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## **Viet Nam's Education in the Transitional Period**

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**VIETNAM'S EDUCATION IN THE TRANSITIONAL PERIOD**

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**Abstract**

Vietnam has been in the process of Doi Moi or renovation for nearly 20 years, because, as part of the global village, it has no alternative but to become competitive in the world economic activities. This marks a period of change when Vietnam is undergoing a remarkable and at the same time painful transition from a centrally planned economy to a market oriented one. Operating within these socio-economically renovating parameters, Vietnam's education has to adapt itself to be able to meet the new requirements. This paper provides a deep insight into Vietnam's educational adjustments in a transitional context. The failure to cope with the renovation at the beginning of the transitional period and the preliminary success of Vietnam's education in ten years later give a clear evidence of the Vietnamese nation's strong determination to integrate into the world. The adjustments in Vietnam's education introduced in this paper clearly aim at meeting the challenges posed by the new market oriented mechanism. Great attention has been paid to the analysis of the major adjustments in the change of educational role, the introduction of the "socialization" of education and the promotion of democratization of education.

**The Basic Facts of Viet Nam**

Viet Nam is located in South East Asia with the total land of 329,314 square kilometers and the coastal line of approximately 3,200 kilometers stretching from North to South. In 2005, its population is 83.2 million, of which women account for 51.2%. The average population growth rate is 1.4% per annum, the population at the working age is about 43.6 million people, accounting for 52% of the total population. Average life expectancy is 71.3 years, the population density is 252 persons per square kilometer; and the urban population accounts for about 27.2 percent of the total. Viet Nam has 54 different ethnic groups, which live in equality and unity, acting together for national development. Viet Nam has 64 cities and provinces. Hanoi is the capital city with the population of 3.1 million people. The average GDP per capita in 2004 was about USD 560.

**Education of Vietnam in Brief**

*Before mid XIX century:* This historical period is characterized by more than one thousand years of the Chinese occupation and around seven hundred years of independent Vietnamese feudal ruling. Education under the Chinese occupation was mainly intended for their children who later would serve the Chinese governing apparatus in Vietnam. After a long time, only few Vietnamese children were allowed to attend these schools. At that time the school system in Vietnam strongly mirrored that of China and consisted of primary education for children of up to 15 years old and higher education for children of more than 15 years old. The education system of the independent feudal Vietnam was simple and included: The National University (Quoc Tu

Giam) which was directly supervised by the King and located in Vietnam's capital, schools at district and provincial levels (mainly public), and schools at commune, village levels (mainly private). The purpose of the education at that time was to prepare feudal mandarins at various levels.

*From mid XIX century to 1945:* This period is characterized by the ruling of the French colonials so the education system strongly changed and followed the French education model. The school system consisted of primary (6 years), first secondary (4 years) and second secondary (3 years). Few technical and professional schools were added to prepare workers and technicians. In the late thirties of the 19 century the Indochina University was established.

*From 1945 to 1986:* Vietnam became independent and three educational reforms were implemented with the purpose to change the previous colonial education to a national, socialist oriented education.

- The First Education Reform (1945): The purpose of the First Education Reform was to remove the French colonial education and establish a new national education of the independent Vietnam, which was proclaimed that of the people, by the people and for the people. The education system included: Level I (4 years), Level II (3 years) and Level III (2 years). In addition, popular education (for adults) was established, technical and professional education and higher education was significantly expanded.
- The Second Education Reform (1956): Until 1954 (complete liberation of North Vietnam from the French) the First Education Reform was implemented only in liberated provinces/regions. The purpose of the Second Education Reform was to extend the First Education Reform into the newly liberated provinces/regions of Vietnam with some changes. For the first time the objective of Vietnam national education was officially stated, specifying the details the nature of the education of the people. The education system was adjusted with Level III covering three years instead of two years previously.
- The Third Education Reform (1979): This reform was closely related to the liberation of South Vietnam and the unification of the country in 1975. The Third Education Reform's purpose was to create a unified education system in the whole country (in the North and the South) and at the same time address a number of shortcomings of the existing education in terms of quality and quantity. The levels of education are: Primary Education (5 Years), Lower Secondary Education (4 years) and Upper Secondary (3 years). Law on Primary Education Universalisation and Law on Care, Protection and Education for Children were promulgated.

