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## **EDUCATION IN VIETNAM Historical Roots, Recent Trends**

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Over the last two decades Vietnam has experienced profound changes in all manner of its social institutions. This volume of essays examines developments in the sphere of education. Broadly understood, education refers to social activities that impart knowledge, skills, or morality. Education can thus take place in innumerable guises and settings. The essays in this volume are focused on Vietnam's education system, understood as the entire set of processes and institutions that govern formal schooling, training, and research activities in Vietnam, and their social and educational outcomes.

The historical lineages of education in Vietnam stretch back over a thousand years. The country has had an organized education system for more than 500 years. Regional differences in education systems that emerged in (what is today) Vietnam in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the associated politics of education during this period are equally if not more important for understanding education in contemporary Vietnam. In macrohistorical terms, major influences on education in Vietnam include the development and incomplete decay of Confucian institutions, colonialism

and anti-colonial struggle, post-colonial state formation, twentieth century wars, the development and subsequent erosion of state-socialist institutions and, most recently, the development of a state-dominated market economy within a Leninist political framework. Against such a varied and complex historical backdrop, the last two decades is a small bit of time indeed. And yet, changes in Vietnam's education since the late 1980s have been momentous, both reflecting and effecting broader social change.

The publication of this volume comes at a time when Vietnam's education system is at a crossroads. Rapid economic growth over two decades has permitted unprecedented increases in the scale and scope of formal schooling. And yet there is a prevailing sense that Vietnam's current education system is inadequate to the country's needs. These are not abstract concerns. Education is not a stand alone sector but a major institution that functions and develops interdependently with other major institutions. What happens in Vietnam's education system has broad implications for social life in the country.

Contemporary Vietnam's education system is fascinating. Seeing why requires moving beyond platitudes to analysis of substantive educational issues. The platitudes are familiar but deserve consideration. One is that respect for education is somehow essential to the Vietnamese character (*bản sắc người Việt*). Another — especially popular among Vietnam's political leaders — is that education is the “national priority”, the “national strategy”, or the “national policy” (*quốc sách hàng đầu*). International development agencies chime in with saccharine praise of Vietnam's educational “achievements” before their inevitable laundry lists of “shortcomings”.

Taken at face value, these sayings are valid enough. Education *has* figured prominently in Vietnam's social history; education *is* a major focus of the state; and, residual problems notwithstanding, over the last two decades, Vietnam *has* registered significant “improvements” across many indicators of educational development. But as the essays in this volume demonstrate, Vietnam's education system is more interesting and complex than the well-worn clichés suggest. In Vietnam today, there are a wide variety of views engaged in a sprawling and urgent debate about what is happening, why, and what might be done about it.

Current debates on Vietnam's education system seem to be fuelled by three broad and related sets of anxieties. The first concerns the relation between education and livelihoods. As the country has grown

wealthier, opportunities for schooling have increased greatly. But demand for education and training has increased even faster, while the costs, qualities, distribution, and accessibility of education remain uneven across regions and different segments of the population. Education in Vietnam — as in other countries — has long been viewed as a pathway to a better life; an avenue to social mobility. But, as elsewhere, education can also function as an obstacle to such social mobility, as a giant sorting mechanism that generates, reproduces, or transforms existing social inequalities. In an age of rapid economic growth, consumerism, and geographic mobility, Vietnam's education system may be thought of as a vast social field in which aspirations and constraints collide.

A second source of debate are the anxieties concerning education policies. Beyond thin consensuses regarding the importance of education and the need for further educational reforms, there are conflicting diagnoses of what ails Vietnam's education system and substantively divergent prescriptions for change. Quite often, entrenched interests, bureaucratic rigidities, and ideological factionalism seem only to promote continued organizational inertia. In other respects, the intensity and sophistication of education policy debates have increased. There are, it is clear, both new and old dilemmas and new and old problems, many of which are addressed in the current volume.

A final concern relates to the quality of education in the context of rapid increases in the scale of, and demand for, education. Maintaining or improving quality in the context of rapid growth is a challenge familiar to educators around the world. It is recognized, for example, that uneven access to and the quality of preschool education is undermining the achievement capabilities of children from poor and marginalized groups. Significant steps to improve preschool education are only now taking hold. Completion of primary and lower-secondary education is becoming the norm, but there are large disparities in the quality of primary and secondary education, and in educational achievement across and within regions. Tertiary education in Vietnam is rapidly becoming mass education, even as the country lacks a single university of international standard. Thousands of vocational training centres have sprouted up across Vietnam, but the country is only now developing systems of accreditation. In the meantime, credentialism and commercialism fuel over-rapid growth. There is, as can be observed, no shortage of important and controversial issues concerning education in Vietnam.

The analysis of education in Vietnam can be approached from innumerable perspectives and this volume does not pretend to offer a comprehensive treatment or all the answers. But it is hoped that the chapters in this volume will contribute to existing knowledge of the country's education system and, in so doing, to broader understandings of social conditions in contemporary Vietnam. The remainder of this chapter introduces Vietnam's education system through an overview of its historical development and current organization, a summary of recent trends, and a survey of relevant literature. The individual contributions to this volume are then introduced in turn.

## **THE HISTORICAL LINEAGES OF VIETNAM'S EDUCATION SYSTEM**

To study contemporary Vietnam's education system is to scratch the surface of something much larger and older.<sup>1</sup> But the history of education in Vietnam cannot be treated as a mere "backdrop" to the present. On the contrary, the history of Vietnam's education system is essential to the analysis and understanding of its present. The following discussion attempts to provide the reader with some of the salient elements of this history. It helps link evidence and understandings of Vietnam's educational past with evidence and understandings of its present.

### **Confucian Institutions and Their Historical Legacies**

To say that Vietnam's Confucian heritage has shaped its education system is to risk essentializing, as is common in many contemporary debates. Indeed, the difficulty of stating concisely the significance of Confucianism to the development of education in Vietnam owes to the complex nature of Confucianism itself, the intellectual content, practical manifestations and effects of which varied considerably over time and place. Confucianism has meant different things to different people. In certain periods and places and among certain groups Confucianism was of marginal or even no significance.<sup>2</sup> And yet, on balance, Confucianism, Confucian institutions, and their historical legacies — real and imagined — have played a vital role in debates about the development of education system in Vietnam and of Vietnamese social institutions more broadly.<sup>3</sup> That said, and before entering

a more detailed discussion, it must be acknowledged that the account below is not expert. It does not offer a substantive analysis of different streams of thought in Vietnamese Confucianism or a serious engagement with scholarship on these themes.<sup>4</sup> Finally, it should be stated that our discussion starts with a consideration of Confucianism, not because it is the most important for understanding the present, but because of its early influence on trajectories of educational development in Vietnam.

To generalize, Confucianism blended education and normative governance. Confucian institutions imposed constraints by linking organized education and the study of classics to governance and authority relations. Confucian ideals and institutions shaped attitudes and behaviours concerning education, but in non-determinant ways, contingent on actors' interests, capacities, and circumstances. Perhaps most important, the development of education systems in Vietnam, as in China and Korea, occurred in interdependent relation with the development of authority relations — proto-national, local, and familial. Grasping this helps us to appreciate the historical significance of education in Vietnam.

Vietnam's introduction to Confucianism occurred through Chinese influence. Chinese domination of what is today northern Vietnam between the first and tenth centuries gave the country what Alexander Woodside has called "a comprehensive initiation into the scholarship, political theories, familial organization patterns, bureaucratic practices, and even the religious orientations of Chinese culture" (Woodside 1971, p. 7). Chinese-inspired civil service exams, based on Chinese Buddhist and Confucian classics, began no later than the eleventh century. The use of written Chinese, the development of an intellectual (or Confucian) scholar "class" (*tầng lớp nho sĩ*), and the incorporation of villages into the pre-modern (or "feudal") state were critical steps in the development of Vietnam's village culture, customs, and codes (Bùi Xuân Đính 1985).

In Vietnam, as in China and Korea, the organized study of Confucian classics and the regular conduct of competitive examinations became integral to the development and functions of dynastic states. As Woodside (2005) has shown, the use of exams and other merit-based criteria allowed imperial courts in these three mandarinates to develop rules-based bureaucracies, contributing to a "precocious de-feudalization" of authority relations that enhanced dynastic states' power. In other respects, impacts of Confucianism on the development of education in Vietnam reflected the peculiarities of

Vietnamese social life. The expulsion of the Chinese in the tenth century was followed by roughly 900 years of largely autonomous development, punctuated by defeats of several Chinese and Mongol attempts to invade. During this period, rulers of the Lý (1010–1225), Trần (1225–1400), Lê (1428–1788), Mạc (1527–92),<sup>5</sup> and Nguyễn (1802–1945) dynasties continued to use formal examinations and other Chinese-inspired mechanisms to recruit and regulate their bureaucracies. John Whitmore (1997) has provided a particularly interesting analysis of literati culture and its significance with respect to political integration in “Đại Việt” between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The practical significance of Confucianism and Confucian institutions with respect to education needs to be clarified. Up until the nineteenth century, education in Vietnam occurred largely in privately run village schools led by Confucian scholars, who trained local candidates (*cử tử* or *sĩ tử*) — always boys or men — for exams and eventual careers as clerks, bureaucrats, or mandarins. Beyond the village schools were state-sponsored prefectural schools (*tràng/trường học*), provincial schools, and the imperial college (*Quốc tử giám*). But education in Vietnam more often took place in village schools (usually situated in the residence of village scholars) rather than in state academies.

How was the “Vietnamese experience” different from that in China? Village teachers in Vietnam tended to be more independent of the bureaucracy. Vietnam’s examination system was not as extensive as China’s, less hierarchal, and eligibility for participation in exams was less contingent on lineage. In both China and Vietnam, education tended to be elitist. But the celebration of literacy in Vietnam was associated with the economic and cultural standing of the village more than a particular lineage. While educational opportunities were fewer among the poor, it was not uncommon for village associations in the country to maintain separate “study fields” (*học điền*) to finance the education of ambitious, but materially poor students (Woodside 1991). Vietnamese education was, by comparison, less specialized and divisions between academic elite and village instructors were less distinct.

