability to quickly perceive changes and think creatively to find the most adaptive development strategy.

2. System errors must be fixed. Nowhere are the four virtues of diligence, efficiency, honesty, and integrity, more needed than in education and science. An education and science system that lacks these moral principles will, of course, not function properly and, sooner or later, will stagnate. Minor internal adjustments based on a management feedback mechanism cannot rescue the system, instead the only way to rescue the system from crisis is to find and fix the system errors. So what are the errors that make our science and education system lack diligence, efficiency, honesty, and integrity? This question should be asked not only of science and education but also of the entire state apparatus. These very errors have so far defeated our anti-corruption campaign. The key lies in the salary/income paradox: official salaries are only a fraction of non-salary income. When this happens, science and education workers have of course to dedicate all their intellect and talent to the pursuit of non-salary income which is distributed chaotically and unfairly, and cannot be strictly audited, and which is the root of many evils that are well known to us all. Why is this called a system error? Because the salary/income paradox dominates and distorts all relationships in the system. It's so bad that increasing salaries to a living wage without fixing the errors will not improve the situation. This system error has produced relationships that over time have become a structural part of the system, thus even after fixing the error one will have to wait for some time, and perhaps fix additional errors, before the system begins to function normally again. In the final analysis, eliminating the salary/income paradox is a prerequisite for ensuring the virtues of diligence, efficiency, honesty, and integrity and thereby improving standards in science and education. I would go so far as to guarantee that as long as the paradox exists our science and education will remain a failure. Of course, fixing the paradox is financially feasible but ideologically quite difficult because it affects a significant number of officials who benefit from non-transparent governance. On the whole, the question is: are we really committed to a strong and healthy science and education system? That question must be answered honestly.

3. Think globally. If we are to win in the globalized world, all our thoughts and actions must take account of the common rules of the game. We must move towards and obey international standards in all areas of activity if we are to cooperate and compete. Unfortunately, from PhD training, to the selection of professors, to criteria for evaluating the quality of a scientific work, a scientist, or a university...we use our own standards that bear no resemblance to those used elsewhere. We even have scientific works and PhD theses in internationally significant fields like the basic sciences, economics, etc. that wouldn't be worth the paper they are printed on if they were assessed according to international standards. Many of our professors do not deserve their title and a large number of them fall far below basic international standards. Ironically, there are many others, especially younger people, with excellent expertise and talent, but who are disqualified because of our trivial criteria that are of no consequence in other countries. As result, one is not surprised to learn that Mr. A or Ms. B who in Vietnam is regarded as famous scientist, is in fact totally unknown internationally. Recently, a great number of officials have acquired academic titles dishonestly; they are completely undeserving of these honors but many people still believe that they are reserved only for individuals of outstanding talent.

Our standards are so chaotic and yet, the other day I heard the chairman of the Council on Professorships declare in a newspaper that to be entitled to the rank of professor one... must establish one's own school of scholarship! In all honesty I do not know whether what the chairman refers to as a "school of scholarship" has anything in common with the concept of a "school of scholarship" as it is understood in other countries. With such exceptional standards how can we possibly expect to integrate?

The danger of empty braggadocio without regard to international standards is that we easily deceive ourselves and in the end what is true and what is false are confused and we can no longer distinguish between the talented and the inept. The titles of professor and associate professor in Vietnam have been so cheapened that when, in a discussion of talent, one hears mention of this or that professor, most people feel sick.

