

Open and distance education for sustainable
development: lessons learnt from vietnam

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Introduction

Open and distance education in Vietnam has engaged in the process of change and reform at all levels since the late 1980s, throughout the 1990s, continuing in the first decade of the 21st century.

The 1990s saw new policy development and legislation for education, a re-statement of the Education Law, an expansion of access and participation, improvement in quality. The changes were driven by three main forces:

1. Recognition of the limitations of the existing education curriculum and system for a market-oriented economy and for competition in a global economy.
2. A concern to improve the quality as well as quantity for provision.
3. The achievements of other ASEAN countries in both education and economic development.

Open and distance education (ODE) has played a role in these changes, though it is difficult to quantify it for the reason in defining "open and distance" learners in Vietnamese context. In Vietnam, the term "open learning" has a very particular meaning that is somewhat different to its meaning in international literature and practice, where it generally refers to a set of values relating to the removal of barriers to learning and access, flexibility of provision, choice on the part of the learner and provision of resources to support learning. In Vietnam, "open learning" has the meaning of "expansion" and "extension"; that is to say, more opportunities are opened to learners in comparison with the traditional system of education. The term "distance education" is used loosely in Vietnam, including degree-granted courses where students are provided with self-learning materials and non-degree courses with the provision of educational radio and television programmes.

With these definitions in mind, this paper addresses the following issues:

- The role of ODE in education and training in Vietnam;
- The contribution of ODE to the development of the country;
- The direction that ODE is likely to take in Vietnam in the future.

Country profile

Vietnam is in Southeast Asia, covering 330,363 square kilometers and has varied terrain including mountains, plains, river deltas and islands. The population is 82 million with an average growth of 1.6%. About 45% of the population is under the age of 15 years. Vietnam is largely an agricultural economy, with 75% of the population living in rural areas. It is the third most densely populated country in Southeast Asia, after Singapore and the Philippines. The distribution is uneven, with 75% of people concentrated in the Red River in the north and the Mekong Delta in the south.

The average annual income is about US \$ 400 per person, yet Vietnam's human development indicators are higher. Literacy rates are 94%. Government expenditure on education is about 16.5% (in 2004) of its total annual expenditure though the intention is to increase this as the economy progresses. Poverty levels have declined, though there is a widening rural-urban gap and most of the poor are rural. There are 54 ethnic minorities (about 13% of the population), living mainly in mountainous and rural areas.

Vietnam has spent nearly the last three decades recovering from thirty years of war. The period since 1976 has been characterized by the efforts to rebuild the country and its economy, and to provide education as a route to development. The 1990s have seen Vietnam move towards a market-oriented economy. The process began in 1986 with the "Renovation" and "Open door" macro-economic reforms followed by a period of rapid economic growth. GDP grew at an annual average rate of around 6 - 8%; inflation was reduced to single figure

and agricultural production doubled (Vietnam moved from being an importer of rice to becoming the world's third largest exporter). This was accompanied by increases in development indicators, such as: life expectancy, literacy, real incomes, health and nutrition, gender equity, participation in education and poverty reduction. The country has gradually opened up and is now linked to the global economy.

Renovation also resulted in some education policy changes. These permitted the establishment of private institutions, promoted "people-founded" and community education centers, encourages non-formal education and self-instructional activities and established greater cost sharing. Four kinds of financing of educational institutions resulted from these changes: private (*tu thuc*), people-founded (*dan lap*), semi-public (*ban cong*) and public (*cong lap*). These kinds of educational institutions range from the lowest up to the highest levels of educational system.

The development of open and distance education
Open and distance education was first introduced in Vietnam in 1960. In the first phase of its development between 1960 and 1986, ODE mainly took the form of correspondence courses, evening classes, part-time courses provided by state institutions. Its purpose was to meet the country's needs for economists, technicians, skilled workers. In-service courses, part-time courses and evening classes for workers were provided at factories, offices and workplaces by different ministries.

After 1986, ODE entered a new phase as there have been more flexibilities and changes. The private economic sector and foreign investment grew, people of any age are given the opportunities to take ODE courses (non-formal education). Distance education provision in universities and provincial centers are supervised by the Department for Continuing Education in the Ministry of Education and Training, and play a significant role in expanding access to education and training. In early 1990s, the curricular and teaching methods of "distance

education" courses were similar to those of formal courses. Though not much was provided in the way of specially prepared learning materials or local support, hundreds of thousand learners have benefited by distance education courses.