Dynastic states sought to use education and teaching to penetrate village life, with mixed success. Early nineteenth century Nguyễn rulers sought to inculcate ten moral maxims regarding the conduct of village life by demanding their regular recitation in village communal houses (*đình*) (Woodside 1971, p. 189). But local literati were often able to promote

their own interests; local customs and local discretions determined which maxims to embrace and which to flout, which students were worthy of material support or exemptions from labour and military requirements, and who would sit for exams (Woodside 1971).

The resilience of local institutions to outside authority (explained, *inter alia*, by the insularity of village life, the physical isolation of frontier settlements, and principled opposition) helps to explain the varying relevance of Confucianism to the development of education in Vietnam across time and place. Moreover, however important to village life Confucian institutions may have been, they always existed alongside other important institutions, including village codes under different names (e.g., *khoán ước*, *khoán từ*, *khoán lệ*, *điều lệ*, *hương lệ*, *tục lệ*, etc.), councils of elders, and local indigenous customs. Village codes, which provided rules for an impressive range of social activities, frequently regulated educational matters, including the level of support for local scholars and finding substitutes to fulfil military obligations (Bùi Xuân Dĩnh 1985). Hence, different localities' peculiarities might manifest in distinctive engagements with and critiques of Confucian thought and institutions. Among non-Viet (and non-Chinese) ethnic groups, the force of Confucian thought and institutions was much more limited, and education was more likely to take place within familial or religious settings, as opposed to formal training.

During the Lê dynasty, the number of examinees at the doctoral exam (*thi hội*) reached 5,700 in the year 1514 and 6,000 in the year 1640 (Ngô Đức Thọ 2003, pp. 75–77). By the nineteenth century, an estimated 4,000 scholars in Vietnam competed in regional exams held every three years (Woodside 1971, p. 179). While the examination system continued to function,<sup>6</sup> dynastic states encountered difficulty recruiting enough scholars of sufficient quality to staff imperial courts, and their efforts to use village literati and village teachers to meet their own imperatives were frequently frustrated. Imperial educational officials appointed to administer education at the provincial and district levels were sometimes less well trained (and therefore not respected) by those they sought to administer.

Confucianism is associated with the veneration of education and its development occurred in an age where access to education was limited. Despite the greater openness of education in Vietnam as noted above, only a small minority of Vietnamese children studied. Although Vietnamese custom did allow education for non-elites, Confucian ideas and institutions nonetheless often promoted and reproduced hierarchies of power, wealth,

and status. With rare exceptions such as the famous case of Nguyễn Thị Duệ,<sup>7</sup> girls and women were largely excluded and those who did receive instruction in the classics were mostly expected to learn and recite certain “virtues of feminine behaviour”, such as how to stand and sit, speak, cook and sew, and submit to male authority. Boys, by contrast, had a standard and fairly extensive syllabus of Confucian classics they were expected to master.

Critiques of Confucian institutions have played an important role in Vietnam’s social history and educational history in particular. Elite malfeasance was a common inspiration of many of Vietnam’s greatest literary figures, such as the eighteenth century writers Nguyễn Du, Hồ Xuân Hương, and Cao Bá Quát, each of whom were both products and critics of the country’s classical educational traditions. The brilliance of these writers lay not in their mastery of classical texts *per se* but in the artistry of their social commentary.

Overall, the impact of Confucianism on education in Vietnam defies generalization. Despite the limited accessibility of education, the use of classical education as an instrument of local and extra-local power imbued much of the country’s population with respect for intellectual tradition and certain methods of learning. The proportionately small number of people involved in formal studies meant that education took place through other means, especially through oral traditions, such as songs, storytelling, and epic poems, many of which offered biting commentary on social and political affairs. Exclusionary aspects of classical education and the difficulty of mastering Chinese characters or Vietnamese *chữ nôm* (“southern script”) meant that vast majorities of Vietnamese remained functionally illiterate (Woodside 1971). And yet, Confucian thought and Confucian-inspired social institutions had wide impacts on the development of education systems in Vietnam and legacies of these impacts remain.

### **Colonialism, Anti-colonialism, and Education**

French colonialism destabilized, destroyed, and transformed Vietnamese institutions, including those governing education. As will be noted, French influence on education preceded the institutionalization of colonial rule. The institutionalization of colonial rule amounted to an attack on Vietnamese authority relations and was, by extension, an attack on the traditional educational system. By militarily defeating and subsequently coopting the imperial bureaucracy and scholar gentry, French colonial authorities



precipitated the demise of Vietnam's Confucian institutions. By the 1920s, French authorities had undertaken a restructuring of the country's school system designed to serve colonial imperatives more efficiently. But the exclusionary, restrictive, and exploitive character of these arrangements drew criticism. Indeed, Vietnamese struggles against French education policies were critical to the development of anti-colonial sentiment. Ironically, French colonialism contributed not only to the demise of Confucian institutions, but also to the rise of a new and increasingly radicalized anti-colonial intelligentsia, members of which would ultimately overturn French rule.

French influence on education in Vietnam was spatially and temporally uneven. European missionary schools existed in various parts of the country by the eighteenth century. But it was the establishment of explicitly Franco-“Annamite” schools in the French protectorate of Cochin China (what is today southern Vietnam), beginning in 1861, that marked the beginning of a significant French influence on organized education. As Trần Thị Phương Hoa (2009) has pointed out, explicitly assimilationist Franco-Annamite schools were in operation prior to the establishment of the official colonial administration. By 1869, there were some 126 Franco-Vietnamese primary schools in Cochin China, with more than 4,000 students (Thompson 1937, cited in Trần 2009, p.7). Importantly, the introduction of these schools occurred in the south several decades prior to the establishment of any similar schools in (what is today) central and northern Vietnam, and there were many more such schools in the south. By 1887, according to Trần (ibid) there were only forty-two Franco-Vietnamese schools in Tonkin. Instruction was in Romanized Vietnamese script, Quốc Ngữ. Of these forty-two schools, only thirteen were primary schools, four of which were designated for girls. The remaining twenty-nine schools were geared to adults, for the training of colonial functionaries, such as clerks and interpreters. Undoubtedly, the greater exposure of the south to French education affected and accentuated regional differences in social structure and trajectories of change.

French colonialism advanced in stages, with the creation of the Cochin China colony in 1860 (in what is today southern Vietnam), and the establishment in 1884 of the protectorates of Annam and Tonkin in (what is today) central and northern Vietnam, respectively. French colonialism and local responses to it precipitated the demise of Confucian social institutions, as the French attack on Vietnamese authority amounted to an attack on hierarchical authority relations and hence education at both the

national and local levels. The subsequent cooptation and marginalization of the Vietnamese Confucian literati and the active participation of many members of this elite stratum in the maintenance of oppressive colonial hierarchies generated popular contempt. Historians of Vietnamese anti-colonialism provide richly detailed accounts of how literati who appeared to collaborate with French authorities became living symbols of moral bankruptcy and subservience and lightening rods of social criticism.<sup>8</sup> The famous Vietnamese doctor, historian, literary critic, and dissident Nguyễn Khắc Viện decried Vietnamese Confucians' proclivities towards conservatism and fixation on individual self-improvement while ignoring institutional constraints, a view characteristic of prevailing leftist critics (Nguyễn Khắc Viện 1993).

Collaboration or toleration were not the only options, as many members of the scholarly elite questioned or openly rejected French colonialism, if in very different ways. The ultimately unsuccessful *Cần Vương* (Aid the King) Movement of 1885–89, for example, was coordinated by scholars such as Phan Đình Phùng, Phan Chu Trinh, Phan Bội Châu, Trần Qui Cáp and Huỳnh Thúc Kháng, who sought to restore sovereign authority to the Nguyễn throne. French-educated conservative scholars of the early twentieth century sought, by contrast, to advance education reforms without fundamentally challenging established power structures. Vietnam's two most famous anti-colonial scholars of this era, Phan Chu Trinh and Phan Bội Châu (neither of whom was French educated)<sup>9</sup> drew direct attention to the relation between French education policies and colonial domination.<sup>10</sup> Anti-colonial dissent politicized education. The tax revolts in 1908 led to an almost ten-year closure of colleges established in the same year.

Indeed, French education reforms undertaken between 1917 and 1919 exacerbated rather than eased tensions. While the nineteenth century saw regional differentiation in education (including the aforementioned development of Franco-Vietnamese schools), these early twentieth century reforms effectively ended the old education system (comprised of village schools and hierarchical regional academies); replacing it with a new arrangement that included, in Cochinchina, a separate French and Franco-Vietnamese school system and, in Tonkin and Annam, "traditional academies" (Hue-Tam Ho Tai 1992, p. 11). All three types of schools were placed under the authority of the French "Office of Public Instruction" which, in addition to overseeing public schools and approving or rejecting the operation of village and prefectural

“traditional” schools, controlled curricula and the management of human resources. According to one estimate, education accounted for seven to eight per cent of the French Indo-China budget.<sup>11</sup>

The Franco-Vietnamese school system, established in 1917, was designed principally to keep Vietnamese out of French schools and to train Vietnamese for administrative occupations in a way that would not threaten French superiority (Kelly 1975).<sup>12</sup> Advancing from elementary to primary education within this system was impossible without elementary education in French, but this was offered in only a small number of schools. By the 1920s, it is estimated that no more than 3 per cent of the population had completed primary school, equivalent to a third- or fourth-grade education. The trial and punishment in the 1920s of both Phan Chu Trinh and Phan Bội Châu and the funeral of Phan Chu Trinh (in 1925) were major political events that fuelled critiques of the colonial education system. Yet between 1920 and 1938, little more than 10 per cent of all students would make it beyond the third grade, while less than 10 per cent of children were attending school (Marr 1981, see especially pp. 32–44). As Truong Huyen Chi notes later in this volume, Kelly demonstrated that instead of promoting national integration, schooling promoted regional inequalities and class tensions (Kelly 1982, p. 52).