4. Accountability. A knowledge-based economy is in fact an economy that relies on intellect and talent. Hence, successful integration requires paying special attention to attracting talent. For years the government has loudly called for Vietnamese who have succeeded abroad to return. This position is correct and necessary. In reality, however, it has encountered a number of obstacles, of which the biggest one is that while the policy is enlightened, the policy environment underneath it is completely closed. From top officials to common people, by no means everyone understands this policy. For example, some important government agencies like the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Interior, and the Office of the Government all have bizarre regulations reflecting very conservative, outmoded perceptions that contribute nothing to the minimal basic conditions scientists require. A few examples... According to a Ministry of Finance regulation, a professor is entitled to fewer square meters of work space than a mid-level bureaucrat. How can professors conduct research or meet and discuss with their students when they are squeezed into such narrow offices. Ironically, a professor's hourly teaching rate is determined by his rank within the bureaucracy (e.g., a minister or deputy minister is paid much more for an hour of teaching than a professor). On the government salary scale, the most senior professor is paid less than a medium level bureaucrat. There are so many salary grades that the majority of hard-working, talented scientists can never reach the highest grade...unless they worked until the age of 90 or 100.

The other day I read a letter printed in a newspaper complaining about the audacity of Vietnamese who earned a degree abroad and have yet to contribute to the nation but who are already demanding special incentives. Who dares to dispute the comment, but it sounds very much similar to the attitude "who are professors to demand a personal office?" or "you are an overseas Vietnamese scientist and have enjoyed a life of privilege for years, now you are serving your country so why are you demanding this and that entitlement?" With attitudes like these we might as well abandon the policy of attracting talent and postpone our escape from poverty and backwardness until the 22nd century—or even later.

5. Speed. Successfully integrating into the world today requires both efficiency and speed, or, more precisely, the ability to respond rapidly has become a significant advantage in business, and is sometimes more important than efficiency. That's because until recently the first criterion in business was efficiency, and firms prioritized anticipating their customers' demands and increasing capital efficiency. That business logic is appropriate when markets are stable or changing slowly. Nowadays, however, when the market is unpredictable and the world is changing at dizzying speed that logic has been rendered obsolete and been superceded by a new logic that prioritizes rapid response over efficiency. If the previous strategy was "make-and-sell"

the preferred course of actions today is “sense-and-respond.” Speed and the ability to respond rapidly are of central importance if one is not to miss opportunities.

In a world changing at an extremely rapid pace, our slow, lollygagging work ethic is unacceptable. The administrative reforms of the past 10 years have not produced any results but have in fact made simple procedures more complicated. System errors are the main cause of the corruption, red tape and extravagant waste that persist from year to year. Every National Assembly session vigorously denounces corruption but this national curse is never rolled back. The practice of giving envelopes of cash is a shameful cultural attribute of our society that has stubbornly existed for decades; in fact even the office of a top government agency sets a bad example. Science and education stagnate while talent is profligately wasted. Year after year, countless conferences and workshops are organized to discuss the problem yet not a single concrete, feasible policy has emerged that might present a ray of hope. We have discussed *ad nosium* the importance of incentivizing human capital but at the end of the day the only thing we have done is carve valedictorians’ names on a golden list hanging in the Temple of Literature! For more than ten years there have been any number of reasonable recommendations regarding education reform and development, from the training of PhD students and the awarding of professorships to specific proposals related to the organizing of entrance exams, tracking, student selection, university autonomy, etc. For every problem we face, no shortage of substantive reforms have been proposed, but only very recently have these proposals been examined. Reform is always a hot topic in science and education, but no sector has been as slow to reform. Most recent is Prime Minister Phan Van Khai’s excellent idea to build a top-tier university that has received the support of American scholars. In the two years since the concept was first raised, there has been no progress. A friend of mine told me that the Chinese Prime Minister recently visited a western country and agreed that one of their prestigious universities would open a branch campus in Beijing; within a few months the school began to recruit students. Windows of opportunity do not remain open for long.

In a world of the Internet, spaceships and mobile phones if we cling to our sluggish thinking and continue to work at a turtle’s pace, opportunity will pass us by. No one is patient enough to wait for us. The era of information technology has just begun and already people are discussing the transition to the era of nanotechnology; unable to anticipate the surprises that may lie ahead, even if we think, act, and run at the same time, we may still be unable to “sense-and-respond”.