ODE at Higher education level

Since 1993, ODE has been used to meet changing labor market needs and unmet demand for higher education. The market economy has generated new motivation to learn, either for advancement in the workplace or for change of occupation. ODE has been also used by many students at traditional universities, who simultaneously enroll in open university courses in order to add computing, English skills, etc. to their degree subjects, in preparation for a competition job on graduation. This time was significantly marked by the establishment of two open universities: Hanoi Open University (HOU) and Ho Chi Minh City Semi-public Open University, one servicing the north and one the south. Hanoi Open University is *"a university which is concerned with training and researching all modes of education including distance education, face-to-face education, etc. in order to meet the variable learning needs of the people contributing to increasing the scientific and technical potentiality of the country"*, (The Prime Minister's Decision, coded 535/TTg on establishing Hanoi Open University). The university has eight faculties, offering courses in business management, accounting, information technology, biotechnology, industrial designing, English language, telecommunication, law, fashion design, architecture, and tourism. There are two categories of courses offered by HOU including degree courses and non-degree ones. Currently, there are over 34,000 students taking degree courses, of which there are 24,000 distance education students. To support the students HOU cooperates with 30 local centers in provinces and cities throughout the country. Non-degree programmes are provided by HOU via the National Television, Hanoi Television and Vietnam Radio. These programmes include business management, rural development, English for tourism, business

English, trading, environment protection, etc. to meet the needs of millions of people throughout the county.

Ho Chi Minh City Open University is a semi-public institution in southern Vietnam offering courses in foreign languages, business management, biotechnology, Southeast Asia studies, rural industry, women's study. Its distance education courses are supplemented by the radio and television programmes to meet the needs of the learners of the southern part of the country.

Apart from these two open universities, several traditional universities started offering distance courses in the late 1990s in order to meet the growing and diversified needs of the people of different background.

Current ODE in Higher Education

(Source: MoET, July 2004)

institutions	Students	Academic AREAS						In-service
		Economics, Management	Technology	Social Sciences	Teacher Training	English	ICT	
HANOI OPEN UNIVERSITY	24,004	14,414	395	5,958	0	2,271	966	64.8%
SEMI-PUBLIC OPEN UNIVERSITY IN H.C.M. CITY	6,016	4,332	624	321	0	427	312	60%
HANOI PEDAGOGIC UNIVERSITY	27,165	0	0	0	27,065	0	100	100%
HUE UNIVERSITY	40,500	3,300	0	5,482	31,798	0	0	95%
DANANG UNIVERSITY	4,625	3,800	370	0	0	455	0	70%
HANOI FOREIGN LANGUAGES COLLEGE	4,269	0	0	0	0	4,279	0	68.7%

DALAT UNIVERSITY	540	150	0	170	0	40	180	70%
NATIONAL UNIVERSITY IN HCM CITY	8,155	0	0	0	0	0	8,155	
TOTAL	115,274	25,996	1,389	11,931	58,863	7,472	9,713	

Teacher education

Distance education has played an importance role in improving the teachers' qualifications. The teaching force, especially at primary school level, has a wide range of educational qualifications, from those with seven years of basic education and two years of teacher training to a minority with 12 years of basic education and four years of teacher training to degree level. The Government policy to upgrade all teachers to a national standard is currently being implemented, and ODE has been seen as an effective solution to this issue. Two educational universities, Hanoi Pedagogical University and Hue University, have taken leading role in offering teacher-training courses. Hanoi Open University has also provided ODE courses to over 2,000 lower secondary school teachers of English.

In response to changing times, the government emphasized the priority of renovation through the solution "Continued Renovation of Stages of Education and Training" (MoET, 1993). Key priorities were identified as increasing quality and improving the curriculum, training and teaching methodology to enhance learning.

The Government's strategy of Education and Training for 2010 to 2020 identifies the goal of quality

improvement, increased levels of education and training, recognition of the importance of life-long learning and more dynamic approach to teaching.

School Teachers

(Source: The Center for Educational Information)

School year	1996- 1997	1997- 1998	1998- 1999	1999- 2000	2000- 2001	2001- 2002
Primary school teachers	310,264	324,545	336,792	340,871	347,883	353,804
Standardized	74.8%	75.4%	77.6%	80.0%	84.9%	86.0%
Lower secondary school teachers	167,110	179,512	194,237	208,802	224,840	243,130
Standardized	86.8%	84.9%	86.2%	86.3%	90.8%	92.0%
Secondary school teachers	42,026	46,979	54,324	65,189	74,189	81,549
Standardized	92.4%	93.2%	94.2%	95.6%	95.8%	97%
Total school teachers	519,400	551,036	585,353	614,862	646,862	678,483

Prominent Achievements

Since the "Renovation", a complete national system of education with diversified of forms and modes has been set up and growing rapidly. Apart from a system of public educational institutions, various non-public institutions have been established, contributing to the development of the country. The numbers of educational institutions and students have been growing year by year.

Equality for educational opportunities has been assured. There has been a wider range of choice for learners to choose, suitable for their personal conditions and status, as all modes of education have been approved of by the Education Law. Education for the people in rural and remote areas has been paid much attention to by the Government. ODE has been used as an

effective solution to improvement of human resources in general and rural development in particular.