### **The “Doi moi” or Renovation in Vietnam**

The year of 1986 has been considered as the starting point of the long period of the “Doi moi” or renovation in Vietnam. This endeavor was initiated by Vietnam in late 1986 and officially proclaimed in the *New Political Program and Strategies for the Socio-Economic*

*Stabilization and Development until 2000* in 1989. The main feature of the Doi moi process is termed as “qua do” or a transition from a centrally planned economy to a market oriented economy. Three essential elements were installed to carry out the transitional ideas:

- Development of a multi-sector economy. It is worth referring back to the fact that before the “Doi moi” there were only two economic sectors in Vietnam, namely: State economic sector and Cooperative economic sector. Now there are 6 economic sectors officially recognized and reaffirmed in Vietnam’s latest political documents as follows:
  - o State economic sector
  - o Cooperative economic sector
  - o Private and small business economic sector
  - o Private capitalist economic sector
  - o State capitalist economic sector and,
  - o Economic sector with foreign investments<sup>1</sup>
- Establishment comprehensive market elements and renovation and improvement the efficiency and effectiveness of the State economic management, including:
  - o Labor market
  - o Stock exchange market
  - o Real estate market
  - o Scientific and technological market
- Settlement of social issues in direction of:
  - o Development of a healthier society
  - o Equality in distribution
  - o Creation of a stronger motivation for production development
  - o Increase of productivity of social labor
  - o Equality in social relationships
  - o Encouragement for citizens to become rich

### **Education in a Transition**

The radical changes and renovations introduced by the Doi moi have made deep impacts on all the aspects of the social-economic development of Vietnam, including education. It should be noted that when the Doi moi started, Vietnam’s education which was designed to serve the centrally planned economy could not adjust itself to the changes and suffered a lot of difficulties. A sector review in education and human resource analysis conducted by UNESCO and the Ministry of Education and Training of Vietnam in the early nineties pointed out the following issues of Vietnam’s education during the Doi moi start up:

- Decrease in quantity and quality of education at all levels
- Weak links between technical and vocational training with production and employment

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<sup>1</sup> *The Documents of the Ninth Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam*. National Political Publishing House. Hanoi, 2001, (p. 29-31).

- Weaknesses in teaching and learning, school mapping and research in higher education
- Weak teaching staff
- Shortage and ineffective utilization of resources for education and training
- Irrelevance of the structure, management and legislation of education and training
- Irrelevance of education and training in the transition period<sup>2</sup>

The statistics in 1989-1990 shows the significant decline of education in the beginning of the transition period. The decline was so alarming that some researchers even termed this phenomenon as degradation or deterioration of education of Vietnam. In particular, number of crèches became fewer, number of kindergartens slightly increased at the end of the decade, number of primary, lower and upper secondary increased. Number of crèche students decreased by 50%, number of kindergarten students remained unchanged, number of primary students slowly increased, number of lower secondary increased very slowly even with some decrease in a number of provinces, number of upper secondary students were unstable and had the tendency of declining. The educational disparities in different regions were very significant in terms of quantity and quality.

Number of vocational schools decreased and number of vocational students also decreased significantly. Number of secondary technical students was not stable and had the tendency of decreasing at the end of the decade. The number of higher institutions slightly increased while the number of students had the tendency of decreasing. The ratio of students per ten thousand population was very low: 20.

Great efforts of researchers have been made in order to renovate the education in response to the transitional process of Vietnam's socio-economic development. Pham Minh Hac (2002), a noted Vietnamese educational researcher argues that there should also be "a renovation in thinking of education". He, in particular, emphasizes the need to:

- Look at education not only from the viewpoint of ideological and cultural values. Instead, education plays a key role in the whole process of the national development. Educational strategies constitute a part of the human strategies of Vietnam, which play a central role in the socio-economic strategies of the country, where people are considered as purpose and driving force for the socio-economic development.
- Change the viewpoint that education is a sort of social welfare whose budget allocation depends on somebody's goodwill and funding availability. Investment in education should be considered as investment for development, a capital investment for the socio-economic strategies. There is a need to regard education as a structural component of Vietnam's socio-economic infrastructure. There is a call for investment in education as in transportation or industry etc.
- Implement the breakthrough measures in schools – the educational institutional units of the whole educational system.

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<sup>2</sup> *Sector Review in Education and Human Resource Analysis*. MOET, 1994, Hanoi.

