Chapter 3
Higher Education in Vietnam 1986–1998: Education in Transition to a New Era?

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Introduction

In 1986, several years before the break-up of the Soviet Union, the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) officially announced what became known as the policy of *doi moi*, or renovation, allowing the introduction of market transactions in the economy. In Europe, a similar process of opening up the state central planning system, beginning a few years later, became referred to as a process of 'transition'. This concept is particularly appropriate for understanding the changes to higher education that took place in the decade following the introduction of *doi moi*.

This chapter begins by considering the concept of transition, and its relevance to understanding the higher education sector in Vietnam. It then goes on to examine in turn the key areas that were being contested during this period: the direction of higher education policy, the marketisation of higher education, the curriculum and the appropriate division of authority between universities and the state, as epitomised in the 1998 Law on Education. It further argues that 1998, and the Law in particular, marked the beginning of a Vietnamese post-communist framework for higher education and the end of a series of episodes of experimentation, conservative backlash and accommodation similar to the transition experienced in Eastern Europe and China. It was a period that set the parameters for the shape and direction of Vietnamese higher education today.

The Concept of Transition

The concept of 'transition' in academic literature is now associated particularly with the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Communist bloc in Eastern Europe, although it has also been applied to China and other countries formerly

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under state socialism. Above all it is used to refer to the processes of economic change from state central planning to a market economy, and simultaneous political change from one-party rule to multi-party democracy. The two are often seen as inseparable or parallel processes, although writers accept that there may be gains or reversals in each sphere separately.

While in Europe change on these two fronts was sudden, dramatic and almost simultaneous, in countries such as Vietnam, China and Laos, change has been far more gradual and focused on changes in the economic, rather than the political sphere. Even now, while market transactions account for an increasingly large proportion of the economy in these three countries, multi-party democracy would appear a long way off. Nonetheless, the concept of transition provides important insights into the development of higher education in Vietnam.

In broad terms, the transition literature tends to describe a process of opening up along political and economic continuums in which the start and end points of the process are assumed more or less implicitly. In an overview of this transition literature, Edwin Winckler finds that the process of transition within a country and within sectors can look very different, depending on the starting point used by the author, the type of analysis undertaken and whether the enquiry spans the macro- or micro-levels, economic or cultural spheres (Winckler, 1999: 3–5). He finds different ways of measuring the extent of transition, including assessing the extent to which market institutions have been built, the extent to which fair rules of political competition have been institutionalised or, in relation to China, the 'shift in mechanisms' from bureaucratic direct intervention to indirect control through legislation and enforcement (Winckler, 1999: 4–5). Rather than describing a unified concept, his analysis instead tends to describe the start and end points of the respective authors' analysis and the process of change they are analysing. The focus on 'transition' is effectively a focus on a significant area of change that in some way is considered to contribute to economic or political opening-up.

Another way of understanding the process of transition, however, is that taken by Leslie Holmes. Rather than focusing on expected economic or political endpoints, he brings together common 'post-communist' features apparent in former communist bloc Eastern European countries immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union. He finds that the common points across these different countries relate, perhaps not surprisingly, to the ideological system of values and beliefs under which people operated in the immediate post-communist period. Some of the phenomena he notes include the rejection of grand theories and teleologism, a high level of moral confusion, the view of the current period as being only temporary, dynamism, cynicism towards leaders and political institutions and a widespread sense of insecurity (Holmes, 1997: 14–21). Holmes describes a period during which everything about the previous order is brought into question, from cultural and behavioural norms through to political and economic transactions. Fundamentally, the process of transition involves the questioning of the ideological and normative foundations of the politico-economic order.

For Vietnamese higher education, the years 1986–1998 saw not only an opening up in the economic and political spheres, but also a fundamental questioning of the

boundaries within which the higher education system should be operating. This was followed by the re-establishment of new norms and boundaries in which debates about policy and direction could be contested.

Higher Education Policy on the Eve of *doi moi*

Under central planning, government ministries in Hanoi made all decisions for universities about issues such as finance, curriculum and enrolment. University institutions were placed under the oversight of the ministry with responsibility for that sector and these narrowly specialised institutions were expected to train the manpower to meet the projected labour requirements of each sector. For example, the University of Health was placed under the Ministry of Health, which decided which courses should be taught, the length of the programme of study, and, in conjunction with the Ministry of Planning, the employment that its students would receive on graduation. The Ministry for Higher and Secondary Vocational Education was responsible for a relatively small number of generalist universities such as the Hanoi General University (*DH Tong Hop HN*), University of Dalat (*DH Da Lat*) and the National Economics University (*DH Kinh te Quoc Dan*) which might supply graduates for a variety of sectors. It was also responsible for a large number of teacher-training universities, although lower level teacher-training institutions for primary and secondary teachers were under the jurisdiction of the provincial authorities (St.George, 2003: 114, 171). Universities in Vietnam constantly looked to the national government for direction, and links with the wider community were limited. At the same time, while nominally all decisions were made according to well-defined planning and allocation mechanisms, in practice personal relations were extensively cultivated and used to influence resource allocation and decision making.

