

## **Educational Leadership Challenges: Vietnam's System of Higher Education**

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### **Abstract**

There are long lists, published in numerous reports, recited at numerous conferences, contained in numerous newspaper articles, of the challenges facing the systems of education, and especially the system of higher education, within Vietnam. Vietnam is a country that has been invaded, occupied and ravaged by war on more than one occasion, which struggles to retain its dignity, protect its values and find its balance as it moves forward trying to provide a better life for its people.

While the challenges of educational management and leadership are apparent through out all systems of education in Vietnam; this paper, focuses on the institutions of higher education. In the past, many have pointed to wars and poverty as the root cause for the challenges facing education in Vietnam. We, on the other hand, would suggest that while the country lacks in the area of resources, both financial and human, the larger impacts today have to do with how the resources are used.

There is no doubt that one of the keys to unlocking the aspirations and abilities of this remarkable nation lies in the area of educational leadership. We must also acknowledge that we believe Vietnam presents a unique and special set of problems for those who pursue research related to leadership and change.

The key educational leadership challenges facing Vietnam are discussed in an effort to articulate an educational leadership research agenda for the country. The five major areas covered include:

- The centralized control and administration of the educational systems;
- The strong resistance to change at all levels of education;
- The lack of trained and experienced human resources, both in quantity and quality;

- The lack of institutional history or continuity, dramatic changes with leadership changes;
- The high level of global isolation and lack of global integration.

These discussions lead to the identification of a set of research agenda themes. Our position is that Vietnam's agenda for research in the area of educational leadership and management will not be a traditional agenda. Rather, the agenda is likely to be unique and challenging in its need to understand the complex dance between society, government and education.

Studies that focus on description; what are the management styles currently in practice? How much educational leadership is evident among today's academic leaders? What has been the level of educational exposure by the academic leaders to formal training in the areas of management and leadership? What has been the level of experience in positions of management and leadership?

- Studies that compare the state of affairs in Vietnam with other nations, similar or dissimilar in circumstances.
- Studies that focus on the forces in Vietnam that are preventing the adoption of known improvements in the areas of leadership and management?
- Studies focusing on the transition from centralization to decentralization in the educational systems of Vietnam. What is the evidence of the transition in the educational systems? Where does the current state of affairs place Vietnam in relation to other systems of education?
- Studies that attempt to quantify the levels of integration across nations. Have there been measurable impacts of globalization on educational leadership in Vietnam?
- And finally, studies should explore the extent to which leadership and best practices management that are found in Vietnam have been able to impact educational functioning and student achievement?

This paper is not an academic article on the system of higher education in Vietnam; it is a discussion of a possible research agenda in the area of educational leadership within in the country. It is not meant as a full analysis of the system of higher education, but rather a brief introduction to the major challenges thought to form the core of potential research activity.

## INTRODUCTION

The last two decades have witnessed a rapid change in the educational systems of Vietnam in general and in higher education in particular. The change in higher education can be seen very clearly in the data concerning the expansion of the existing institutions as well as in the establishment of many new universities and colleges in all parts of Vietnam. There were 101 universities and colleges in the country in 1987 as compared with 376 in 2008 and now 422 as of April, 2009 (Lao Động Điện tử Cập nhật, 2009). The number of higher education students increased from 133,000 in 1987 to over 1.7 million in 2009, an increase of 92% with the 2009 enrollments representing 13 times those experienced in 1987. The number of lecturers (faculty) has increased by over 3 times from 20,000 in 1987 to over 61,000 in 2009. (MOET, 2009)

With rapid socio-economic changes, twenty-first century higher education faces major challenges in its governance systems, curriculum, mission focus, external relations, research, and financing (Shin & Harman, 2009). According to a report from Vietnam's Ministry of Education and Training (MOET, 2009), the development of Higher Education in Vietnam is undoubtedly faced with many challenges including the inability to meet the demands of industrialization, modernization, international integration and the learning needs of the people. In addition, the U.S. - Vietnam Education Task Force Final Report (September, 2009) said that Vietnam is under the "pressing need for significant modernization of Vietnam's higher educational system, including fundamental changes in governance, institutional autonomy, financing and administration, faculty hiring, promotion and salary structure, as well as in curricula and the modalities of teaching, evaluation, and research" (p. 3).

"While Vietnam's higher education system is developing rapidly and on a large scale, the education ministry's management is failing to keep pace and higher education management is lagging behind." (MOET, August 2009) The problems and challenges of the Vietnamese system of higher education have been repeatedly reflected in the words of various people and organizations; some of these are reported here.