### **The Adjustments of Education in the Transition**

Some people in Vietnam may think of reforming education in order to respond to the radical changes brought about by the Doi moi process. It is quite true because it has been more than 20 years since the third education reform was implemented in 1979. If so, this adjustment would be called the fourth educational reform. But most of educational researchers and decision-makers tend to call the adjustment as renovation of education. Pham Minh Hac (2002) even suggests to use the term of “chan hung”, literally meaning to “correct” then “make prosperous”. Nevertheless, a number of important policies have been introduced in order to renovate education in the context of the transition of Vietnam from centrally planned to a market oriented economy. Dang Ba Lam (2003) summaries the educational renovation policies as follows:

- Education must serve the market-oriented economy. This includes:
  - o To ensure that all population attain the minimum education level, actively fight against the illiteracy, increase the literacy rate, strengthen primary education universalization, upgrade the level of compulsory education.
  - o Ensure training of defense and security human resources
  - o Mobilize contributions from population for post primary education
  - o Satisfy the needs of human resources for not only the State economic sector, but also all other economic sectors and the society. Employment should be based on the market demands.
  - o Expand opportunities for all people to update, renovate their knowledge and skills for their jobs
  - o Expand and strengthen international cooperation in education, implement the “open door” policy in education.
  
- Implementation of “socialization” of education. In Vietnam the term “socialization” which is translated directly from the Vietnamese word “xa hoi hoa” has a wider meaning compared with its English origin. Bui Gia Thinh et al. (1999) defines “Socialization” of education as the mobilization of the whole society in the implementation of education, encouragement of all population to make contributions to the national education under the State guidance. The socialization of education includes:
  - o Involvement of all agencies, organizations concerned in the development of education
  - o Mobilization of communities, social forces, mass organizations in education
  - o Diversification of types of education, types of schools in education. Combination of formal, non-formal and informal education. Development of semi-public, private, and people-funded school in addition to public ones.
  - o Expand and explore other potentials of financial, human and physical resources in the society for education.
  
- Democratization of education. The purpose of this policy is to create favorable conditions for all people to participate in managing education, overcoming the existing authoritarianism in the management of education. The democratization of education consists of democratization of students enrolment, democratization of educational planning and democratization of management of education.

### **Major Achievements of the Transitional Education**

It seems that the “degradation” or the “deterioration” of education in Vietnam that happened at the beginning of the Doi moi process has gone due to the recent efforts to renovate education and make it more responsive to the changes of the market oriented economic development of the country. In the *Educational Development Strategies for 2001-2010* (2001) there is an overview of the achievements accomplished by education in the context of the market-oriented economic development in Vietnam. The overview indicates that:

- A relatively complete, unified and diversified education system has been built with all levels from pre-school education to doctorate training. The general education school network is expanding throughout the country. There are boarding or semi-boarding schools in provinces and many districts for people of ethnic minorities. Vocational schools, classes, centres are developing in different forms, the short-term vocational training classes are developing strongly. Universities and junior colleges have been established in almost every populated areas of the country, regions and localities. The school infrastructure has been upgraded, improved. The number of newly built schools that meet the national standards is increasing.

The education system began to be diversified in forms, modes of delivery and resources, step by step is integrating in the common trend of the world education. From a system dominated by public and formal schools, nowadays in the education system there are non-public schools, different forms of informal education, open learning, distance education, joint ventures with foreign institutions. Tuition fees system is applied to almost all levels of post-compulsory education. The proportion of students of non-public educational institutions in the total enrolment is increasing, amounting to 66% of crèche children, 50% of kindergarten children, 34% of upper secondary school students, 11% of higher education students in 2000-2001 school year.

- The enrolment is rapidly increasing, initially satisfying the learning needs of society. In school year 2000-2001 there are about 18 million school pupils, 820 thousand vocational students (among them 130 thousand long-term vocational students), the number of higher education students per 10 thousand of population in 2000 was 118. The vocational training enrolment has increased by 1,8 times from 1997 to 2000.

The labour force trained in different forms and at different levels is 20% of the total labour force of the country.

