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HIGHER EDUCATION IN VIETNAM: ISSUES, OPPORTUNITIES, AND ACTIONS

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The following REPORTS are available at the VEF website, www.vef.gov, under "Resources":

1. *Observations on Undergraduate Education in Computer Science, Electrical Engineering, and Physics at Select Universities in Vietnam*
2. *Observations on the Current Status of Education in the Agricultural Sciences in Vietnam*
3. *Opportunities for Enhancing STEM Education in Vietnam: A Forum for the Discussion of VEF's Reports on Undergraduate and Agricultural Education*

ABSTRACT

With the cooperation of the U.S. National Academies and Vietnamese government and academic entities, the Vietnam Education Foundation (VEF), a U.S. Federal government agency, conducted two focused research projects on the status of higher education in Vietnam. Twelve U.S. experts conducted on-site research and observations in Vietnam. As the mission of VEF is to build bilateral relations through educational exchange and capacity building, the overarching intent of the projects was to help strengthen higher education in Vietnam. The purpose of these projects was multifold: (1) to assess current conditions of teaching and learning in computer science, electrical engineering, physics, and agricultural sciences at select Vietnamese universities; (2) to identify opportunities for improvement; (3) to assist in implementing changes in Vietnamese higher education; and (4) to produce models that can be adopted across academic fields and institutions in both Vietnam and elsewhere. The resulting reports are entitled: (a) Observations on Undergraduate Education in Computer Science, Electrical Engineering, and Physics at Select Universities in Vietnam; and (b) Observations on the Current Status of Education in the Agricultural Sciences in Vietnam. Opportunities for improvement and scenarios for change are identified. Following the dissemination of these reports, VEF sponsored a workshop in cooperation with the National Academies and the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) to discuss proactively the recommendations and plans for improvement with leading decision-makers from Vietnamese universities. This paper will summarize the reports and present the outcomes of the workshop.

BIOGRAPHIES of PRESENTERS

Lynne McNamara has been dedicated to international education for over 30 years during which time she has lived and worked in Europe, the Middle East, Asia, and the United States. Her career includes the development and administration of programs in the U.S. and overseas for both international and American students. Her faculty positions have included teacher training as well as teaching foreign language to Americans, English to non-native speakers, multi-cultural skills, writing, and poetry. She received her Bachelor's degree in Italian at the University of Colorado, Boulder, and then, her Master's in Linguistics. She attained her Ph.D. in Education at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. Prior to her appointment as Deputy Executive Director, Dr. McNamara served the Vietnam Education Foundation (VEF) as Acting Executive Director as well as Director of Programs. Before joining VEF, she was Director of International Programs for the University of Maryland University College (UMUC) in Adelphi, Maryland, after serving as UMUC's Director of Program Development in Asia from 1999. From 1992 until 1999, while on the faculty of Temple University Japan, she served as Director of Corporate Relations and created the Office of Career Development. From 1989 until 1992, Dr. McNamara was Academic Director of Arizona State University Japan. Before going to Japan, she was the Academic Director of the USAID-funded English Teacher Training Program in Egypt (1987-89), administered by Fulbright. Earlier (1980-86), she established and directed the American Language Academy in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

Peter Gray earned his Ph.D. in Educational Psychology from the University of Oregon and his Masters Degree in Curriculum Theory from Cornell University. His areas of higher education expertise include student learning outcomes assessment; quality assurance; course, curriculum, and program design, development and evaluation; and leadership and planned change. From 1984 to 2002 he was Associate Director of the Syracuse University Center for the Support of Teaching and Learning. He became Director of Academic Assessment at the United States Naval Academy in August 2002, where he is responsible for developing and maintaining a broad program of academic assessment. Dr. Gray has over

40 publications including the chapter *Roots of assessment: Tensions, solutions, and research Directions in Building a Scholarship of Assessment* (Banta, T. W., editor, 2002); *The campus-level impact of assessment: Progress, problems, and possibilities. New Directions in Higher Education* (number 100, winter 1997, co-edited with Banta); and *Viewing assessment as an innovation: Leadership and the change process in this New Directions in Higher Education volume*. Dr. Gray chaired the Middle States Association Commission on Higher Education Advisory Panel that produced the publication, *Student learning assessment: Options and resources*. He has also given numerous workshops, key note addresses and presentations at conferences and on individual campus world-wide concerning topics related to the enhancement of educational excellence in higher education.