## **THE PROBLEM IN THE WORDS OF OTHERS**

“Participants from across the country also called for better quality of management staff, national and international standard curricula, modern teaching methods and better facilities in schools nationwide. They said several shortcomings including low wages, lack of adequately trained teaching and management staff needed to be addressed to achieve higher education standards in the country.” (From: Schools should develop national characteristics, 01/12/2009 *VietNamNet Bridge*)

“We believe without urgent and fundamental reform to the higher education system, Vietnam will fail to achieve its enormous potential. ... 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.” (From: Vietnamese Higher Education: Crisis And Response, Thomas J. Vallely and Ben Wilkinson, Harvard Kennedy School Ash Institute, Asian Programs)

“Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Education and Training Nguyen Thien Nhan said that the quality of higher education in Vietnam remains low and drastic measures are required for a big improvement. The Deputy Prime Minister made the remark at a national conference held in Ho Chi Minh City on January 5 with the participation of representatives of 17 ministries and branches as well as universities and institutes nationwide.” (From Measures for improving quality of higher education, Nhan Dan, 2009)

“Vietnam's educational system is in crisis, and the lack of qualified human resources is one of the biggest factors limiting Vietnam's development and economic growth. Top Vietnamese officials, including Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung, are aware of this challenge... Moving from today's failed system, protected by a hide-bound and largely unqualified hierarchy of educators, will not be easy...” (From: US-Vietnam Education Memo, 2008, US Embassy, Hanoi)

“Vietnam is facing a crisis in its education systems at all levels that jeopardizes its pursuit of economic progress and global integration. Officials lack training in education administration, teachers are poorly trained and underpaid, and corruption plagues the system at every level. In addition, opportunities for higher education are limited, as the system can accommodate only a

fraction of those seeking admission. In 2007, Vietnamese universities had places for only 300,000 of the 1.8 million candidates who sat for university entrance exams. Although the number of university students has doubled since 1990, the number of teachers has remained virtually unchanged, a statistic disturbing to experts.” (From: US-Vietnam Education Memo, 2008, US Embassy, Hanoi)

## **EDUCATION IN VIETNAM**

The above examples talk about a fraction of the long lists of challenges facing the systems of higher education within Vietnam that are published in numerous reports, recited at numerous conferences, and contained in newspaper articles on a regular basis. Vietnam is a country that has been invaded more than once, occupied more than once and ravaged by war more than once; a country that struggles to retain its dignity in an ever globalized world, intent on protecting its values and to finding a balance as it moves forward in its efforts to provide a better life for its people.

The challenges of educational management and leadership are apparent through out all systems of education in Vietnam; this paper, however, will focus on the institutions of higher education. In the past, many people have pointed to wars and poverty as the root cause for the challenges facing education in Vietnam. We, on the other hand, would suggest that while the country lacks in the area of resources, financial and human, the larger impacts today have to do with how the resources are used. The choice between these two perspectives will impact one’s research agenda for education in Vietnam.

To provide an understanding for readers who are unfamiliar with the system of education in Vietnam, the structure of the national system of education can be seen in figure 1 below.