- The social equity in basic education is ensured, education in the regions with ethnic minorities is changing positively, about 250 boarding and more 100 semi-boarding schools for ethnic minority students have been established. About 94% of populations over 15 year are literate; the average number of schooling years of population is 7.3. Basically, Vietnam has gained the gender equity in basic education.
- The socialization of education has brought the initial results. Different social forces gradually are participating actively in the mobilization of children for

- schools, construction of school infrastructure, investment in school building, making financial contributions to education in different forms. The percentage of financial contributions of society in the total education expenditure gradually increased, reaching about 25% in 2000.
- The quality of education is changing in some aspects. The level of knowledge, the capability to get new knowledge of certain number of students is increasing; the education for gifted students has achieved the high level in the region and in the world, the number of students-winners of international and national Olympiads in some subjects are increasing. The majority of graduates from higher education institutions have the ambition to be a person of virtue, to make a living and are self-reliant, dynamically motivated. The training quality in some science and technology fields has been improved. Higher education is growing step by step, training courses for a numerous contingent of scientists and technicians from bachelor to doctor levels, who are working and have brought important contributions in different socio-economic sectors.

### **The Present Education System**

The goals of education of Vietnam is to train the all-round Vietnamese with morals, knowledge, physical health, aesthetic sense and profession, loyal to the ideology of national independence and socialism; to shape and cultivate one's personality, quality and ability, satisfying the demands of building and defending the Fatherland.

The national educational system comprises:

1. Infant education composed of creches and pre-school education;
2. General education comprises two educational levels: primary education and secondary education; the secondary education comprises two grades, basic secondary education and general secondary education;
3. Vocational education comprises vocational secondary education and job training secondary education;
4. Higher education trains two degrees, college and university degrees; post university education has two levels, master's degree and doctorate.

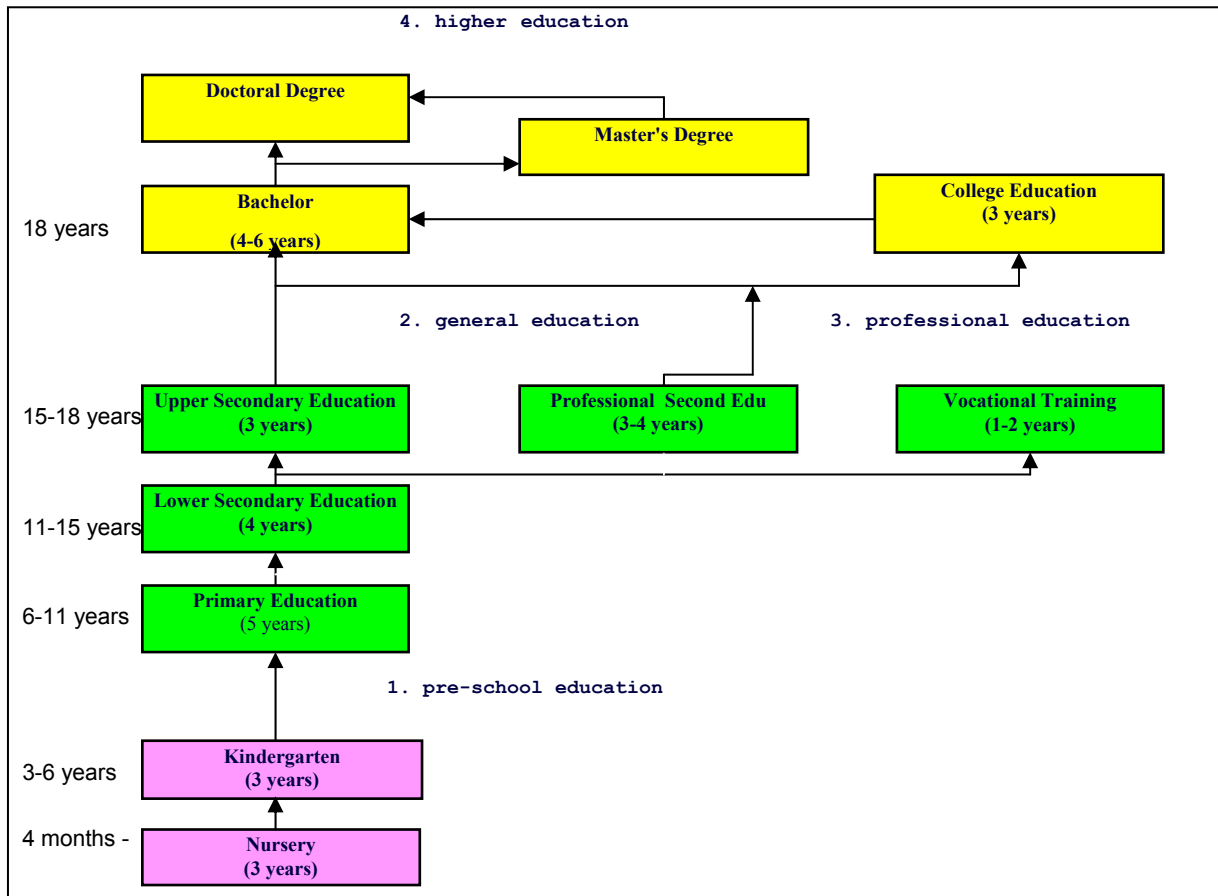
The forms of education comprises formal and non formal education.