While schooling in colonial Vietnam was limited, some question the conventional depiction of early twentieth-century Vietnam as overwhelmingly illiterate. Scholars agree that by the early twentieth century literacy rates in Vietnam had begun to increase, thanks to popularization and increasing availability of printed material in the Romanized Vietnamese language system (*quốc ngữ*). As Woodside (1983) has pointed out, statements that 95 per cent of Vietnam’s population was illiterate in 1945 appear to some as a decidedly Confucian equation of literacy and academic learning.

On the other hand, it was clear that anti-colonial politics fuelled an interest in education. Hồ Chí Minh was not the first to claim that the longer Vietnamese remained an ignorant people (*ngu dân*), the longer they would remain in servitude. Indeed, demands for more inclusive educational institutions and calls for Vietnamese to educate themselves fuelled the development of anti-colonial movements of the early twentieth century and figured prominently in the political struggle for national independence (Marr 1981). A small number of semi-privileged young Vietnamese who managed to make it through secondary education went on to seize the

political initiative, rejecting colonial careers for revolutionary politics, which they frequently pursued through educational activities. Though there were only three upper-secondary schools nationally (in Hue, Hanoi, and Saigon) their significance to Vietnam's political history was immense. Well known students of the Trường Quốc Học in Huế included Hồ Chí Minh, Phạm Văn Đồng, Trần Phú, Võ Nguyên Giáp, and Đào Duy Anh.

Colonial structures of domination proved fertile ground for the development of a small, young, and radical intelligentsia, who rejected traditional Confucian ideas and institutions in favour of liberal and socialist ideas. This new intelligentsia, largely from petit-bourgeois families, took form through exposure to new ideas and to the indignities of the colonial experience. They were unwilling to settle for careers as clerks, interpreters, or tax collectors and increasingly sought to overturn French rule. By the twentieth century, a trickle of such Vietnamese ventured overseas for education, most importantly to France, Japan, and China, where they gained exposure to liberal, nationalist, and revolutionary ideas, as well as political and military training. Members of this young intelligentsia formed political parties, such as the Vietnam Quốc Dân Đảng (Nationalist Party), inspired by the ideology of Sun Yat-sen and founded by Phan Bội Châu in 1924, and the Marxist-Leninist Indochina Communist Party (ICP), which was formed during the late 1920s and was officially (and secretly) established under the authority of Comintern in Kowloon, Hong Kong, in 1930.

Outside the established education system, education played a key role in the independence struggle. In 1940, the communist-led *Việt Minh Đồng Minh Hội* (Việt Minh) announced their commitment to a fully literate population and to compulsory schooling at the primary level. As early as 1938, communist party committees in Tonkin launched efforts to promote literacy and party ideology through clandestine schools. As the 1940s unfolded, literacy training emerged as an integrated feature of the Việt Minh's political platform and a powerful tool for inculcating revolutionary values. Notably, the Việt Minh's literacy campaigns especially sought to reach out to non-Kinh ethnic minorities which, among other things, signalled the importance of achieving "unity" (*đoàn kết*) among the "great Vietnamese family of peoples" (Woodside 1983, p. 407).

After declaring Vietnam's independence in 1945, these efforts continued through compulsory literacy training in Việt Minh-controlled areas. Between 1946 and 1950, amid French efforts to reclaim northern Vietnam by force,

the Việt Minh and sympathetic forces provided literacy training to some ten million previously uneducated Vietnamese (Woodside 1983, p. 401). In the 1950s and early 1960s, the Việt Minh and National Front similarly organized literacy classes and educational activities across the south, from the central mountains to the Mekong delta.<sup>13</sup>

### **State Formation, War, and Education Systems in a Divided Vietnam**

The worldwide expansion of education during the twentieth century was a phenomenon closely linked to the development of modern states. The close relation between education systems and processes of state formation owes in large measure to the fact that education systems can be multifunctional instruments of state power. States can use education to promote diverse imperatives, including social order and consent, economic growth, and welfare. In post-World War II Vietnam, processes of educational development and state formation went hand in hand. Education in Vietnam during this period is only given a cursory glance here. In the account that follows, broad developments are offered instead of details on influential persons and events.

In the 1940s and 1950s Vietnam experienced the formation of two new states — the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) in the north and the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) in the south — and with them, two separate education systems. General poverty combined with the onset of war limited the scope of education, while the administration and daily operations of the system took place in the context of social upheaval. As Thaveeporn Vasavakul has shown in her comprehensive study of education and state building in North and South Vietnam between 1945 and 1965, the fledgling states that developed on either side of the seventeenth parallel developed educational systems that reflected the nationalist, class-based, and organizational biases of their respective political elite (Vasavakul 1994). These biases were shaped not only by ideological convictions, but the exigencies of an intensifying civil and international war.

In northern Vietnam, the development of the education system was part and parcel of the DRV's Soviet-inspired development strategy. By 1949 and 1950, the Việt Minh set about designing a new school system. In principle, universal education was to be guaranteed as a right of citizenship and wholly financed by public means. Curricula were, after 1950, simplified

to focus on perceived organizational and productive requirements of the wartime situation.

The development of mass education in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam is frequently represented as a success story. Indeed, school enrolments increased rapidly during the 1950s and even during the wartime 1960s. Though constrained by lack of resources and war, Vietnam's communist leaders maintained a thoroughly instrumentalist and ultramodernist view of education. Education was (and in most respects remains) seen as an instrument of state power for the achievement of progress and socialist revolution. Education would contribute to the development of the "new socialist man" (and, presumably, woman).

But in other respects, the successes were illusory and the relevance of schooling to the "worker" and peasant questionable. The transition from the "guerrilla-style" (*du kích*) or *blitzkrieg* mass literacy courses of the 1950s to a stable bureaucratically organized education system proved difficult (Woodside 1983). The urban bias of the DRV's development model, the overwhelming paucity of resources, and war placed severe limits on the quality of education across regions. Successes of the 1950s in promoting literacy and school enrolments among ethnic minority groups in the northern mountainous regions declined. The development of education in the north during this period is revisited in Chapter Two of this volume.

The first education reforms in southern Vietnam predated Hồ Chí Minh's declaration of independence. By March 1945, the Japanese had permitted the establishment of the so-called State of Vietnam, or "Imperial Vietnam" (Đế quốc Việt Nam), whose first prime minister, Trần Trọng Kim, was a conservative academician and former colonial education administrator under the French. However short, Trần's six-month reign saw the transition of the southern curriculum to the Vietnamese language and Vietnamese oversight, albeit in a faithful translation of the French educational programme. By 1949, the Ministry of Education of the southern government had under its jurisdiction three primary superior schools (*collèges*) and 573 primary schools. The number of post-primary and primary school students numbered 2,686 and 119,600 respectively, but did not include some 5,000 students enrolled in private schools and over 23,000 enrolled in Chinese schools, mostly in Chợ Lớn (Vasavakul 1994, p. 51). Thaveeporn Vasavakul's previously cited comparative study of education in the north and south contains an exhaustive description of the southern education system, including organization, curricula, and finance.

With the establishment of the Republic of Vietnam in 1954 came great excitement over a new independent education system in the south, but also controversy, confusion, and disorder with respect to education policy. A recent collection of articles by Nguyễn Thanh Liêm, a former vice-minister of Education and Youth in the Republic of Vietnam, provides a fascinating glimpse of the situation in the south during this period. The volume includes contributions from more than twenty-five former educators and education officials and provides details for the period between 1955 and 1975. Upon its formation, the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) undertook successive rounds of education sector reforms. These achieved certain quantitative indicators of progress. Modelled after the French, the RVN's education system saw rapid growth. Between 1960 and 1970, the proportion of children that completed primary education in the Republic doubled, from 30 to 60 per cent, while by 1973 there were more than 100,000 students enrolled in over fifteen community colleges and universities (Nguyễn Thanh Liêm 2006, p. 6). War and increasing chaos in the south gradually eroded the southern education system before its collapse in 1975.

### **Education after 1975**

After 1975, the state authorities waited until 1981 to adopt a unified national education system. Dire social conditions and acute shortages across the entire country meant that quality of education was lacking and there was uneven access across regions. The gradual imposition of a Soviet-style education system to the south of the country was one among many major changes in southern society in the post-war period. The exclusion of former teachers and of children from families and localities associated with the RVN, along with "re-education" camps, were indicative of the politicization of education in the immediate post-war south.

In many areas of post-war south, the same guerrilla education tactics used in the 1940s and 1950s were redeployed and so the development of education frequently depended on local initiative. As a primary school principal in Quảng Nam province recalled in a 1999 interview, "after the war, getting the school operating was a priority; getting children to come to school was difficult though and we had no money; but we were young and no one really cared about money at that time" (London 2004). The end of the war and social mobilization in the south contributed to rapid increases in school enrolments. Between 1976 and 1981, enrolments grew



by some 260,000 pupils per year and by 1981, statistics indicated that almost a quarter of the entire population was enrolled in either primary or lower-secondary schools (Woodside 1991).

Over time, however, the development of the national education system was limited by acute financial constraints. By the 1980s, Vietnam had developed a sprawling education system and boasted enrolment figures comparable with countries ten times as wealthy. But the poor performance and gradual erosion of Vietnam's state socialist economic institutions undermined the fiscal foundations upon which the provision and payment for education depended. The quality of education remained hamstrung by threadbare conditions, particularly in rural areas and especially in remote regions. School attendance figures masked the fact that a "school day" for most children in rural areas consisted of no more than two or three hours.

While no detailed analysis of curricula can be offered here, some comments on the content of education during this period seem appropriate. In hindsight, many Vietnamese have questioned the practical relevance of the school curricula during the 1970s and 1980s, and many believe this deficiency remains. In the post American-war context, Vietnam's leaders demonstrated rhetorical flair in their emphasis on practically oriented "socialist" education. But the development of vocational education consistently fell short of such rhetoric. Heavy emphasis was placed on literature (including readings of "classics" not written for children), the celebration of nationalist symbols, heroes and legends, and other subjects far removed from the students' daily lives.