Postgraduate education was very limited inside Vietnam. Rather than pursuing higher degrees within Vietnam, students with appropriate moral and academic qualifications were instead sent to friendly socialist countries abroad. Russian was the most common foreign language taught, compulsory in the first 2 years of study at university (Hoa, 1998: 166). This reflected both its status as the lingua franca of the Eastern bloc countries to which students were sent and Vietnam's geo-political alliances. The first postgraduate classes in socialist Vietnam were only officially operational from 1976.[1]

Centralised decision making was intended to reduce costs and streamline the process of training and labour allocation and ensure that labour requirements anticipated by forecasting projections were met. For central planners education was fundamentally about meeting the labour needs of the economy. They wanted to

[1] QD 224/TTg, 24 May 1976.

ensure that the dialectical relationship in which education and employment existed was kept in balance and that education neither outstripped nor fell behind the needs of the economy. As stated by the then Minister for Education:

> We are living in a society in full growth; education must follow a right path in accordance with economic and social development and at an adequate tempo. Otherwise there is a permanent risk of contradiction and tension. (Nguyen, 1971: 14)

If the structure of higher education was fundamentally designed to meet the needs of the labour market, it also had a number of ideological roles. From the time of the creation of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) in the North in 1956 (and even earlier), through to *doi moi*, education was encouraged to be 'national, scientific and popular'.[2] 'National' education at different times included the rejection of colonialism, support for a socialist nation and, following reunification, the creation of a single unified system of education across the country. It also referred to the use of Vietnamese as the national language in schools and as a slogan to link education to national campaigns (such as the hygiene and patriotism campaign in 1956) (Pham, 1979: 17; St. George, 2003: 109–110). Support for 'scientific' education was support for a modern, technological society, and the drive to create skilled technicians who could support this society. Finally, a 'popular' education was one that was egalitarian and linked closely to production in the country. University students were expected to spend several months each year working in factories or teaching literacy in remote schools, according to their particular area of study. Popular education was intended to overcome a perceived traditional intellectual dislike of manual labour and create linkages between theoretical study and its practical application.

Education in the DRV was also organised according to 'class-based' principles (Vasavakul, 1994: 343–344). This meant favouring enrolment of students from a working-class or peasant background. Students were required to submit their 'curriculum vitae',[3] listing past places of residence, activities and affiliations (especially political), including those of all members of their extended family, as part of their application for admission to higher education. This procedure was used to reward those who had taken part in the resistance against France or the United States with a place in higher education, while those designated as landlords, and those who had, or whose families had, collaborated with foreign powers, were often excluded (St. George, 2003: 116). Candidates for doctoral degrees were expected to be strong supporters of the communist party and to 'put into practice the path and policies of the party and government, maintain a truthful attitude and help socialism'.[4]

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[2] *dan toc hoa, khoa hoc hoa, dai chung hoa*.

[3] *ly lich.*

[4] QD 224/TTg, 24 May 1976.

Higher Education Policy from 1986

The particular form that the higher education system in Vietnam took in 1986 was a function not only of socialist central planning common to other socialist-bloc countries, but also of the particular history of colonialism and civil war from which the country was emerging, and of the economic crisis in the immediate lead-up to the Sixth Party Congress. For education, the economic crisis of the 1980s had particularly severe effects. Higher levels of education were almost entirely dependent on the state for funds. High rates of inflation and falling levels of production meant that expenditure on public sector wages in real terms fell dramatically. Teachers' salaries were eroded and expenditure on infrastructure and equipment for schools was virtually at a standstill (St. George, 2003: 129). When the Communist Party of Vietnam committed itself to the policy of *doi moi* at the 1986 Sixth National Congress, it gave official approval for the first time to transactions taking place outside the system of centralised planning and allocation, as well as support for the introduction of a market economy. From this point of view, 1986 is an appropriate year from which to date is the official beginning of the transition in Vietnam. While the introduction of market exchanges offered the possibility of funding from outside of the cash-strapped public sector, how this would work in practice was far from clear.

In the year following the announcement of *doi moi*, education ministry officials and senior educators from around the country met to discuss the implications of the new policy for higher education. The conclusions of these discussions were that higher education institutions would now have to:

1. train manpower for non-state sector jobs;
2. obtain income from outside the state sector;
3. develop their own institutional plans and learning programmes to meet the needs of society as well as the state;

while graduates would

4. be responsible for finding their own work.[5]

A work plan involving three new programmes was established to meet the challenges facing higher education in the new environment. The programmes were improving the quality of education, and increasing the numbers of students; linking research and teaching more closely to production, and seeking out private investment; and increasing standards of teachers and administrative personnel, and

[5] See also Bo Giao duc va Dao tao (1995) 50 nam phat trien su nghiep giao duc va dao tao [Fifty years of education and training development]. Hanoi: Nha Xuat Ban giao duc, 236; and Bo Giao duc va Dao tao (Ban Dan lap) (1998) Mot so chu truong va bien phap cap bach de bao dam su phat trien ben vung va on dinh cua cac truong dai hoc dan lap [Some urgent policies and methods to uphold the strong and stable development of people founded universities]. Tai lieu hoi nghi dai tao dai hoc. Hanoi: Bo Giao duc va dao tao, 177.