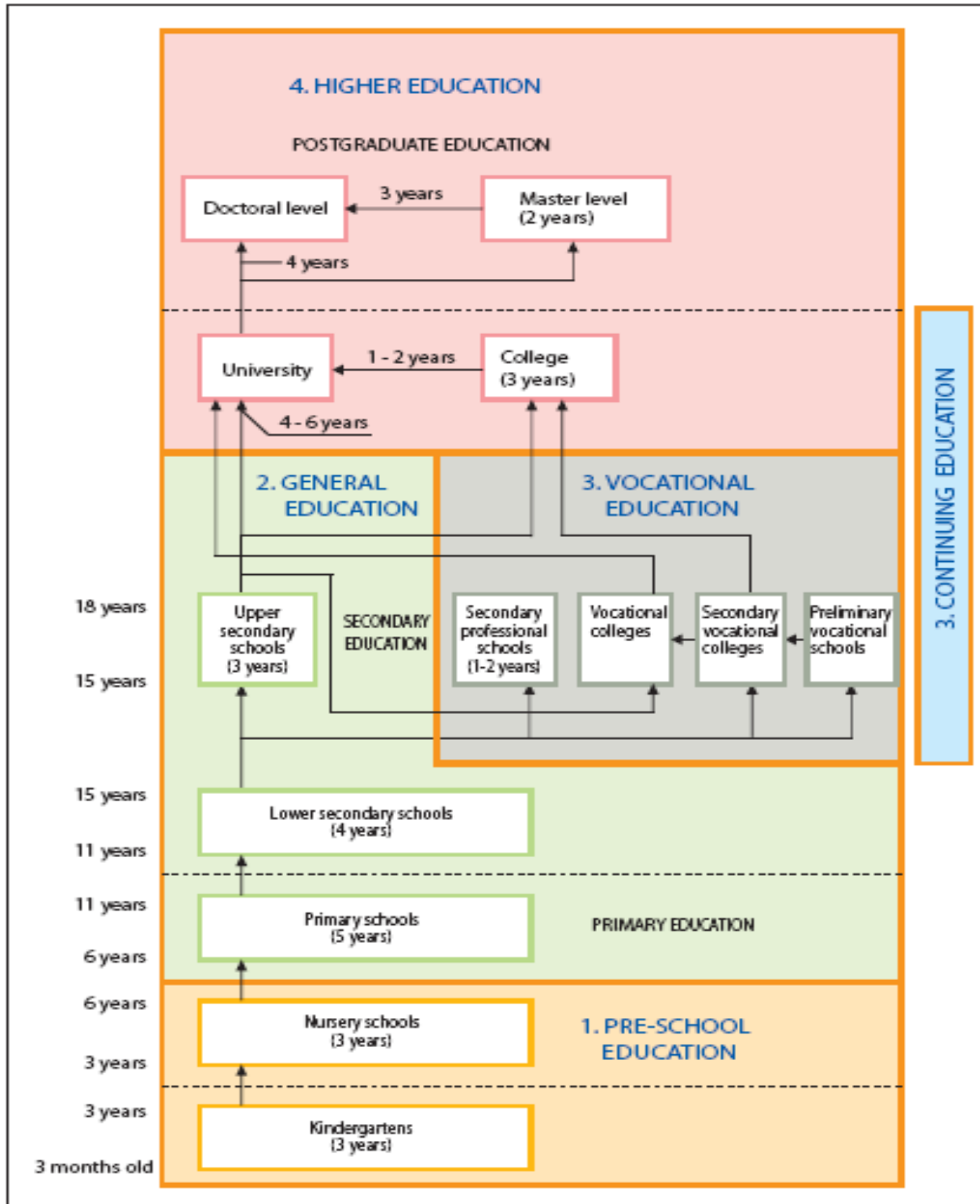


Figure 1: Structure of the national educational system of Vietnam (According to Education Law 2005)

In order to understand some of the material presented here it is important to know that a culture of centralized planning and bureaucratic decision-making is deeply rooted across most areas of public service provision in Vietnam (Hayden& Lam, 2007). The whole educational system, including higher education, has been controlled at the micro level by the central government particularly the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) and other related ministries. Not all Universities and Colleges in Vietnam report to MOET, many, mostly single disciplined institutions, report to other Ministries in the country (i.e., the University of Medicine and the University of Dentistry report to the Ministry of Health, while the University of Police reports to the Ministry of Security and the University of Transportation reports to the Ministry of Transportation).

The political and educational leaders in Vietnam are often heard talking about change and the desire to improve the systems of education in Vietnam. But what one will find when you scratch the veneer of verbal presentation is a system of management and leadership subject to norms of culture and government so strong that those entrusted with performing the task of improving education within the country do not have the ability to carry out the very ideas of those who lead them suggest need to be done.

The MOET is under pressure to provide high quality education that is able to meet the requirements of the developing society, at the same time it is required to increase its efficiency. This task is not easy and requires competent and motivated administrators within the MOET and its local departments (Edquist, 2005).

MOET has encountered many challenges and in fact is not responsible for all of the problems evident in the Vietnamese systems of education. The MOET is often perceived as ineffective because of its lack of responsiveness to challenges but in reality MOET cannot be responsible for everything. Institutions of higher education, through mechanisms for decentralization, must be given the authority to take care of their own business (Edquist, 2005).

It is important that the educational administrators be able to respond to changes in the conditions of the environment of their institutions. In Vietnam, both public and private institutions have

mico-level challenges within their own walls. Institutions have developed a mini-culture of resistance. This mini-culture makes it difficult to implement management “best practices.” While change is always difficult, regardless of the culture, nation or circumstance, in Vietnam the causes of resistance to changes and what is hindering the changes appears to be different.

There is no doubt that one of the keys to unlocking the aspirations and abilities of this remarkable nation can be found in the area of educational leadership. We must also acknowledge that we believe Vietnam presents a unique and special set of problems for those who pursue research related to leadership and change.