Some attribute these curricular peculiarities to Vietnam's leaders' intellectual failure to grasp the real significance of a skilled labour force. This, it is argued, is a consequence of the deeply engrained tradition of scholarly elitism which, whether in the study of *analects* or *dialectics*, tended to treat intellectual pursuits as a pathway from the world of manual labour to state power — what one scholar has aptly described as "the incomplete disappearance of Mandarin instincts" (Woodside 1991). In 1989, an academic writing in the leading party journal on the theme of education reforms for the next twenty years emphasized the need to reorient education policies towards vocational education, but still evidenced an underlying elitism, stating the need to steer those with "intellectual capability" towards careers as "scientific, technical, and economic cadres", while equipping the majority of students, those with a "fixed level of cultural development", with "essential and appropriate knowledge to step into a life of labour" (Nguyễn Quang Vinh 1989).



In the late 1980s, as Vietnam's economy descended into turmoil, the education system struggled to function. In the face of dire economic conditions, declining quality, the advent of school fees, and new economic opportunities, scores of young Vietnamese abandoned their studies, with many professional educators following suit. By the early 1990s, Vietnam's education system was in disarray. Further discussion of the education system in Vietnam during this period is provided in Chapter Two. A discussion of developments since the early 1990s immediately follows an overview of the organizational and operational attributes of contemporary Vietnam's education system.

## **THE ORGANIZATION AND OPERATION OF VIETNAM'S EDUCATION SYSTEM**

Many of the organizational and operational attributes of Vietnam's education system are similar to those of other countries, while others are unique to Vietnam. The formal administrative organization of Vietnam's education system is fairly centralized, though there has been a recent movement towards greater decentralization. By contrast, the actual workings of the education system (including policy implementation processes and educational activities) are highly decentralized, owing to the nature of education and the broader features of social organization in Vietnam. The curriculum is fully standardized and broadly resembles that found in other countries. Other aspects of the curriculum — such as its content — can only be understood in relation to the peculiarities of Vietnamese history.

### **The Administrative Organization of the Education System**

The state — understood here as the interpenetrated complex of party, government, bureaucracy, and all affiliated state organs — plays a dominant leadership role in the ordering and coordination of the education system, as it is by far the leading provider of education through various state-owned or state-managed schools.

The education system's administration is subordinated to formally centralized and hierarchical bureaucratic structures. One remarkable feature of the education system was the longevity of its leadership. Nguyễn Văn Huyền, for example, served as minister of Education from 1946 until 1975 (his successor, Nguyễn Thị Bình, served from 1976 until 1987). Until

1990, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Higher Education and Vocational Education were separate. In 1990, the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) became the main national agency responsible for education matters, except those involving specialized institutes, universities, and schools falling under other functional parts of the state (such as medical schools, military, and maritime institutes).

MOET's responsibilities include the drafting of education planning strategies, the management of the education budget and human resources, and the formulation of laws and policies. These are approved by the National Assembly in accordance with the directives of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV). MOET works with other line ministries to determine investments in education and plays the leading role in determining the content of curricula.

At the local level, education matters are left to province-level departments of education and district-level offices of education. These are doubly accountable to MOET's organizational hierarchy, on the one hand, and to the People's Committees at their respective levels of government, on the other. At the province level and in the major cities (Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, Haiphong, and Danang), educational affairs are administered by departments of education (*Sở Giáo Dục*), whose responsibility is to implement national policies and manage resources. At the district or urban ward level, offices of education (*phòng giáo dục*) are accountable both to their local people's committee and to the provincial department of education. Provincial department of education are responsible for the direct oversight of upper-secondary education, whereas districts oversee lower levels. District-level offices of education manage school districts; populous districts may contain multiple school districts. At the commune (administrative village) level, People's Committees are responsible for mobilizing children for primary education and managing kindergarten and nursery schools. Virtually all communes have a "social affairs" cadre who may be involved in various education-related issues, and village heads (*trưởng thôn*) may also be involved in educational matters.

While all communes in Vietnam have a primary school and arrangements for preschool education, school districts may incorporate all or parts of several different communes. This is common in rural and sparsely populated areas, particularly at the level of secondary and upper-secondary education, where students from several communes will be pooled together in a school. The increasing number of non-state schools — including so-called "people founded" (*dân lập*) schools (for which the state may provide

land or subsidies) and self-sufficient private (*tự thực*) schools — are more common in urban areas and draw students from different jurisdictions. As in any other country where place of residence affects location of schooling, families in Vietnam manoeuvre their children into schools of choice through diverse tactics.

Beyond secondary education, many districts and all provinces and major cities have an assortment of tertiary institutions, such as post-secondary colleges (*cao đẳng*), vocational schools, and colleges and universities. Vietnam's colleges (*trường cao đẳng*) are administered by provincial authorities. They typically enrol between one and two thousand students and offer single-focus training programmes for teachers and other professions. These colleges account for roughly 20 per cent of students enrolled in post-secondary education. Universities, by contrast, are established under the authority of the prime minister and administered by MOET and other functional ministries, such as health, finance, and defence.

Like virtually all other spheres of life in Vietnam, education and the education system are highly politicized. The CPV and its organs permeate all aspects of the education system. Party organizations for students and teachers exist at all levels of education, save preschool. Examples include the Ho Chi Minh Pioneers (*Đội thiếu niên tiền phong Hồ Chí Minh*) at the primary and lower-secondary school level and the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth League (*Đoàn Thanh niên Cộng sản HCM*), active in secondary schools and above.

## **Educational Structure**

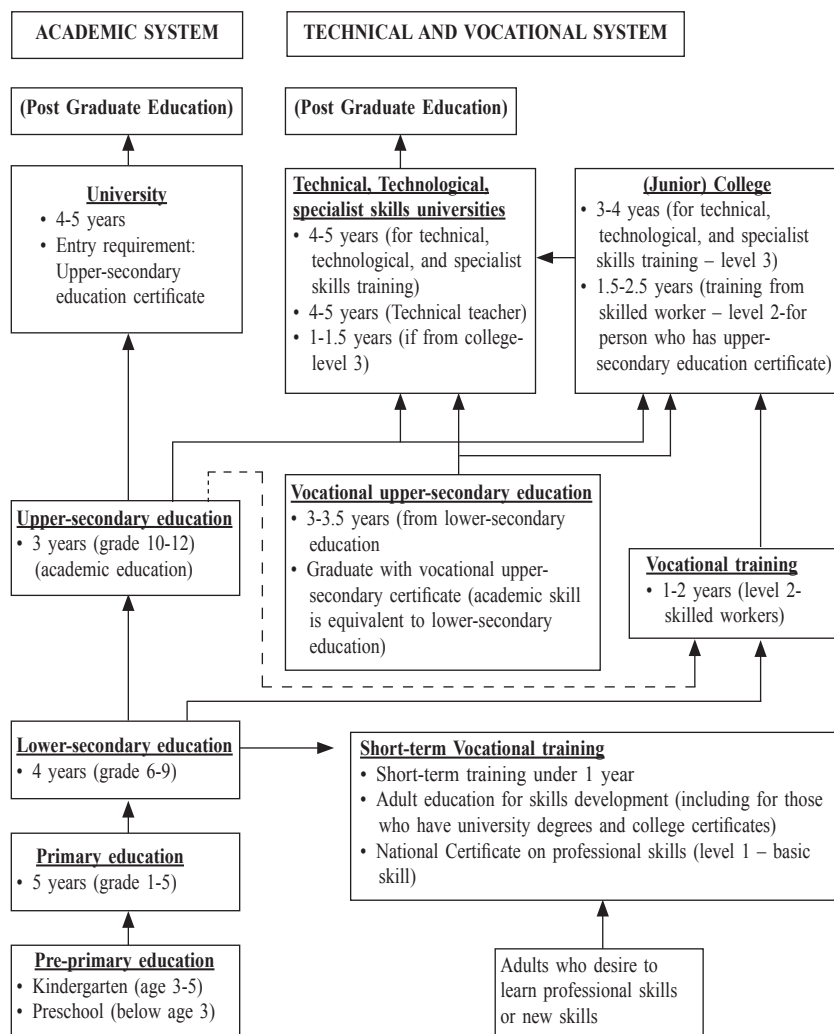
The structure of Vietnam's education system is broadly consistent with that found in other countries and is given in Figure 1.1.

Figure 1.1 describes the structure and age-appropriate sequence of the education system as established by MOET. This structure has gone relatively unchanged since the early 1980s, though lower-secondary education has gradually been separated from primary education.

## **Bureaucratic Organization and Operation**

The formal bureaucratic organization of the education system tells us only so much about its actual operational features. Vietnam's education system is a sprawling complex of thousands of linked organizations operating in diverse local circumstances. By 2008, the education system (that is, all public and non-public schools, institutes, and universities) accounted

**FIGURE 1.1**  
**Vietnam's Education System Structure**



*Note:* If a student wishes to move from the technical and vocational system to the academic system or vice versa, he/she must pass a special transfer training programme, which is designed to be appropriate to each level of education.

*Source:* Adapted and translated from *Chien Luoc Phat Trien Giao Duc Viet Nam*.

for well over 20 million students and 1.5 million personnel. In 2006, the country had some 11,582 kindergartens, 14,834 primary schools, 9,635 lower-secondary schools, 2,044 upper-secondary schools, 307 combined lower- and upper-secondary schools, as well as over 300 universities and colleges and some 269 professional secondary schools (*trung cấp chuyên nghiệp*). The National Academy of Sciences and Technology and the National Academy for Social Sciences, which fall outside the administration of MOET, encompass twenty-eight and twenty-nine separate research institutes, respectively.