democratising administrative practices. In practice, these programmes announced very little that was new for higher education. Calls to improve the quality of education and raise teaching standards had been made since at least colonial times, while linking teaching and research to production were familiar slogans from the 1950s. The plan to 'democratize administrative practices', while a relatively recent notion, was not specific to education, but part of a broader administrative reform process taking place across the Vietnamese bureaucracy. 'Democratization' referred to the process of devolving more authority to middle-level cadres, with the intention of ensuring that decision makers were closer to the areas affected by their decisions, and of addressing the failure of tight central control over planning and resources. Eventually this process led to widespread complaints about public resources being used for personal gain and a re-centralisation of control (Vasavakul, 1996: 46–51). Within the three programmes announced by the ministry, there was little evidence of new thinking in response to the changing socio-economic and wider social context, and no clear guidance as to how universities should respond.

New Thinking

Proposed changes to higher education in the immediate aftermath of *doi moi* and into the early 1990s continued to conceptualise education as a form of social welfare, dependent on economic development for its existence (St.George, 2003: 137). This began to change, however, in 1991. Pham Minh Hac, then Vice-Minister for Education, has argued that:

> Since 1991 education along with science and technology has been considered as a primordial state policy... it is necessary to do away with the opinion regarding investment for education merely as a kind of welfare fund to which one may allocate at will any amount of money. Investment in education is investment in development, being the fundamental investment in the socio-economic strategy. Subsequently, especially as from 1991 and since the fourth Plenum of the Party Central Committee (1993) the view has become clearer and education is regarded as part of the socio-economic infrastructure (Pham, 1998: 29).

In fact, it is around 1991 that education became increasingly discussed in terms of its contribution to the economy in leading economic and political journals, and that human capital theory began to make inroads into the thinking of political leaders (St. George, 2003: 143). Several factors can be associated with this change. In 1991, the Seventh Party Congress re-analysed the role of intellectuals in society. Where previously they had been treated as part of the elite and considered with suspicion, the Seventh Party Congress asserted that intellectuals were vital to building socialism and confirmed that intellectuals were now all the children of workers and peasants and no longer members of the elite (Dang Cong San Viet Nam, 1991: 114). This reinterpretation of the importance of intellectuals paved the way for the resurrection of the status of higher education.

At the same time a number of outside influences were encouraging the government to place more emphasis on education. In 1990, Alvin Toffler published his book, *Powershift*, which argued that: 'The most important economic development

of our lifetime has been the rise of a new system for creating wealth, based no longer on muscle but on mind' (Toffler, 1990: 9). His book was translated into Vietnamese and large tracts were reproduced in succeeding issues of the leading economics journal, *Nghien cuu Kinh te*, in 1991 and 1992. Intellectuals had always enjoyed a high level of prestige in Vietnam and Toffler's arguments bridging the theoretical gap between intellectuals and their contribution to economic growth were eagerly received.

Another source of inspiration for leading educators was undoubtedly the UNDP/UNESCO-sponsored project entitled the 'Education Sector Review and Human Resources Analysis'. This project brought together a number of international experts in Vietnam to conduct an in-depth analysis of the education sector and provide new research tools in order to enable Vietnamese participants to undertake their own research. Participants in the project described it as a 'dredging of the waterways to accommodate a new flow of ideas about how to break any upstream logjam' (Le and Sloper, 1995: 7). The upstream logjam refers here to the set pattern of ideas that existed about education, particularly among senior-level administrators who had responsibility for adopting new policy.

At the same time, the government was undertaking a thorough political and economic re-evaluation of education and training, of which the UNDP/UNESCO project was an integral part. The results were presented at the Fourth Plenum of the Communist Party Central Committee (seventh Congress), held from 10 to 14 January 1993. The Plenum was a landmark for education. It was the first time a plenum had been devoted solely to the education sector, and it resulted in a specific resolution, 'On the continued renovation of education and training' (Pham, 1998: 35). This resolution offered general principles for the development of the education sector, under four headings:

1. education is a priority policy and investment in education is investment in production;
2. develop education to raise the intellectual standard of the people, train manpower and foster talent;
3. link education closely to the developmental needs of the country and actual progress and ensure continuing education for everyone; and
4. diversify forms of training, ensure the payment of fees and principles of equality (Bo Giao duc va Dao tao, 1995: 402).

These four principles marked a fundamental shift from previous policy and set the stage for the higher education sector in Vietnam into the future. Education policy makers would no longer look to labour market requirements and the predictions of the Ministry of Planning to make decisions about the shape of the education sector, but could argue for investment in education as an investment in development in its own right.

Other important developments stemming from the Plenum also included the beginning of a steady rise in the allocation of funding to education from the state budget, the re-organisation of the degree structure for higher and postgraduate

education, the introduction of a two-phase higher education system and the introduction of community colleges, all of which were fundamental changes from pre *doi moi* policy. The Fourth Plenum in 1993 in many ways marked a turning point for the education sector in Vietnam and for the higher education sector in particular.