The Government policy "Socialization in Education" has mobilized the whole society for educational development. The investment for education comes from different sources: Government, organizations, individuals, etc. In 2000, the funding for education from the private sector accounted for 25% of the total expenditure on education.

Basic Education

(Source: The Center for Educational Information)

School years	1996-1997	1997-1998	1998-1999	1999-2000	2000-2001
Number of schools	21,618	22,494	23,330	23,960	24,675
Primary school children (thousand)	8,375	9,091	10,414	10,250	10,063
Lower secondary school students (thousand)	3,197	2,699	4,885	5,514	5,769
Secondary school students (thousand)	911	554	1,176	1,658	1.975

Higher Education

(Source: The Center for Educational Information)

School year	1996-1997	1997-1998	1998-1999	1999-2000	2000-2001	2001-2002
Universities and colleges	109	126	139	153	178	191
Students	593,884	715,231	798,857	893,745	918,228	974,119
Students at public institutions	568,872	669,512	729,629	786,216	813,963	873,129
Students at non-public institutions	25,012	45,719	69,228	107,538	104,265	100,990

Students of Different Educational Modes
(Source: Information Center of the MoET)

School year	1996-1997	1997-1998	1998-1999	1999-2000	2000-2001	2001-2002
Junior college students	96,129	127,027	157,710	173,912	186,723	210,863
Formal students	81,380	105,859	129,755	133,236	148,893	167,476
Part-time students	6,788	10,666	14,097	11,398	19,819	24,478
Distance education students and others	7,961	10,502	13,858	29,278	18,011	18,909
University students	497,755	588,204	641,147	719,842	731,505	763,256
Formal students	216,727	284,24	339,931	376,401	403,568	411,721
Part-time students	182,929	216,777	215,560	205,906	223,837	251,600
ODE students	98,099	87,163	85,656	137,535	104,100	99,935

Budget for Education

(Source: Ministry of Education and Training)

Year	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002
From National expenditure (%)	13.6	14.1	15.0	15.3	15.5

Scenario of Development

(Source: The National Institute for Educational Strategy and Curriculum)

Year	2000	2005	2010
GDP Growth (%)	6	7 - 8	7 - 8
GDP/person (USD)	400	515	700
Population (million)	79	83	88

Population of Labor age (million)	46.7	50.8	56.8
Distribution of labor	100	100	100
Agriculture (%)	61.3	56 - 57	50
Industry (%)	16.7	20 - 21	23 - 24
Service (%)	22.0	22 - 23	26 - 27
Investment for education from National expenditure (%)	15	18	20

Conclusion

Open and distance education in Vietnam has continued to make an important contribution to education and training provision in particular and sustainable development of the country in general. Many people who have obtained qualifications would not have been able to do so without access to opportunities that ODE courses provided. The establishment of the open universities has been significant in progressing the use and status of ODE and in parallel, traditional universities are increasingly adopting more flexible and varied modes of course delivery. The contribution made by ODE to the development of the country, which has been mentioned above, can be generated for the following reasons:

1. The wide range of learning needs caused by the transition to a market economy. Many people need education for employment, adaptability with job requirement; others strive for advancement or change of occupation. The system of traditional institutions, which was heavily centralized, could not meet the demand for human resources.
2. The trend for globalization in all fields including economy, communication, education, etc. requires renovation and reforms, otherwise the country would be backward and lagged behind. The cooperation and relation between Vietnam and other countries,

especially the ASEAN countries, have created favorable conditions for improvement.

3. The Government policy has been the most important factor to the development. In line with the renovation in economy and "open door" policy, the Government has released series of directions and decisions to improve the education system. In many official documents, priorities have been given to ODE development.

Though much has been achieved in ODE in Vietnam, in some ways ODE has been slow to develop beyond its earlier conceptions. The models in 2004 are, to some extent, still similar to those in the 1990s, relying heavily on face-to-face teaching, short of specially designed learning materials and other media to support learners. Though ICT has been used in ODE, it is just in the initial stage. One challenge facing ODE in Vietnam, as in many other countries, is the achievement of parity of esteem and a quality equivalent to, or better than, that of traditional providers and modes. Another challenge relates to funding. There is still debate about the most efficient and effective ways to provide ODE and the institutions to be invested. Lack of adequate funding has been a major handicap in putting new thinking into practice and in achieving desired standards.

A new renovation in education is now beginning in Vietnam. The National Assembly is considering for a Renewed Law of Education to meet the demand of the new area of development. The Government' Strategy of Education and Training for 2010 to 2020 identifies the goals (among others) of quality improvement, increased levels of education and training, the creation of skilled and flexible workforce, recognition of the importance of life-long learning. It includes ODE as one means of achieving these goals. Therefore, ODE will continue to make significant contributions to the sustainable development of the country.

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