## **KEY EDUCATION LEADERSHIP CHALLENGES IN VIETNAM**

There have been and are many educational leadership challenges in Vietnam. Those that might be considered major challenges can be identified as the system of centralized control resulting in the lack of institutional autonomy, the resistance to change at all levels of organization, and a shortage of highly qualified human resources who would be able to function successfully in the age of globalization.

The following discussion represents our attempts to lay the groundwork for a set of recommendations concerning a research agenda for Leadership in Education in Vietnam. They are not meant to be a complete objective critic of the current systems of education in Vietnam. There have been many positive changes in the educational systems in Vietnam over the past couple of decades. These issues, we believe, represent the core areas of research interest in understanding the pace at which change is taking place.

### **Centralized Control**

The centralized control and administration of the educational systems in Vietnam by the central government is a way of life. MOET, the Ministry of Education and Training is the source of all formal leadership in the field of education within Vietnam. There is a desire by the central



government to decentralize decision-making accountability to higher education institutions for the purposes of achieving greater efficiency and effectiveness in the use of resources; and on the other hand, there is also a desire by the central government to retain control of the socialist orientation of higher education and of the deployment of the sector within a framework of centralized national economic management (Hayden& Lam, 2007).

As a result, Vietnam's systems of education display unique and clear characteristics:

- There is a general lack of accountability from individual institutions and schools; reporting to MOET and through MOET to the nation absolves them from the responsibility of accountability for their own actions.
- There is a lack of strategic planning at the individual institution and school level. Planning is a centralized function and MOET dictates the path for all institutions that report to it.
- Accreditation and quality assurance activities are performed by the individual institutions and schools; but these activities are accomplished in response to requests and directions from MOET. In Vietnam, the activities of accreditation and quality assurance are not so much for the purpose of institutional assistance in their efforts toward improvement but rather represent a process of identifying and ranking good institutions versus poor institutions.
- Centralized control hinders an institution's/school's abilities and flexibility to function as effectively as they can
- Recently, decentralization has been delegated to universities and schools by the central government through decree No 07- 2009, but it is not really realized throughout the educational system due to the existence of bureaucracy and the resistance to for change among educational leaders and administrators. Legislative enactment of a right to autonomy for higher education institutions is only a first step. A regulatory framework consistent with this right also needs to be established. Hayden& Lam (2007) stated that with the highly regulated environment of higher education in Vietnam, the process of

renegotiating existing regulatory controls in light of institutional autonomy is not likely to be a simple matter.

### **Resistance to Change**

Changes in leadership perception, leadership styles and actions have taken too much time by educational leaders of all levels. In other words, resistance to change is still strong at all levels of education

Above all else, there is a resistance to change in Vietnam that is different from what one will find in other nations. While we know a great deal about the direction that is needed to obtain improved leadership capability, it is important that we identify and understand the elements of resistance to educational changes and innovation in Vietnam. This resistance results in:

- The lack of opportunity on the part of Vietnamese educators to learn new things from the outside world. Even given such opportunities both the language barrier and a pervasive conservative mind-set have prevented the Vietnamese from understanding and adopting best practices.
- Change, as it does in any situation, often carries with it risks; risks of failure or rejection or lose of title and power. In the Vietnamese society, where everything of worth comes as the result of a struggle, few educational leaders or managers want to take risks necessary to champion the necessary changes.
- Change always takes a great deal of effort, determination and commitment on the part of the changers. These characteristics are not rewarded in Vietnamese society; as a matter of fact they might result in punishment and being ostracized. Consequently researchers are likely find low levels of these characteristics among educational administrators at all levels in the educational system.

## **Shortages in Human Resources**

The quantity and quality of trained and experienced human resources who could serve the goal of change and innovation in education in Vietnam is in short supply. There is a lack of visionary educational leaders, as well as a lack of well- trained and qualified faculty, teachers, and educational administrators.

In addition to the shortage in human resources, there is also a low capacity to utilize effectively the human resources that are available. The authoritative and bureaucratic style of leadership and management and inflexibility of regulations and their implementation mitigate the impact of trained and experienced educators.

Brain drain is a reality happening in the educational system of Vietnam and this fact seriously challenges the educational leadership at all levels. In the mean time, attracting talented individuals to provide sound governance as chairs and members of governing councils may be problematic in Vietnam because so few of those likely to be considered for appointment at this level will have had any experience of self- governance within the higher education sector (Hayden& Lam, 2007)..