Experimenting with a Market in Education

Changes in higher education institutions did not wait for government policy, but were a significant factor influencing the direction of that policy. Even before the announcement of *doi moi*, the University of Ho Chi Minh City (*DH Tong hop TpHCM*) requested permission from the government to accept fee-paying students. University lecturers there had participated in a review of higher education over the previous decade and pointed out the successes that had been achieved in agriculture with the introduction of production-based contracts. They suggested that parallels could be drawn with students in higher education. In Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), teachers were underemployed and suffering from low wages, while youth unemployment was a significant concern. Increased enrolments as a consequence of accepting fee-paying students had the potential to address both problems simultaneously. The proponents of the 'open enrolment' system within the University received permission to enrol fee-paying students on a trial basis from September 1986. The experiment was not made widely known and only officially recognised almost a year later when the first cohort of students had finished their first year of study. Shortly afterwards, it was made public, and at the 1987 rector's conference in Nha Trang, the experiment was confirmed as having been a great success (Dai hoc va Giao duc Chuyen nghiep, 1988: 16, 19; Thao, 1998: 41).

Following the experiment at the University of HCMC, and despite ministry requirements that universities apply for approval before enrolling fee-paying students, the number of universities offering places under a fee-paying open enrolment system for students rose exponentially, from a single university in 1987 to seven in 1988, and to 30 universities by the start of the 1988/1989 academic year (Dai hoc va Giao duc Chuyen nghiep, 1988; Bo Giao duc va Dao tao, 1995: 238). The number of students enrolled in this way also grew exponentially, from 4,489 in 1988/1989, the first official year of the system, to 28,731 at its peak in 1992/1993 (St.George, 2003: 236). The rapid increase in students reflected the pent-up demand for higher education in the country, particularly in the South, where large numbers of students with associations with the former regime or with Western countries were discriminated against in university enrolment. It reflected also the willingness of universities to increase the enrolment of fee-paying students who could bring additional income to supplement teacher salaries. The rapid increase was not, however, without its problems. By 1992/1993, amidst concerns about the quality of the students being enrolled, the experiment was being shut down. Open enrolment students, who were required only to have completed their senior secondary certificate

for admittance, usually became fee-paying students once they had already failed the entrance examination that would have guaranteed them a free place and a job upon graduation.

Another form of experimentation was the introduction of private higher education institutions. Thang Long University was the first non-government institution to operate, on a trial basis, from 1988. It was established by a group of highly renowned and respected mathematicians, many with postgraduate degrees from either the Soviet Union or France, who were concerned about the lack of funding flexibility, and therefore quality, in Vietnamese higher education (Hoang and Bui, 1992; St.George, 2003: 203). The University had a slow start, beginning life as Thang Long Tertiary Education Centre, with one faculty – mathematics and computer science – and an initial enrolment of around 50 students. The centre was allowed at first only to offer certificates for individual courses of study. It faced significant scrutiny and suspicion during its foundation, to the extent that it received 'concrete guidance' on its operation from the General Secretary of the Communist Party at the time (Pham, 1997: 204). It was eventually given official permission to offer degrees by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) and it became a fully-fledged 'people-founded' university in 1990. People-founded universities were those opened under the sponsorship of community organisations, although for all intents and purposes they were run as private organisations. The introduction of the term 'people founded' was intended to avoid the connotations of 'private' as being for-profit, which was viewed with suspicion in the socialist country.

If suspicion was the greatest difficulty faced initially by the institution, by 1990, the rector, Hoang Xuan Sinh, argued that the greatest difficulties were financial (H.B. 1990). The founders had significant success in leveraging their international contacts to obtain initial funding to found the centre, but by 1990 these funds were drying up and there were strict restrictions on the level of fees that the founders were allowed to charge the students. The first graduates were in 1993. The University expanded slowly in an effort to ensure that educational standards were maintained. By 1997 it was enrolling around 1,100 students.

Following the establishment of Thang Long as a university, other non-government institutions quickly followed suit. The second non-government institution to open, Ho Chi Minh City Semi-Public Open University (*DH Mo Ban Cong TpHCM*), was established on 15 June 1990, with a mandate for providing flexible education to rural students who would not otherwise be able to attend higher education in HCMC. In contrast to Thang Long University, the Open University expanded rapidly, enrolling 3,000 students in its first year and 12,000 students by 1993. Not only was it opened in the south of the country where fee-paying had not long been abolished, but it was also founded on the basis of an existing public-sector institution. To some extent it was able to address opposition to providing education for profit in a socialist country because it was set up to provide education to poorer, rural students. At the same time it was dependent on the state for its infrastructure, and its 'private' status was not clear. In 1995, concerns about the quality of the University, and about its ability to service the rural community (a large proportion of new students were from HCMC), prompted the government to move

6,000 of the University's students to other institutions so that it could concentrate on the provision of distance education (Pham, 1997: 98). This decision suggested that the government did not consider it to be a private institution in the sense of being autonomous.