Margaret Petrochenkov received her Ph.D. in Comparative Literature at Indiana University, but has been primarily engaged in the administration of Fellowship Programs for graduate students and postdocs during the greater part of her career at the National Academies. At present, she works with the Research Associateship Programs (postdoctoral positions in federal laboratories), the Ford Foundation Diversity Fellowships at the predoctoral, dissertation, and postdoctoral levels, the Jefferson Science Fellowships, and the review for the Vietnam Education Foundation Fellowships. Since 2004, she has traveled to Vietnam 5 times while engaging in the on-site reviews, and has participated in a workshop in Hanoi dedicated to the improvement of the educational system in Vietnam in August 2007. She wrote the summary report for that event. Dr. Petrochenkov is the primary organizer of the bi-annual Fellowship Roundtable meetings, where fellowship program administrators meet to discuss policy and to promote their fellowship programs. She is a specialist in the design of fellowship program guidelines and applications, along with the organization of reviews and the selection of review panelists.

Opportunities for Enhancing STEM Education in Vietnam: A Forum for the Discussion of VEF's Reports on Undergraduate and Agricultural Education

Summary

Site Visit Teams of the National Academies authored two reports on the current status of higher education in Vietnam. The first, *Observations on Undergraduate Education in Computer Science, Electrical Engineering, and Physics at Select Universities in Vietnam*, focused on three disciplines at four premier Vietnamese institutions and was released in August 2006. The second, *Observations on the Current Status of Education in the Agricultural Sciences in Vietnam*, followed from site visits to four Vietnamese agricultural universities, and appeared in January 2007. VEF widely distributed these publications in Vietnam to professors, administrators, researchers, and MOET. Workshop participants received electronic copies of these publications in English as well as in Vietnamese in advance of the meeting. All participants on site received the Executive Summary and Conclusions of the first report (Appendix I), and the Executive Summary and Conclusions of the second report (Appendix II). The full reports are available at the VEF website (www.vef.gov) both in English and in Vietnamese.

After Dr. Vo Van Toi, the Executive Director of VEF, welcomed all workshop participants, Dr. Nguyen Thi Thanh Phuong, Country Director of VEF, began the Workshop with a briefing on the undergraduate education report. She outlined the Site Visit Team's observations on undergraduate programs in computer science, electrical engineering, and physics and underlined five problem areas that the team identified in the Vietnamese educational system: undergraduate teaching and learning, undergraduate curriculum and courses, instructors, graduate education and research, and the evaluation of student learning outcomes and institutional effectiveness.

The Site Visit Team made recommendations, which include the following. Vietnam needs to increase the number of universities as well as the number of faculty members. Universities should require local institutional autonomy and a system of program review and accreditation. Faculty and students need access to online journals, research data, and other public information electronically. Faculty members need to develop professionally, which could be facilitated by reducing their course load. The MOET-mandated curriculum needs revision and reorganization, including a reduction in the number of required courses. Universities should include fundamental and basic research in their organizational structure. The Site Visit Team also suggested a focus on improving teaching methods in high school, and encouraged these students to choose a college major before graduation.

Dr. H. Ray Gamble of the National Academies then summarized the findings of the agricultural education report. This Site Visit Team observed many of the same problems and issues already cited. Additionally, the Agriculture Site Visit Team suggested comprehensive rather than over-specialized education for students in agriculture. Furthermore, while reiterating the need to integrate research and teaching at educational institutions, the Site Visit Team also underlined the need to integrate research at the extension level and to reward cooperation between extension, universities, and institutes.

Four participants from the two Site Visit Teams and two members of the VEF staff then made brief presentations. Dr. Peter Gray, Director of Academic Assessment, Faculty Enhancement Center, United States Naval Academy, presented his ideas on teaching methodology. Dr. John E. Hopcroft, Professor, Department of Computer Science, Cornell University, spoke on curriculum and course content. Dr. Lynne McNamara and Dr. Nguyen Thi Thanh Phuong, both from VEF, discussed the evaluation of students and faculty. Dr. Neal Van Alfen, Dean, College of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences, University of California, Davis, delivered a talk on faculty development and advancement, followed by Dr. Isaac Silvera, Thomas Dudley Cabot Professor of the Natural Sciences, Lyman Laboratory of Physics, Harvard University, who spoke on research in undergraduate and graduate education.

On the second day of the workshop, Dr. H. Ray Gamble presented the charge to the four breakout groups to identify opportunities for improvement in the Vietnamese higher educational system, based on the two reports and the workshop presentations of the previous day. After a three-hour breakout period, each of the four groups presented the following results of their discussion to the larger group.