This shortage and low level of utilization in the area of human resources, preventing the development of the critical mass necessary for the implementation of change and innovation, results in:

- The persistence of strong resistant to change and innovation at all levels of the educational systems in Vietnam;
- The inability on the part of the educational systems to develop good strategic plans for long term development;
- The inability to establish the prerequisites needed for positive changes and innovation to take place;

- The marginalization of those who are well-trained and experienced to the point that they are not able to fully develop and utilize their abilities due to the bureaucracy and the resistant to change within the system itself.

### **Fluctuating Educational Priorities**

Educational priorities of the systems of education in Vietnam seem to change the focus each time there is a change of key educational leaders; especially at the ministry level. Historical and Institutional continuity is low within MOET and most Universities. The normal length of terms given to people in the positions of educational leadership usually do not allow enough time for them to fully implement their educational priorities. With the power and authority afforded to leadership within the Vietnamese society, successors seldom continue the efforts passed on to them but rather move directly to focusing on their own priorities. Energy and resources expended by the predecessor are wasted while new energy and resources are re-directed to the incumbent's projects. Changes in educational priorities lead to many other related changes such as those that occur in the organizational structure of the Ministry and Universities and the nature and destination of the budget allocations.

### **Globalization and Education**

Vietnam, perhaps more isolated for a longer period of time than most other nations, experiences exaggerated impacts of globalization on its educational systems. Educational leaders, without true global exposure, are unable to identify and develop a clear national approach to the development of their educational systems and to the improvement of school performance. Language barriers, social barriers and mobility barriers have combined to prevent the identification and development of the most suitable direction and practice for education in Vietnam in the age of globalization.

The same barriers result in a reduced capacity to utilize external human resources from foreign experts, professors, universities, schools, and NGOs. Language barriers, awkward and unusual

working styles, and the lack of sufficient accountability, transparency and sustainability in partnerships all work to impact the country's ability to integrate into the global community.

And of course, what has been true of many developing countries in the past, Vietnam is impacted by brain drain in the educational system. Vietnam is experiencing both the loss of human resources to other countries as well as the move of educational experts, well known professors, teachers from the public sectors to private sector due to the better paid, more comfortable working conditions and more room for their academic freedom.

The growing numbers of private institutions have helped expand access to higher education in today's world, while quality assurance has become a critical issue (Shin, 2009) which challenges the educational leaders. Shin (2009) also stated that there has been growing concern about student issues, effective instructional methods, and student's career development.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS/THEMES**

We investigate the world of education in the hopes of understanding ways of improving the quality of our product – student learning and development. We have volumes and volumes of results collected over the years by an uncountable number of scholars from all over the world. We are seeing more and more attention given to the craft of meta-analysis; the summarizing and synthesizing of research results to cull from the collection of research results that which holds promise and importance in the field.

We know that the findings vary to some degree from society to society, institution to institution, population to population, and research project to research project. Vietnam's agenda for research in the area of educational leadership and management will not be a traditional agenda. It is not a matter of subjecting old hypotheses to new tests or discovering the direction and magnitude of correlations between management and performance. Rather, the agenda is likely to be unique and challenging in its need to understand the complex dance between society, government and education.

The agenda is likely to first focus on descriptive studies; what are the management styles currently in practice? How much educational leadership is evident among today's academic leaders? What has been the level of educational exposure by the academic leaders to formal training in the areas of management and leadership? What has been the level of experience in positions of management and leadership? In other words, the immediate agenda might be exploring the fundamentals of the state of affairs in Vietnam by educational level.

From the development of some basic knowledge concerning the state of affairs in Vietnam and how that compares with other nations, similar or dissimilar in circumstances research could begin to look at *the forces in Vietnam that are preventing the adoption of known improvements in the areas of leadership and management?* We are sure that this question is appropriate for other countries and institutions within other countries and departments within other institutions; but in Vietnam, a whole system of higher education appears to be challenged in its inability to adopt best practices. Why? This is a fundamental research challenge for Vietnam.

Over the past years, dare we mention again Do Moi, there has been clear signs of a transition from *centralization to decentralization in the educational systems of Vietnam*. This theme leads to a number of agenda items; what is the evidence of the transition in the educational systems? Given the movement, where does the current state of affairs place Vietnam in relation to other systems of education? Have there been noticeable changes in the leadership and management evident in educational systems as the transition from centralized control and planning to more autonomy and decentralizing takes place.

Apart from the issue of internal national changes are agenda items related to yet another theme; that of globalization. Can we quantify levels of national integration? Have there been measurable *impacts of globalization on educational leadership in Vietnam?* What are the challenges presented to Vietnam and their possible solutions?

Finally, research should explore the extent to which leadership and best practices management can be found in Vietnam and whether or not they have been able to impact educational functioning and student achievement?

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