- The infant education comprises:
  1. Creche and group of baby sitters to care for children from three months to three years old;
  2. Infant school and infant class admitting children from three to six years old;
  3. "Young bud" school is an educational establishment combining creche and infant school admitting children from three months to six years old.
- The general education comprises:
  1. Primary education is the compulsory level of education for all children from six to fourteen years old; it is conducted in five school-years from the first to the fifth form. The age of pupils admitted to the first form is six years;



2. Basic secondary education is conducted in four school years from the sixth to the ninth form. Pupils admitted to the sixth form must have the graduation certificate of primary education and be eleven years old;
  3. General secondary education is conducted in three school-years from the tenth to twelfth form. Pupils admitted to the tenth form must have the graduation certificate of basic secondary education and be fifteen years old.
- Job education comprises:
    1. Vocational secondary education is conducted from three to four years for learners having the graduation diploma of basic secondary education, from one to two years for those having the diploma of general secondary education;
    2. Job training reserved for those having a cultural standard and health condition suited to the job they need to be trained in. It is carried out for less than one year for the short-term job training programs and from one to three years for the long term job training programs.
  - University and post-university education comprise:
    1. College degree training is conducted in three years for persons having diplomas of general secondary education or diplomas of vocational secondary education;
    2. University training is conducted in from four to six years depending on the trades and jobs for those having the diploma of general secondary education or diploma of vocational secondary education and from one to two years for those having college diplomas of the same branch.
    3. Master's degree training is conducted in two years for persons having university diplomas;
    4. Doctor degree training is conducted in four years for persons having university diplomas, from two to three years for persons having master diplomas. In special cases, the time for training the doctorate may be extended as prescribed by the Ministry of Education and Training;
  - The Non-formal education:
    1. Non-formal education is the mode of education to help everyone to work and learn at the same time and to learn continually all the life aimed at perfecting their personality, broadening their knowledge, elevating their cultural, specialization and professional standard in order to improve the quality of life, find a job and adapt to social life.
    1. Establishments of non-formal education
      - Permanent education centers;
      - Non-formal education is also carried out at the general education and vocational secondary schools, job training centers, colleges and universities, and through the mass media.

*Figure 1: Vietnam's Education System*



### The Challenges Ahead

For sure that the Doi moi process or the transition of Vietnam from the centrally planned to a market oriented economy will take a long time and its end is not definite yet. This means that there will be a lot of changes, renovations, adjustments to be made for the socio-economic development. In turn, these changes will pose new requirements to education to become more and more responsive to the transitional circumstances. What has been done is not sufficient. The challenges are still ahead and can be seen as follows:

- The change of the role of education to serving a wider range of clients (six economic sectors instead of the earlier two) has resulted in a significant increase in students enrolment at all levels of education recently, while the readiness of educational institutions to absorb such a high number of students is not sufficient. The ratio of students per teacher in Vietnam is extremely high, the budget allocation per student is extremely low, school facilities and infrastructure are strongly inadequate etc. The conflict between the issues of quantity and quality of education has surfaced and there is a urgent need to address these problems, in particular education quality assurance.

- The socialization of education has been successful to a certain extent in involving a number of stakeholders to contribute to education. At the same time the socialization of education has been facing a strong criticism from the population for its so called “commercialization” tendency. The main argument of the criticism is that the poor population of Vietnam will suffer first from this policy. Furthermore, the Confucianist ideals about education upheld in Vietnam make it difficult to accept the fact that education can be “commercialized”. Therefore, it is felt that there is a need to further investigate into the policy for the poor in the context of the socialization of education, cultural issues in the context of the socialization of education, privatization of educational institutions etc.
- Looking into the democratization of education that has been introduced in Vietnam’s education it can be concluded that the main focus was on the issue of decentralization. The particular areas of the interest were the delegation of decision-making powers to lower levels regarding students enrolment, planning and institutional management (election, appointment...) etc. However, in addition to decentralization, the democratization may include a wider range of issues to be further addressed: leadership, staff empowerment, human resource management, financial management etc.

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