Groups 1 and 3: Teaching Methodology & Student and Faculty Evaluation

Facilitator: Dr. Peter Gray¹

The discussion focused primarily on establishing teaching methodology that could be used to foster active learning. This group also noted the lack of formalized institutional assessment to guide educational reforms. The group recommended that MOET/Vietnam:

1. Establish Centers of Higher Education Teaching and Learning to “Train the Trainers.”
2. Decentralize - Provide autonomy at each level from rector to student.
3. Base teachers’ salaries on responsibilities, not on hours in the classroom.

Group 2: Curriculum Development and Course Content

Facilitator: Dr. John Hopcroft

The curriculum development and course content group maintained that students in Vietnam are required to spend too much time in the classroom, which leaves them little opportunity to study and internalize the material. University faculty members claimed that they had no leeway in establishing their curricula, while MOET claimed that they do have some, which is a critical difference in perception. The group recommended that MOET/Vietnam:

1. Reduce the number of credits required for degrees.
2. Increase the amount of homework.
3. Ask professors to spend less time teaching and more time in office hours and grading papers for the same, if not a higher, salary.
4. Experiment with reducing the number of courses in a few departments in a few universities to demonstrate effectiveness before trying this on a wide scale.
5. Reduce the number of credits required for courses such as military service, Marxism, Leninism, that do not bear on academic course content.
6. Transfer decision-making power to universities.
7. Convince MOET to measure the output through national examinations in a transparent process.

Group 4: Faculty Evaluation, Development, and Advancement

Facilitator: Dr. Neal Van Alfen

The faculty, evaluation, development, and advancement group maintained that faculty evaluation is lacking or flawed. Professors, as well as students, need mentoring and support from peers. In their view, faculty members need to share in the decision-making process. The group recommended that MOET/Vietnam:

¹ Workshop participants were initially permitted to choose one of 5 breakout sessions. Based on the interest of the participants, groups 1 and 3 were combined into one session.

1. Develop evaluation criteria at each institution (autonomy required).
2. Base evaluation on both quality and quantity, not just quantity in teaching.
3. Allow faculty and management to devise transparent evaluation criteria together.
4. Provide help to those who need it.
5. Make evaluation transparent--include peers, supervisors, self, AND students.
6. Include methods such as questionnaires, classroom observation, and interaction with external groups.
7. Permit each university to develop its own methodology (MOET should provide ideas, but not impose them).
8. Involve the faculty in management—faculty should share in the decision-making process with management (each university requires autonomy in this process).
9. Develop a Center of Excellence in Teaching.
10. Include research as a fundamental part of faculty development and provide better access to funding and more laboratories.

Suggested Improvements in Resources:

1. Better laboratories and facilities to conduct research.
2. Improved level of English, especially for institutions outside of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City.
3. Interlibrary loan system and other means of sharing between universities.
4. Improved access to information and resources (Internet, laboratories, international journals and books).

Group 5: Research in Undergraduate and Graduate Education

Facilitator: **Dr. Isaac Silvera**

The breakout group on research in undergraduate and graduate education primarily addressed funding issues. Most research funding goes to the Vietnam Academy of Science and Technology (VAST), not universities, and the regional and provincial colleges receive a very small share. Research should not be separated from teaching, but at present it takes place primarily in research institutes and is not integrated into teaching institutions. Government-supported research does not collaborate with industry and the private sector, thereby decreasing opportunities for funding and the production of new technologies. Industry raids well-trained and talented professionals and scientists from educational institutions. Since academic researchers cannot supplement their salary from outside sources such as contracts with industry, even more academic researchers leave educational institutions. Universities cannot compete with industrial salaries and cannot provide equipment and facilities without foreign grants. Even when the institutes have sufficient equipment and funding, staff retention falters and researchers feel underutilized in the work environment. The group recommended that MOET/Vietnam:

1. Create Teaching-Research Teams, as the University of Da Nang currently does.
2. Allow student participation in research.
3. Supplement faculty salaries through research funds rather than increased hours of lecturing.
4. Recognize that time for research is a fundamental part of a professor's work responsibilities.
5. Increase the interaction between MOET officials and universities with VEF Fellows—strategically recruit VEF Fellows.
6. Encourage universities and MOET to develop a strategic plan to integrate research into undergraduate study.
7. Provide research funding to universities on a competitive basis.
8. Recruit and retain research-oriented faculty (such as VEF Fellows).
9. Require successful research for faculty promotion.

Possible approaches for Vietnamese university research:

1. Improve laboratory facilities, libraries, Internet access.
2. Encourage teaching by Ph.D. level faculty.
3. Support faculty research programs.
4. Make research part of a professor's employment responsibilities.
5. Support independent research programs for junior faculty with start-up funds for junior faculty research.
6. Connect promotion with successful research.
7. Reduce inbreeding, or hiring one's own graduates.