Between 1993, when the framework for non-government higher education institutions was established, and 1998, when the government suspended approval of any new requests to found private institutions, 15 people-founded universities and 3 semi-public universities had been opened (compared with 118 existing public higher education institutions). While, across all institutions, the number of students had increased rapidly during the 1990s, nowhere was the increase more evident than in people-founded universities. Between 1995/1996 and 1998/1999, the number of students enrolled in people-founded universities increased by 361 per cent (from 19,180 to 69,228), while in public institutions the number increased by a comparatively modest 72 per cent (from 334,078 to 575,446).

In contrast to the careful monitoring of Thang Long University, the founding of later institutions went largely unchecked. Non-government institutions, and to a lesser extent government institutions, far exceeded the enrolment quotas allocated to them by the MOET. In 1998, the people-founded University of Dong Do (*DH Dan Lap Dong Do*) in Hanoi, for example, exceeded its student quota by 91.8 per cent (4,042 students), and the people-founded University of Industrial Engineering, Ho Chi Minh City (*DH Dan lap Ky thuat cong nghiep TPHCM*), exceeded it by 25.4 per cent (1,191 students). At the same time, some institutions did not manage to meet their quotas, such as Thang Long University, which was under-enrolled by 58.8 per cent, but such instances were rare (Bo Giao duc va Dao tao (Ban Dan lap), 1998).

Examples of overcrowding and apparently mindless expansion were frequently cited in the press during 1998, with particular blame attached to the institutions for their irresponsible actions in not guaranteeing the quality of their graduates. Blame was also levelled at the MOET for not taking seriously the inspection of the quality of the institutions. One author complained that: 'The conclusions of the missions [to supervise the non-public HEIs] usually depend on their personal relations or the mission's sympathy for the supervised institution' (Pham, 1997: 123). University staff had to establish warm personal relations with particular ministry officials to achieve a better outcome for their institution.

Two elements are worth highlighting from the experimental introduction of fee-paying students and private universities in the early 1990s. The first is that these experiments were initiated by higher education institutions, rather than by the state, albeit under close state supervision. The second is that, despite possible ideological opposition to fee-paying education, the popularity of the experiments among universities, students and families who would not otherwise have found a university place for their children saw the authorities not only accept this solution to the crisis, but endorse its rapid expansion, to the detriment of the quality of the education being offered. These experiments launched Vietnam on a path well-known to the rest of the world, that of finding the appropriate role for the

state in higher education, between the extremes of state central planning and laissez-faire.

The introduction of fees at Ho Chi Minh City University and the establishment of Thang Long University were both dramatic innovations that underscored a fundamental shift in Vietnamese society towards acceptance of a market in education, but this shift was far from certain as a way forward for the future. Non-public institutions were given formal policy recognition at the Second Plenum of the Eighth Party Congress in 1996.[6] Two years later, however, because of the criticisms levelled at these same institutions, the MOET suspended approval of any new non-public institutions until it could investigate the problems more thoroughly. As discussed further below, the 1998 Law on Education was particularly ambiguous in its support for a market in education.

The introduction of fee-paying students was a change that was diametrically opposed to the fundamental outlook of the Communist Party of Vietnam. Viewed in historical context, the process went through a period of laissez-faire, leading to wide-ranging experimentation, followed by both public and political backlash that re-defined the parameters within which the education sector could operate. Such a process is characteristic of sectors undergoing a post-communist transition.

A Socialist Curriculum

If centralised planning and funding of higher education by the state was one basic characteristic of the 'socialist' education system in Vietnam, a second defining characteristic was a strong emphasis on 'Marxist-Leninist' teaching. This second characteristic was also brought into question immediately following the announcement of *doi moi*.

The study of Marxist-Leninist subjects refers not only to the study of Marxist-Leninist theory *per se*, but also to a suite of related subjects such as Ho Chi Minh thought, History of the Communist Party, Marxist-Leninist Political Economy and Scientific Socialism. The study of Marxism-Leninism and its related subjects was and is compulsory for all students. Such study is intended to play a number of roles. Most obviously, it is intended to give students an understanding of the theoretical and historical background to the political and economic environment in Vietnam, and to groom them as supporters of the existing order. The President of the Central Theory Committee (*Hoi dong Ly luan Trung Uong*), a think-tank attached to the Party Central Committee, argues that education is fundamental to ensuring the high level of theoretical and ideological understanding needed to shore up the foundation

[6] See Communist Party of Vietnam (1996). Resolution of the Second Plenum of the Central Party Committee (eighth Congress): The strategic orientations for the development of education and training in the industrialisation and modernisation period and related tasks until the Year 2000 (24 December 1996). Unpublished translation.

of the party and the state, and overcome the enemies who wish to overthrow the revolution and abolish socialism in Vietnam (Nguyen, 2005). For such thinkers, an attack against the study of Marxist-Leninist subjects is considered an attack against the Vietnamese nation. Marxism-Leninism was considered to imbue people with the ardour and revolutionary spirit that had helped the Democratic Republic of Vietnam reunite the country and overcome the might of the United States. 'Government's concern in ensuring political correctness of teachers and students led to political education becoming a qualitative indicator of the whole education system' (Hoa, 1998: 145).