Taken alone, the general education system (consisting of primary, lower-secondary, and upper-secondary education) included some 16.2 million students and 789,000 teachers (GSO 2007). Each of Vietnam's sixty-four provinces and 593 districts has local education administration units, employing thousands of "education cadres" (*cán bộ*). There is, in addition to the formal education system, a vast system of informal education in the form of after-hours private tuition.

Despite recent reforms, the formal administrative organization of the education system is quite centralized. Critics of this centralization decry "controlism" (*chủ quản*), understood as a range of behaviours by central authorities that stifle local innovation. No doubt, the centralizing pretensions of MOET have not disappeared. In a 2006 interview, one MOET official asserted that from his office it was possible to know what was being taught at any hour of any day in any corner of Vietnam. On the other hand, decentralization in a poorly regulated setting, such as Vietnam's poses its own risks. Given ongoing concerns about cost, quality, and equity, the move towards decentralization raised important questions about the appropriate future roles of MOET. Central-local tensions exist over a wide range of concerns, including curriculum and quality controls, personnel, and finance.

And yet decentralization has and continues to be a salient operational feature of the education system, in some respects owing to the nature of education, in other respects owing to the nature of the Vietnamese state. Two different types of decentralization need to be specified. There is a long tradition of informal *de facto* decentralization in which local units of the state respond to local circumstances and exigencies. The war and poverty that Vietnam experienced during the middle parts of the twentieth century required local education administrators and teachers to develop innovative

and, at times, illicit improvisational strategies simply to survive periods of acute shortages.

Since 1996, Vietnam has been undergoing a process of administrative decentralization, which has had important effects on the education system. The Budget Laws of 1996 and 2002 marked a significant change in granting local authorities (especially provinces) increased discretion over education spending, provided (in principle) that centrally determined norms are met. Decree 43, which took effect in 2006, encourages schools and other local public service delivery units to expand their own non-budgetary sources of income through various revenue enhancing activities (such as the establishment of service companies and special services) and to adopt a “business-model” of management. As we will observe throughout this volume, the issues of decentralization and (especially) school autonomy are the subject of considerable debate in Vietnam today.

A comprehensive analysis of MOET would be fascinating if not impossibly complicated. The organization is unquestionably in transition. But its direction is sometimes difficult to discern. Many aspects of its organization show that there is significant organizational learning going on. Then again, in late 2008, MOET released its “Draft of National Education Strategic Planning 2009–2020”, which was immediately subject to heavy public criticism. The document, which had been revised more than ten times within MOET before its public release, managed largely to ignore several earlier (and better regarded) education policies. MOET ultimately had to withdraw this strategy document. Controversies have also erupted concerning control over education budgets. Ironically, while the MOET strategy document called for administrative centralization (going against its own quite recent rhetorical statements about the need for decentralization), MOET is rapidly losing control over education expenditure, which is increasingly being ceded to provinces.

## **TRENDS IN THE EDUCATION SYSTEM SINCE 1989**

Since the late 1980s, Vietnam’s education system has changed considerably. The most important of these changes have been (1) large and sustained increases in education spending; (2) shifts in the principles and institutions governing the provision and payment for education; and (3) continuous if uneven expansions in the scale of the education system, as indicated by enrolments and other measures. These trends have manifested themselves

differently across different regions and different segments of the population. We next examine the nature and significance of these trends in turn.

### **Increasing Education Expenditure**

The rapid economic growth that Vietnam has experienced since the late 1980s has permitted significant and sustained increases in total education spending, where “total spending” includes public, private/household, and spending from other sources, such as official development assistance (ODA).<sup>14</sup>

Public spending on education has grown significantly in both absolute terms and as a proportion of GDP. Between 1990 and 2006, recurrent budgetary spending on education increased from 1 to 3.5 per cent of GDP (MPI 2006). Between 2001 and 2006 the government’s annual budget for education trebled. By 2008, education accounted for roughly 23 per cent of the state budget and the government has indicated its intention to maintain this level for the foreseeable future. The government has also signalled its intent to bring total public spending on education up to 6.9 per cent of GDP by 2010, compared with roughly 1.8 per cent in 1994.<sup>15</sup> In the 2007 education budget, primary education accounted for some 28 per cent, lower- and upper-secondary for a combined 36 per cent (24 and 11 per cent respectively), followed by tertiary education (16 per cent), vocational and professional secondary education (four per cent each), continuing education (two per cent), with the remainder going to “other” categories.

Like most developing countries, Vietnam sees a large proportion (over 80 per cent) of its recurrent public spending on education going to teachers’ wages.<sup>16</sup> Recent years have seen several rounds of wage increases, reflected in a more than fourfold increase in recurrent expenditures. Salaries and wages vary considerably across regions and different parts of the education system, however. Finally, the very slow growth in teachers’ pay over the 1990s created hardships for teachers and contributed to the institutionalization of such practices as illegal fees, the private provision of after-hours “extra-study” classes by nominally “public” teachers, and various forms of academic corruption. Future policies on teachers’ pay have wide-ranging implications for the costs and quality of education in Vietnam and it will be interesting to see whether future pay increases will mitigate the current trends towards the commodification and commercialization of “public” education.

Increased public spending on education has also gone to finance construction and various programmes targeting poor and vulnerable segments of the population. Between 2001 and 2007, capital expenditure on education (mainly for new construction and facility upgrades) increased more than fourfold, while education spending on so-called target programmes increased more than fivefold. The construction boom, along with the reorganization of schools and school districts, has resulted in increasing numbers of schools of all levels. Importantly, public education spending has been broadly redistributive in that education budgets effectively rely on interprovincial fiscal transfers through the central budget. On the other hand, the educational and infrastructural needs of poorer regions are more acute than those of wealthier areas, and budgetary transfers, though they have increased, are often inadequate for local needs.

Increased household expenditure has grown alongside increases in average per capita incomes and earnings, which has grown from roughly US\$200 in the early 1990s, to a projected US\$1,000–US\$1,050 today. Though estimates vary, evidence suggests household spending on education approaches or exceeds public spending, and that, proportionally, household spending on education in Vietnam is higher than in other countries in East Asia, save Cambodia.<sup>17</sup>

As we would expect, there are sharp differences in household spending across regions and different income/expenditure quintiles of the population. Whether and how these discrepancies affect enrolment and academic performance is addressed later in this introduction and in the different chapters comprising this volume. Table 1.1 shows estimated annual per

**TABLE 1.1**  
**Average Estimated Real Expenditure per Student in Past 12 Months**  
**(‘000 Vietnam Dong, per capita expenditure/income quintiles)**

	2004	2006	2008
Poorest	413	467	671
Near Poor	647	934	1,129
Middle	689	1,086	2,302
Near Rich	1,523	1,778	1,932
Rich	2,545	3,000	4,319

*Source:* GSO 2010.



capita expenditure on education per student in Vietnam for the period 2004 to 2008, across five different expenditure quintiles of the population.

Table 1.1 illustrates how household educational expenditures of Vietnam's wealthiest quintile are roughly six times those of the lowest. These differences reflect not only regional variance in school fees and other charges, but also the varying sums households across and within regions pay for private "extra-study" classes. For example, by 2008 it was not uncommon for households in Ho Chi Minh City or Hanoi to pay more than US\$100 per month on "extra study" classes — an unimaginable sum for poor households in any region.

International development organizations have invested substantially in Vietnam's education system, through both grants and technical assistance. The World Bank and Asian Development Bank (ADB) have been the most important donors, with the World Bank focusing on primary and (since 1998) tertiary education and the ADB on secondary education.<sup>18</sup> Up until 2007, the World Bank had provided some US\$535 million in educational assistance (including grants, loans on concessionary terms, and technical assistance).<sup>19</sup> Other international organizations such as UNICEF and bilateral development agencies have contributed significant funds and expertise. Important bilateral donors to Vietnam's education system have included Canada, the United Kingdom, Holland, Japan, Norway, Singapore, and the United States. Examples of large foreign-sponsored education projects include a US\$139 million in credit for the primary education of disadvantaged children in 2003, organized by the World Bank and sponsored by bilateral donors; and bilateral support for the Mekong 1000 project, which aims to train 1,000 Vietnamese government staff. Up until 2007, the World Bank's credits to higher education projects has exceeded US\$140 million. In 2009, the government announced plans to build four "international standard" universities, with a loan of US\$400 million from the World Bank and ADB. These will be Vietnam's first public, non-profit, foreign-managed universities.<sup>20</sup>

Grants and technical assistance are aligned with grant makers' normative commitments. Hence, for example, in addition to various projects aimed at curricular reform and teacher training, and primary education for poor and vulnerable children, the World Bank's emphases have broadly been on measures to enhance cost efficiency and increase the role of markets. Through the International Finance Corporation (IFC), the Bank has invested and will continue to invest in private education.<sup>21</sup>

Another somewhat strange, but noteworthy, arrangement is the US–Vietnam Education Fund, which allows Vietnam to pay the RVN debt to the United States back into a special education fund, which can then be used to fund overseas scholarships for (as it turns out) hand-picked state-affiliated Vietnamese.

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have also played an important role. While NGOs have not been a major source of education finance, they have played important roles in steering funds, piloting innovative programmes, and raising awareness of education sector needs.<sup>22</sup> Overall, increases in education spending have contributed to increases in the scale of the education system. But the significance of spending increases is better understood in relation to the shifting principles governing education finance.

### **Changes in the Principles Governing the Provision and Payment for Education**

Since 1989, Vietnam has experienced a shift from an education system based on principles of universalism and public finance to a hybrid system combining state and non-state provision of education, and public and private (that is, household) responsibility for education finance. While the state remains by far the largest provider of education, state policies have sought to shift financial responsibility for education payment onto households. The transition from public financing to the current hybrid system was hastened by the demise of state socialism in the late 1980s. In addition to public and household expenditure, the state has sought to promote what it calls the “socialization” (*xã hội hóa*) of education, understood here as broad-based social mobilization of resources for education, not public finance of education. For the above reasons, the analysis of education finance in Vietnam defies conventional categories, such as public and private.

Vietnam’s market transition in the late 1980s entailed the rapid erosion of collectivist institutions that had formerly been responsible for education finance. Over the course of the 1990s, growth in public spending on education was significant, but moderate. State policies in the early 1990s sought to stabilize the education system by allowing for the introduction of fees (in 1989) and the limited “non-state” provision of education through so-called “people-founded” schools. In subsequent years, local authorities and schools resorted to chronic scarcities by introducing and

increasing fees of various types (tuition fees, construction “contributions”, medical insurance, water and sanitation, and other fees — legal and illegal). The 1990s also saw the emergence (or rather re-emergence) of so-called “semi-public” schools and classrooms — a category of schools that (ironically enough) existed in the Republic of Vietnam, and which is financed through a combination of state subsidies and fees. Perhaps most importantly, across the country, teachers resorted to teaching of so-called “extra-study” classes after school hours, and income from such activities increasingly became their most important source of income.

In essence, the collapse of state socialism produced an institutional vacuum in the area of education finance; certain national and local *ad hoc* responses grew into institutionalized features of the education system. While public expenditure on education has increased, these increases have not been sufficient to address needs, while household expenditure tends to benefit children from wealthier households disproportionately. To address the residual funding gap, the state has sought to promote the “socialization” of education. Enthusiasts of socialization understand it to be a peculiarly Vietnamese form of social mobilization, embodying the values of community and mutual assistance under the leadership of the Party (see, for example, BGDĐT 1999; Chu Văn Thành 2004, 2007). They have a point. Social mobilization in the name of education is not new to Vietnam, as some forms of compulsory community contributions to schools existed even during the state-socialist period and earlier. On the other hand, critics of “socialization” see it as the state shirking its responsibilities. Either way, the need for socialization appears to arise mainly from the absence of a mature tax system and the limited allocative capacities of the central state.

Given the shifting of responsibilities for education payment, the expanding role of non-state provision of education, and the mobilization of funds from other sources, it is no surprise that education finance in Vietnam is a messy practice. Fees and private payments for public education are pervasive. Various forms of “non state” schools (such as “people-founded schools” and private “self-sufficient schools”) are almost always organized and operated by people within or closely associated with networks of state power and can draw substantially on state resources. “Socialization” resembles charitable donations in some instances and regressive taxes in others. In short, the analysis of education finance in Vietnam defies conventional public-private categorizations.

### **Increasing Scale and Scope, Shifting Inequalities**

Rapid increases in enrolment indicate that Vietnam's education system is growing in scale. Once-huge disparities between regions and rural and urban zones have declined. Enrolment for girls has surpassed that for boys. Increases in the proportion of children attending school at their age-appropriate grade — the so-called net enrolment rate — indicates that formal schooling is becoming a more institutionalized feature of social life. Yet enrolment data have important limitations, both general and owing to specific conditions in Vietnam. Enrolment data supplemented with other data provide us with a general understanding of trends and differentials across Vietnam's education system and within different educational levels.

#### *The Value and Limitations of Enrolment Data*

Enrolment data are useful for gauging general trends and differentials in school attendance, but are not particularly informative about other basic concerns. An understanding of trends and differentials in Vietnam's education system requires an appreciation of the value and limits of enrolment data.

In Vietnam as in many countries, increases in school enrolment are taken as indicators of progress. Internationally institutionalized development rubrics, such as the Millennium Development Goals, tend to reinforce this view. The emphasis on enrolment rates in Vietnam may be especially strong, owing to decades of state-socialist developmentalism in which physical production targets were the standard barometers of performance. The emphasis on enrolment rates as progress creates strong incentives for Vietnamese state agencies, officials, and teachers to report exaggerated enrolment and graduation figures and shuttle students through the system, regardless of learning outcomes. In Vietnam, this tendency to exaggerate successes has been appropriately dubbed "achievement syndrome" (*bệnh thành tích*), which detracts from the credibility of enrolment figures, even those quoted in high-level planning documents.<sup>23</sup>

The volume and quality of enrolment data in Vietnam have no doubt improved. The most widely cited enrolment data come from the large-scale foreign-sponsored household surveys, such as the Vietnam Living Standards Survey (VNLSS) and the Vietnam Household Living Standards Survey (VHLSS). While these surveys may provide the

most credible enrolment data, they are not without important problems. Perhaps most notably, these surveys may miss large numbers of migrant households as well as non-official residents. Many of these “missing households” are poor and their children’s educational status go unreported (Pincus and Sender 2008). Finally, enrolment data alone are unable to account for wide variances in the costs, qualities, and distributions of education. Pairing enrolment data with other sorts of data provides a better understanding of developments in Vietnam’s education system.

### *System-wide Trends*

In spite of deficiencies in the data, it is reasonable to assert that over the last two decades, Vietnam has seen rapid increases in school enrolments at virtually all education levels. Table 1.2 lists net (that is, age appropriate) school enrolment data for primary, lower-secondary, and upper-secondary education for the period 1993–2006. 2008 data, which became available only in 2010, show less significant changes.

As Table 1.2 indicates, Vietnam has registered steady increases in net enrolment at the primary, lower-secondary, and upper-secondary levels. Increases in lower- and upper-secondary education have been striking, rising by 2.5 and seven times respectively. The increasing scale of higher education is equally impressive. As of 2008, there were over 1.3 million Vietnamese enrolled in tertiary institutions, compared with 162,000 in 1993. When the data are disaggregated to account for urban/rural and regional differences, a more interesting, but no less impressive, picture emerges, as illustrated in Tables 1.3 and 1.4.

**TABLE 1.2**  
**Estimated Net Enrolment Rate (NER), 1993–2008**

	1993	1998	2002	2006	2008
Primary	86.7	91.4	90.1	89.3	88.3
Lower-secondary	30.1	61.7	72.1	78.8	78.4
Upper-secondary	7.2	28.6	41.8	53.9	54.2

*Sources:* VLSS 1997–98 (GSO 2000, p.52); VLSS 1992–93 (GSO 1994, p. 50); 2004 and 2006, the author calculated percentages on the basis of VLSS (2004; 2006); \* indicates MICs Data 2006, VHLSS 2008 (GSO), VHLSS 2010, GSO.

**TABLE 1.3**  
**Estimated NER by Level of Education in Urban and Rural Areas, 1993–2008**

	1993	1998	2002	2006	2008
Primary					
Urban	85.58	95.92	94.1	89.7	89.2
Rural	76.56	91.96	89.2	89.1	88.1
Lower-secondary					
Urban	55.8	81.9	80.8	82.8	82.6
Rural	31.8	57.2	69.9	77.7	77.1
Upper-secondary					
Urban	30.2	54.9	59.2	66.3	66.4
Rural	6.9	21.9	37.7	50.3	50.6

*Sources:* VLSS 1997-98 (GSO 2000, p. 52); VLSS 1992–3 (GSO 1994, p. 50); 2004 and 2006, the author calculated percentages on the basis of VLSS (2004; 2006); \* indicates MICs Data 2006, VHLSS 2008 (GSO), VHLSS 2010, GSO.

**TABLE 1.4**  
**Estimated NER by Level of Schooling Region, 2008**

	Primary	Lower-Secondary	Upper-secondary
<i>Country-wide</i>	88.3	78.4	54.2
Regions			
Red River Delta	91.3	85.2	69.5
Northeast	89.7	79.9	52.5
Northwest	81.4	63.9	33.4
North Central	89.3	81.6	57.4
South Central	87.9	82.0	58.4
Central Highlands	85.6	69.9	44.4
Southeast	88.5	79.0	54.7
Mekong Delta	86.7	71.5	40.4

*Source:* VHLSS 2010.

Table 1.3 lists net enrolment rates for primary, lower-secondary, and upper-secondary enrolment by urban and rural areas. As we observe, disparities between urban and rural areas have declined at all levels of the general education system.

Table 1.4 indicates enrolment levels across different regions of Vietnam. While the data are not given here, interregional variation in enrolment

levels have declined across all levels of the general education system. On the other hand, gaps between regions have become larger in upper-secondary education. In higher education, large differentials between regions remain. As recently as 2005, the gross enrolment rate in higher education in Vietnam's north-west region was 6 per cent, three times less than in the Red River Delta.

One striking feature of enrolment in Vietnam is the relative parity that exists in boys' and girls' enrolment from kindergarten through upper-secondary education into tertiary education. As recently as the mid-1990s, nationwide enrolments in lower- and upper-secondary education were a full five percentage points lower for girls. Today, the primary school and secondary completion rate for girls and boys is virtually equal. In Vietnam's south-eastern wealthiest region, female enrolment in (lower and upper) secondary education is, at 83.9 per cent, significantly higher than male's, at 73.7 per cent (UNICEF-GSO 2008, p. 96). Nationally, female net enrolment in upper secondary education is 56.4 per cent, whereas male enrolment is 51.5 per cent (VHLSS 2008). Female enrolment in higher education is higher than male enrolment, in both colleges and (undergraduate) university education. On the other hand, enrolment parity does not mean that gendered inequalities have ceased to exist. Research by Belanger and Liu (2004), for example, suggests that in poorer families, boys' education tends to be privileged over girls. An interesting question is whether and to what extent household expenditure on "extra study" differs among boys and girls across and within households.

As will be observed across different levels of education, ethnic minorities continue to lag behind those in the ethnic *Kinh* and *Hoa* groups. The reasons for this include the physical remoteness of many ethnic populations, lags in developing public infrastructure (including schools) in remote areas, as well as various forms of cultural and linguistic barriers, and discrimination. Past efforts to "universalize" primary education among ethnic minorities did not always contribute to better educational outcomes. The rush to boost primary education (and enrolment figures) among ethnic minorities in the 1990s, for example, involved new arrangements that allowed students to "pass" two grades in a single year, and five grades in as few as 120 weeks for ethnic minority students.