The study of Marxism-Leninism is also intended to raise the socialist qualities of students, held to be synonymous with their moral qualities. This is the position taken by Nguyen Quoc Anh, who, towards the latter half of the 1990s, found that there had been a rise in the 'social evils' in higher education. While he blamed families and university administrators in part for these occurrences, he also accused schools of not taking Marxist-Leninist studies seriously, resulting in a lack of interest on the part of students and a lowering of their moral qualities (Nguyen, 1997). In comparing moral education in three socialist countries, China, Cuba and Vietnam, W. John Morgan finds that for Vietnam: 'In higher education, the ideas of inculcating socialist thoughts and socialist principles are as important as building intellectual ability; these are again conventional goals of a ruling communist party' (Morgan, 2005: 395).

An analysis of moral and political education in the Vietnamese curriculum from primary school through to postgraduate education highlights how this works in practice. Dung Hue Doan notes that until grade ten, or the end of lower secondary school, moral education focuses on the strongly Confucian-influenced principles of love of nation, community and family. Socialist and Marxist-Leninist principles are introduced in upper secondary school but still taught alongside Confucian principles, blending ideas of socialism and citizenship (Dung, 2005). It is not until students reach university that Marxist-Leninist theory per se is taught as a compulsory subject. These compulsory undergraduate and postgraduate courses provide students with the foundations for understanding and furthering Marxist-Leninist theory and Ho Chi Minh thought.

In effect, it could be argued that higher education is one of the key ideological battlegrounds for the perpetuation of the current political regime. While there is a strong network of party cells in workplaces, and administrative divisions at all levels, which are responsible for disseminating and applying communist party policy, it is largely through universities that the communist party is able to ensure the dissemination of Marxism-Leninism and Ho Chi Minh thought, the ideological foundations and rationale for the Communist Party of Vietnam, and its re-interpretation for a new generation.

The study of Marxism-Leninism and Ho Chi Minh thought is important not only for its contribution to nation-building and building the moral qualities of students, however, but is also believed to provide a scientific approach and theoretical foundation for interpreting every area of thought and activity (Luu, 2005). In other words, such study is fundamental to the ability of students to undertake higher levels of

education or research. Eero Palmujoki describes in detail how Marxist-Leninist principles such as dialectical materialism and the distinction between subjective and objective facts have been used to build platforms of acceptable rational argument in Vietnamese discourse (Palmujoki, 1997: 15–22). This method of argumentation was particularly evident in social science journals during the 1990s and earlier. The influence of Marxist-Leninist principles on enquiry in higher education in Vietnam is outside the scope of this paper. It is worth noting here, however, the belief among senior academics (of which Luu Ha Vi is one) that the study of Marxism-Leninism is fundamental for students to be able to both interpret and contribute to understanding about how the world operates, and is therefore commensurately defended as a necessary subject of study.

The fervent ardour with which the importance of Marxist-Leninist studies has been upheld, particularly among Marxist-Leninist theorists, is in stark contrast to the passive and sometimes less-passive opposition of students towards its teaching. This was increasingly commented upon, in the immediate aftermath of the announcement of *doi moi* (Dao, 1989a; Dai hoc va Giao duc Chuyen nghiep, 1989; Phuc and Xuan, 1989). The issue was of such concern that it even received a special mention at the Seventh National Party Congress in 1991.[7]

A review of changes to Marxist-Leninist training at the Polytechnic University in Hanoi (*DH Bach Khoa*) in 1989 found that the programme of study bored many students. The author argued that this situation could in part be blamed on the lack of textbooks and outdated documents for the subjects, but also on the high number of hours devoted to the subject and the lack of commitment of the teachers in presenting the courses (Dao, 1989b). For those studying economics at the School of Economics in the National University in HCMC in the early 1990s, such subjects comprised almost a quarter of their total programme, that is, 300 hours out of a total 1300 hours (Doan va Thanh nien, 29 December 1988: 6). Well aware of the problems, the Ministry of Higher, Technical and Professional Education issued an instruction for amendments to the existing programme in December 1988. According to Instruction no. 12,[8] Marxist-Leninist studies were not to represent more than 8 per cent of the total study time for natural and physical sciences, 10 per cent for the social sciences, 12 per cent for a 5-year economics course and 14 per cent for a 4-year economics course, while the examination in the studies at the end of the degree programme would be abandoned and replaced with smaller subject-specific examinations (Doan va Thanh nien, 15 December 1988, p. 6). To some extent the instruction was an administrative readjustment designed to coincide with the government's plans for all courses to be run on a two-semester rather than a yearly basis.

In 1989, the Rector of the School of Economics at the National University in HCMC agreed that the teaching of these courses had not been keeping up with the decisions of the party (in particular the policy of *doi moi*) and that there was an

[7] Dang Cong San Viet Nam, 1991: 33.