In the past, Vietnam's education system was characterized by sharp differences in the quality of education. Quality is, of course, a slippery

term that can be assessed in many ways, including differences in amount of schooling, the adequacy of school, infrastructure, teachers' qualifications, and the relevance of the curriculum, to name a few. Vietnam has seen advances across most of these dimensions.

Until quite recently, many schools in rural and remote areas were makeshift facilities. New school construction, infrastructural upgrades, and gradual declines in population growth have reduced the incidence of double- and triple-shift schools and allowed for longer school hours. As recently as the late 1990s, it was common for children in remote areas to have no more than two hours of schooling a day in a thirty-three week school year — one of the shortest school years in the world (Oxfam 1998). By contrast, in April of 2009, MOET announced that some 35 per cent of primary students in thirty-five poor mountainous provinces would study a full school day, like students in wealthier provinces. While investments in school construction have reduced this phenomenon, it remains common in preschool education in many rural areas. Today, large proportions of schools in rural areas lack adequate water and sanitation facilities. With respect to the quality of instruction, gaps remain. In remote and rural areas, schools are often understaffed while the skills of those employed fall short of national standards and local needs.

Another dimension of quality concerns the relevance of the curricula. If Vietnam is to chart a path of sustainable, rapid, and equitable development, it must — at the very least — develop a skilled workforce capable of creating value and competing internationally. But there is wide questioning in Vietnam about the adequacy and appropriateness of the educational curriculum at virtually all levels. Talk of the need for curricular reform is nothing new, but the sense that there is a need for change is perhaps stronger today than in the past. Today, Vietnam's leaders frequently speak of their intent to develop a "knowledge economy". This stands in stark contrast with the current thrust of prevailing pedagogy and practice, where the emphasis is still on rote memorization and attempts to innovate are actively or structurally discouraged.

As the foregoing discussion suggests, the scale of the education system has grown while the magnitudes of certain educational inequalities in Vietnam have declined. An examination of developments within different educational levels provides a more nuanced picture.



## Trends and Differentials Across Educational Levels

### *Preschool Education*

Across the various educational levels, it is arguably preschool — including nursery school (*mầm non*) and kindergarten (*mẫu giáo*) — that has seen the most disorganized growth. However recent years have seen something of a reversal. Until the late 1980s, nursery school and kindergarten education was — in principle — provided and paid for by collectivist institutions, such as agricultural cooperatives, enterprises, and other state organizations. When these institutions unravelled, so too did institutional arrangements governing early childhood education. Central government efforts to develop lagged over the course of the 1990s and preschool education has generally been underfunded. Nonetheless, preschool and kindergarten education has gradually been reintegrated into the administrative and financial operations of the educational system.

Making sense of the data on preschool education in Vietnam is complicated, to say the least. The term administrative category “kindergarten” (*mẫu giáo*) is a misnomer, for it really refers to preschools, which include both kindergarten and nursery schools. Today, roughly three million children regularly attend preschool and kindergarten. There are in Vietnam nearly 12,000 preschools, roughly half of which are public and half so-called “people-founded” (sometimes also called “private”). Within these 12,000 are roughly 9,000 nursery schools (35 per cent of which are people-founded) and some 3,000 kindergartens (which are 70 per cent “public”).<sup>24</sup>

Public and private expenditure on preschool and kindergarten education has increased alongside economic growth, but public spending on early childhood education remains marginal compared with that for other education levels. In 2002, the government mandated that early childhood education must account for at least 10 per cent of total education spending, but as of 2006, only seventeen of sixty-four provinces were able to reach this target (UNICEF 2008, p. 9). Not surprisingly, many aspects of early childhood education have been subject to market principles. State-managed preschools charge fees for service in most areas and are staffed by underpaid young women on short-term contracts.<sup>25</sup>

In general, attendance for early childhood education is lower than might be expected as a recent UNICEF-sponsored survey is revealed. By 2006, an estimated 57 per cent of children aged thirty-six to fifty-nine months were regularly attending some form of school with wide

gaps across different segments of the population (MICS 2006). Roughly 75 per cent of urban children in this age group attended some form of schooling, compared with just over half in rural areas (UNICEF 2008). There was significant variation across regions, with the highest rates in the Red River Delta (80 per cent) and north central regions (67 per cent). Interestingly, the lowest rates are found in the Mekong Delta (roughly 40 per cent) and the south central coastal region (44 per cent). While the low rate for the Mekong region may be attributed to geographical barriers, the low figure for the south central coast is not readily explicable. Vietnam's poorest regions — the north-west and central highlands also fared poorly, with just 50 and 44 per cent of the children attending some form of early childhood education.

In rural and remote regions, the material circumstances of early childhood education can be extremely rudimentary. In poor regions, many preschools and kindergartens lack water or electricity and use open pits as toilets. Some preschools make use of other facilities, such as commune "cultural houses". Many localities are unable to meet local preschool needs. In fieldwork carried out in Lao Cai province in 2008, local authorities related their need to turn tens of three and four-year-old students away for lack of adequate facilities.

Addressing inequalities in early childhood education will mean diminishing the currently strong association between income and schooling on the one hand, and parents' level of education and schooling on the other. More than 80 per cent of wealthier households send their children to preschool, as do over 83 per cent of mothers with an upper-secondary education. By contrast, less than half of mothers with no upper-secondary education send their preschool-aged children to school. Sex discrimination in early childhood education does not appear to be a problem, at least not within the Kinh ethnic group. Nationally, preschool and kindergarten attendance is higher for girls than boys, at 61 and 53 per cent respectively. An estimated 39 per cent of small children from non-Kinh ethnic groups were attending school, compared with 60 per cent for Kinh, although these figures may overestimate actual enrolment.<sup>26</sup> Still, these and other poor regions have seen increases in state efforts to boost early childhood education in poor regions and among poor groups through conditional cash payments and other schemes.<sup>27</sup>

Current efforts to promote preschool education are motivated by the observed consequences of inadequate preschool education, particularly

among the poor. Children with some preschool education tend to perform significantly better than those without it. In Vietnam, only 60 per cent of children under five live in houses with a minimum of three non-children's books, and only 24.7 per cent of children under five live in houses with children's books (UNICEF-GSO 2008, p. 93). Currently, Vietnam's state and international donors such as the World Bank are assigning greater priority to preschool education, driven by the recognition that early childhood education is essential for increasing the academic performance of vulnerable groups and promoting further poverty reduction.

### *Primary Education*

For decades, primary education was the central focus of Vietnam's education policy. The constitution and education law stipulate that primary education is compulsory and provided free to all citizens. In 2008, Vietnam's government declared that primary education had been "universalized" (*phổ cập giáo dục tiểu học*), by which it meant that practically all Vietnamese children had access to primary education.<sup>28</sup>

The actual picture is more complicated. It suggests that while all Vietnamese have access to primary education and the vast majority complete primary education, significant numbers of children do not complete primary education at the age-appropriate grade and a non-trivial number do not complete it at all. Survey data indicate that by 2006, 93.5 per cent of children aged six were attending primary school, while the net primary enrolment rate was estimated at 88 to 89 per cent, meaning that the majority of children attending primary school were studying in their age-appropriate grades (VHLSS 2006). A UNICEF survey found that 81.7 per cent of children of primary completion age (age 11) were indeed completing the last year of primary education and that, of all children starting the first grade, 97.5 per cent would eventually reach grade five (UNICEF-GSO 2008, p. 97). By 2008, there were nearly seven million primary school students, though a decline in birth rates over the next ten years will mean a gradual shrinkage in the scale of primary education.

Compulsory primary education has gradually eroded regional and income disparities. Urban/rural discrepancies in primary enrolment are gone, even as disparities in the costs and quality of primary schools remain. A 2006 survey actually found higher net-enrolment rates among six-year olds in rural areas (UNICEF-GSO 2008, p. 96). Primary enrolment in Vietnam exceeds 90 per cent across all major regions and social groups,

**TABLE 1.5**  
**Net Primary Enrolment, 1993–2006**

	<i>1993</i>	<i>1998</i>	<i>2002</i>	<i>2004</i>	<i>2006</i>
Poorest	66.9	84.8	84.5	83.0	85.4
Near Poor	77.57	94.47	90.3	91.3	88.3
Middle	81.49	94.82	91.9	90.2	90.1
Near Rich	84.96	96.27	93.7	92.9	90.1
Rich	84.77	96.81	95.3	89.7	90.1

*Sources:* VLSS 1997–98 (GSO 2000, p. 52); VLSS 1992–3 (GSO 1994, p. 50); 2004 and 2006, the author calculated percentages on the basis of VLSS (2004; 2006).

excluding ethnic minorities and the very poor. In important respects, state financed primary education is the most progressive component of Vietnam's education system. The relation between income and primary enrolment has also declined over time. By 2006, the difference between the poorest and wealthiest quintiles of the population was around five per cent, as illustrated in Table 1.5.

However, comparisons across regions, income/expenditure groups, and ethnicities reveal that many disparities remain. Gross completion ratios for primary education are significantly higher (at 89 per cent) in urban areas than in rural areas (80 per cent) (UNICEF-GSO 2008, p. 98). Vietnam's poorest regions — the north-west and central highlands — and one of its richest (in income terms) — the Mekong delta — exhibit some of the lowest primary enrolments, reflecting geographical and ethnic obstacles unique to those regions. Estimated net primary enrolment rates for these regions in 2008 were 81, 86, and 87 per cent respectively. Once again, these enrolment figures do not capture disparities in the quality or material circumstances of primary education across regions. It is also the case that laws and policies notwithstanding, primary schools still collect fees of various kinds and that these fees weigh more heavily on those who can least afford to pay them. This issue has received considerable attention in Vietnamese-language literature, which is reviewed immediately following this section.