[8] Chi thi 12, 1 December 1988.

increasing divide between the current reality of emerging market transactions in the economy and the theory of state central planning being taught in classrooms. Nonetheless, the rector argued that the courses should be maintained and would be upgraded as new teaching documents became available. Students at the School of Economics were particularly disgruntled with the rector's decision, and with the parallel decision to continue with the final examination for these subjects. They took the unusual step of demonstrating against the decisions, and, even more unusually, the demonstrations were reported in the newspapers. Faced with protests, ministry officials met with the rector and agreed to uphold his decision not to reduce the number of hours the subjects were taught, on grounds put forward by the rector, namely that political economy subjects were a pivotal part of the curriculum studied at the University and employed a large number of teachers. To reduce the number of hours devoted to these subjects would result in a large number of teachers left unemployed and demean the status of existing courses (Doan va Thanh nien, 12 January 1989: 6). Ten years later, however, the number of hours these subjects were taught at the University had, in fact, been reduced, in line with the national recommendation, to 12 per cent of the total curriculum (Hanoi National Economics University and Japan International Cooperation Agency, 2001: 77).

The demonstrations at the School of Economics were important, as they were the last organised and publicised attempt to change the curriculum. They also marked a singular willingness to engage in a fundamental reshaping of the cornerstone curriculum of socialist central planning – Marxism-Leninism – both on the part of the central state ministry and on the part of students.

Several months after the demonstrations, the collapse of the Soviet bloc in Eastern Europe sent shock waves reverberating throughout Vietnam. While student discontent with the programme of study did not again become public, dissatisfaction with the teaching of Marxist-Leninist studies continued. In 1998 a conference held on improving the quality of teaching and study of Marxism-Leninism and Ho Chi Minh thought in universities found that the quality of these subjects had been steadily declining since the beginning of *doi moi* and that teachers were not as 'ardent' as they had been before the fall of the Soviet Union. Nonetheless, the Communist Party daily, *Nhan Dan*, argued that these subjects were the cornerstones of the Communist Party of Vietnam, one of the few communist parties to continue successfully on the path to socialism, and that it was therefore up to teachers to improve their teaching of the subject.[9] In 2007, focus group discussions with 30 Vietnamese economics and social science graduates studying in Australia found likewise that students felt that too many hours were spent studying Marxist-Leninist theory and related subjects, and that the methods for teaching these subjects were outdated. A common complaint was that these subjects offered little basis for understanding contemporary Vietnam – the same complaint that was raised 20 years earlier in the wake of *doi moi*.

[9] Nhân Dân, 26 June 1998: 1, 6.

The introduction of private funding and of the re-examination of the place of Marxist-Leninist studies were both experiments in fundamental changes to the system of higher education. But while paying fees has become an accepted part of Vietnamese higher education (albeit subject to continual refinements), the prominent role of Marxist-Leninist studies continues to be hotly defended. In 1989, following a short period of laissez-faire, the government quickly set firm boundaries around what could be discussed in terms of curriculum. While there has been significant change in the courses offered by higher education institutions since the start of *doi moi*, the line drawn in the sand has been to reject questions about the importance of Marxist-Leninist studies.

In summary, in terms of both funding and curriculum, the higher education sector during this period went through a process of experimentation, followed by official and public backlash against those experiments that went too far. This experience drew the boundaries around what was culturally, socially and educationally acceptable in higher education policy to both the Vietnamese people and the government. The parameters within which the higher education sector could operate in the new environment gradually began to take shape.

The Law on Education – Defining the Appropriate Distribution of Authority

The Law on Education passed in December 1998 marked in some ways a culmination of the process of experimentation and search for a direction under *doi moi*. It brought together in one document the areas where consensus had been reached, and it remained ambiguous in those areas where there was still a high level of contestation about the way forward. As such, it is an important document for understanding where the process of transition in higher education was at in 1998, and what the areas were that remained to be resolved in the future.

The development of the law, by its very creation, demonstrated the commitment of the government to a more standardised and rule-based system of checks and balances, as compared with the previous, more personalised, system of decision making. While not at the centre of those changes considered to indicate political transition, it does indicate a shift away from direct intervention to indirect control, or a move along the transitional path in the political sphere. As in other sectors, Vietnam's higher education system had been governed by a myriad of rules and decisions, which simultaneously encouraged a high level of discrete flexibility and a high level of official paralysis. As the economy opened up and as more private transactions took place, this system compounded and reinforced the likelihood of corruption taking place. The law was seen as one means of combating this unwanted phenomenon.[10]

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[10] Nhan Dan Internet Edition (1998) Quoc hoi thao luan du an Luat dua doi, bo sung Luat Dat dai 1993, Luat Giao duc [The National Assembly discusses the legal project to correct and strengthen the Land Law (1993) and the Education Law] www.nhandan.com.vn 10 November 1998.

As discussed above, the role and place of a market economy in education was one of the biggest arenas for debate during the 1990s. On the one hand, the Law on Education allowed for the private funding of higher education, for example, by stipulating the existence of public, semi-public, people-founded and private institutions (Art. 44), and it allowed for the possibility of tax deductions for those contributing directly to education (Art. 91). On the other hand, it failed to give any further details regarding the status of those institutions vis-à-vis the state, or, more generally, the role of private institutions in a state-dominated sector. The law 'forbids all actions commercialising educational activities' (Art. 17), but at the same time gives permission for economic activities to support educational activities (Art. 54). The distinction was intended to be a moral one, recognising the need for supplementary, non-state funding for education, but rejecting the sale of educational services per se to meet these needs (St. George, 2005: 128–129). The contradictions reflect the high level of ambiguity and uncertainty around how to resolve the need for greater funding to finance an expanded education sector, and the strongly held ideological belief in free and equitable access to quality education.

The key administrative ambiguities within the law centre on the division of responsibilities within education. Compared to previous regulations, the law showed a clear, albeit limited and ambiguous, move to increase the autonomy of higher education institutions and reduce the role of the state. Article 48 envisaged universities establishing their own regulations of operation, including establishing links with the wider community and society (rather than awaiting directions from above, as previously). The award of postgraduate degrees, a highly public and politicised activity, was also devolved. Though PhD candidates were no longer to be examined by a committee appointed by the prime minister, nor assessed for their support of the Communist Party, there continued to be high level of government involvement, with the Minister for Education awarding the degrees. For master's degrees, the award was no longer made by the minister, but by the rector of the relevant university (St. George, 2003: 217–220).

The law made clear, however, that unlike the countries in Eastern Europe, Vietnam was still a country on the path to socialism, guided by Marxism-Leninism. Returning to pre *doi moi* language, Article 3 specified that: 'Vietnamese education is socialist education with popular (*nhan dan*), nationalist (*dan toc*), scientific and modern characteristics, based on the foundation of Marxism-Leninism and Ho Chi Minh thought'. Each level of education was given a particular responsibility in this regard. Basic education had the role of helping to build a socialist Vietnamese person (Article 23), while undergraduate and postgraduate teaching were required to ensure that students had an excellent knowledge of Marxist-Leninist thought.[11] For postgraduate education, the theme was further developed in the Law on Science and Technology, which specified that research was expected to 'creatively develop and apply the reasoning of Marxism-Leninism and Ho Chi Minh thought; to build

[11] Article 36, par.1.a, and Article 37, par.2.a.

socialist reasoning and the path to socialism in Vietnam'.[12] One of the fundamental roles given to higher education then was to support and reinterpret the theoretical foundations of the Communist Party of Vietnam itself.

In summary, the law promulgated in 1998 set out the ground rules for education, including the articulation of Marxism-Leninism and Ho Chi Minh thought as the guiding forces in the education sector. The law nonetheless remains ambiguous in areas such as the role of fees, private universities and the division of responsibility among actors in the education sector, in line with the unresolved process of experimentation of the previous decade. These issues were taken up and resolved in the direction of greater decentralisation of administrative responsibility, and greater support for the private funding of education, in the revised Law on Education in 2005, but they remain issues of contention.

Conclusion

In 2006, after 20 years of *doi moi*, the Tenth National Party Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam again asserted that Vietnam is on the path of 'a market economy with a socialist orientation', and that Vietnam would 'continue to develop democracy, build and perfect a socialist law-governed state'.[13] What this means in practice is still not clear to Vietnamese leaders, let alone to outside observers, but it does highlight the government's focus on the inter-connectedness of the economic and political paths in a post-communist Vietnam.

In line with the concept of 'transition' outlined at the start, this chapter has argued that during the 1990s, Vietnam's higher education system underwent a fundamental period of transition, both in Winckler's sense that it became more market-oriented and less under the control of central planning and also in the more fundamental sense elaborated by Holmes in that it became legitimate and widespread to question the foundations of the existing system.

While concerns in the higher education sector initially centered around overcoming the immediate crisis in education, this rapidly gave way to key questions such as: What is the role of higher education in the new society? Does non-public funding have a role to play? What is the role of the international community? Do Marxism-Leninism and Ho Chi Minh's thought still have a role to play?

The period of transition for higher education in Vietnam saw a marked expansion in the arena of contestability around the paradigms, norms and values underpinning higher education, particularly in relation to economics and politics. By the end of

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[12] Article 4, Section 1.

[13] See Ban Chap Hanh Trung Uong (2006). Nang cao nang luc lanh dao va suc chien dau cua Dang, phat huy suc manh toan dan toc, day manh toan dien cong cuoc doi moi, som dua nuoc ta ra khoi tinh trang kem phat trien [Step up the capacity of leaders and the struggle of the Party, engage the strength of the people, push forward comprehensively the process of renovation, and quickly pull our country out of the ranks of less developed countries]. Political Report of the 10th Party Congress, Art III, XI.

the 1990s, through, in particular, the process of elaborating the Law on Education, that arena of contestability had again shrunk. Strident opposing views were once again on the periphery, rather than at the centre of the debate.

Reinforcing the perception that Vietnam has reached a post-transitional phase in higher education, in the period from 1998 to 2008, the debates have moved on. Fundamental questions addressed in the Government of Vietnam's 2005 vision for higher education in 2020 no longer centre around whether private universities should be allowed to exist at all, but how responsibilities are best divided between the state and the universities, between the private and the public sectors. The role of Marxist-Leninist studies has been reaffirmed, but again, the relevance of asking about its role has diminished, given that students now get much of their instruction from the Internet. The key debates that now excite the imagination of higher education policy-makers no longer relate to the transition from state central planning, but to ensuring that Vietnam has a university in the top 200 in the world by the year 2020.

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