### *Secondary Education*

Increases in lower- and upper-secondary enrolment since the early 1990s have been striking. Between 1993 and 2008, net lower-secondary enrolment

more than doubled (from 30 to 79 per cent), while upper-secondary enrolment increased sevenfold.<sup>29</sup> As of 2006, 91 per cent of children who completed the last grade of primary school continued onto (though not necessarily complete) lower-secondary school (UNICEF–GSO 2008, p. 99). Only roughly five per cent of secondary-school-aged children were attending primary school, though this figure is higher across poor regions and poor segments of the population. Non-state schools, that is, people-founded and private schools, play an increasingly important role in the provision of secondary and especially upper-secondary education. By 2007 in Hanoi, for example, non-state schools accounted for over forty per cent of upper-secondary enrolment — a surprising figure, indeed.<sup>30</sup>

By 2010, the government aims to “universalize” lower-secondary education, though in 2008 only forty of sixty-five provinces were on track to do so. Though it is clear that Vietnam is a long way from ensuring that all children have access to upper-secondary education, the government’s target for doing so is 2015. By 2008, there were nearly six million lower-secondary students and over three million upper-secondary students instructed by some 312,000 lower-secondary and 135,000 upper-secondary teachers respectively. As of 2008, there were some 275 vocational secondary schools, administered by various line ministries and under the supervision of MOET. Vocational education is addressed in the next subsection.

Disparities in secondary school enrolments have declined across regions and groups. At both the lower- and upper-secondary levels, the gaps in enrolment between urban and rural areas have narrowed considerably, to around 10 per cent. At the lower-secondary level, there have been impressive declines in regional enrolment inequalities. Between 1992 and 2008, net lower-secondary school enrolment increased in the north-west mountainous region from 30 to 64 per cent, in the central highlands from 21 to 70 per cent, and in the Mekong from 22 to 72 per cent. In the same regions, net upper-secondary enrolment increased from 10 to 33 per cent, 2 to 44 per cent, and 6 to 40 per cent respectively.<sup>31</sup>

Still, significant regional, socio-economic, and ethnic disparities remain. Given various fees and extra-study expenses, the costs of education have increased significantly, reaching their apex in upper-secondary education. In effect, lower- and upper-secondary education functions as a sorting mechanism, excluding many poor children, thereby increasing the likelihood that their poverty will endure. For many children in Vietnam’s poor households, completing upper-secondary education remains enormously

difficult. Children from poor households and ethnic minority groups remain much less likely to attend secondary schools. Transitions from primary to lower-secondary or from lower-secondary to upper-secondary education are when students are most likely to drop out or discontinue their studies. The gap in net enrolment rates for the poorest and richest households is over 25 per cent for lower-secondary education and over 55 per cent for upper-secondary enrolment. 2008 and 2009 have seen a surge in dropouts, as inflation, declining earnings, and rising prices associated with economic turbulence have impinged on expenditures on education.

Although enrolments have increased among children from ethnic minority groups, children from such backgrounds — especially girls — continue to face obstacles to continuing their studies. A recent UNICEF–UNESCO report found that girls from ethnic minority backgrounds had systematically lower educational attainment, despite the increasing availability of schools in their areas. Research revealed that major obstacles included financial barriers, the perceived need to work, poor quality of education, inadequate infrastructure, and the parents' low regard for education in comparison to other imperatives. However, the research also noted significant variability across ethnic groups, suggesting caution in making sweeping generalizations.<sup>32</sup>

### *Tertiary and Vocational Education*

Vietnam has seen rapid increases in tertiary and vocational enrolment and a proliferation of colleges, universities, and vocational schools. Between 1999 and 2008 the number of universities in Vietnam more than doubled, from sixty-nine to 160, while the number of vocational schools (colleges) nearly trebled, from eighty-four to 209.<sup>33</sup> Today, over 1.6 million Vietnamese are attending colleges and universities in Vietnam, nearly double that of ten years ago. The role of non-state education has increased as well. Of the 330 colleges and universities in 2007, about fifty were non-state, accounting for roughly 12 per cent of tertiary students. By 2020, government targets stipulate that non-state providers of higher education will account for 40 per cent of enrolments. There is also intense debate on financing higher education and whether or not some public universities ought to be privatized.<sup>34</sup>

While tertiary and vocational education are the fastest growing segments of the education system, they are arguably also the segments most in dire need of reform. The higher education system is failing to

meet the increasing demand for skilled labour. Within universities, staff tend to be undertrained, underpaid, and have few opportunities to pursue research. Vietnam is generally weak on research in both physical and social sciences and lacks a single university of international standard. Recently, the Ministry of Education and Training has focused on the goal of rapidly developing higher education, through such measures as training 20,000 PhD holders by 2020.

But there are doubts about what can be achieved, given outstanding problems in the education bureaucracy and within universities themselves. Academic freedom is tightly bound. The education bureaucracy is widely accused of undermining local initiatives, though higher education leaders are themselves inexperienced in decision making. In rural areas, especially remote regions, there are few outlets for higher education and most schools that do exist tend to offer training that is incommensurate with ongoing processes of economic diversification. Until recently, Vietnamese who were trained overseas were more likely to return to bureaucratic posts than industry or applied work.<sup>35</sup> Sustained improvements in living standards require a shift towards the production of higher value-added commodities, but undertaking such a shift requires a skilled workforce and a higher education system that the country presently lacks. There are also major questions about the role of foreign-operated tertiary institutions. Numerous foreign universities (including many from the United States) are anxious to establish operations in Vietnam (Overland 2009).

## **CURRENT LITERATURE, CURRENT ISSUES, AND THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF THIS VOLUME**

The literature concerning Vietnam's education system has grown rapidly and a comprehensive overview is not possible. Rather, the survey presented here distinguishes several major genres of literature, identifies key debates and, in the course of doing so, introduces and situates the contributions to this volume.

### **Genres of Literature on Vietnam's Education System**

Current literature on Vietnam's education system falls into several distinctive genres, including policy documents and analysis, press reports, academic literature, and materials published online.

Until the late 1990s, most Vietnamese educational literature remained largely descriptive policy literature. General overviews provide useful summaries of the education system's development (for example, MOET 1991), though much of the literature tends to be in the traditional reporting format of listing statistics, stating successes and shortcomings, and concluding with the unquestionable correctness of the party line (for example, UBQGCNMC 1994). Former Education Minister Phạm Minh Hạc's *Vietnam's Education on the Threshold of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (1999), available in both Vietnamese and English, is exemplary of this genre. Lê Văn Giảng's more recent book (2003) provides a 1,000-year historical overview. More detailed policy literature can be found in leading Vietnamese state education journals, such as *Nghiên Cứu Giáo Dục* (Education Research), *Thông tin Khoa học Giáo dục* (Educational Science Information), and *Thông tin Quản lý Giáo dục* (Educational Management Information). Ideological pronouncements on education appear regularly in party journals and newspapers, such as *Tập Chí Cộng Sản* (Communist Review) and *Nhân Dân*.

Recent years have seen the emergence of more varied and critical policy literature. The analysis is more empirically grounded, rigorous, and critical. Such literature emanates from both within and outside the state education apparatus. Various books and articles on education exhibit new ways of thinking and an eagerness to view problems in Vietnam from a comparative international perspective (for example, Trần 1996). A number of books approach education from the perspective of public administration reform (for example, Vũ 1998; Lê 2003), while others focus on the special problems of education in a market economy (for example, Nguyễn 2006). Rather than fading away, retired state officials and former educators and academicians weigh in forcefully in current debates, frequently through newspaper articles and online postings (for example, Bùi Trọng Lều 2006).

Recent years have seen the publication of collections of analyses on education in books and online. A recent collection of essays titled *Những vấn đề giáo dục hiện nay* (Current Problems in Education) includes over thirty spirited essays, many of which are quite critical of current education policies (NXBTT 2007). This collection includes a sharply critical 2004 piece by Vietnam's most famous nonagenarian, Võ Nguyên Giáp, who decries the inadequacies of education in the country today. Other contributions argue for the need to raise or lower fees, increase or



decrease public financing, and pose suggestions for improving the quality and relevance of education at all levels. Literature on higher education is growing especially rapidly (for example, Vũ Quang Việt 2007; Hồ Tú Bảo et al. 2008).

At the outset of 1990s, English publications on education in Vietnam largely consisted of translated MOET documents on such themes as “Education for All”. The arrival of international development organizations in the early 1990s was accompanied by new survey research and more sophisticated economic analyses, frequently based on assumptions reflecting the interests of those organizations. The World Bank’s 1996 analysis (World Bank 1996) of education finance was the first such study. Since then scores of econometric analyses have been published by academic economists, especially those affiliated with and reflecting the market expanding mission of the World Bank (for example, Glewwe 1999; Moock et al. 2003). The ADB has been a major provider of financial and technical assistance and has carried out large-scale education studies, for example, on lower-secondary education teacher training (ADB 1998). Several UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) analyses of public services have touched on problems in education finance from the perspective of users (for example, UNDP 1999). In 2008, the World Bank completed a major study on higher education and skills (World Bank 2008).

The transition to a market economy implied both economic restructuring and changing skills requirements. In the late 1990s, several important studies of skilling and vocational education pointed out issues that policymakers are still struggling to address today. Martin and Oudin’s 1996 analysis of skills development and labour markets in rural Vietnam (ORSTOM-MOLISA 1996) emphasized the need for training to be responsive to the diverse needs of different regions and communities, encouraged collaboration among firms and public and private providers of skills training, and suggested the need for apprenticeship schemes, which might link them. Pandey’s 1998 analysis emphasized the need for skills development among women to promote economic diversification and increased agricultural productivity in rural areas and the development of small and medium-sized enterprises in all areas (Pandey 1998).

Today, each round of survey data is quickly followed by a corresponding round of quantitative analyses of education (for example, Nga 1999).

Among other international organizations, UNICEF has also carried out several important surveys and analyses of problems in education. Non-governmental organizations involved in education-related projects have produced quite informative reports on their activities.

English-language academic scholarship on education in Vietnam is growing rapidly, displaying increasing diversity. A complete discussion is not possible. The late 1990s saw the emergence of scholarly articles on education, including Nguyễn Văn Chính's analysis of education and opportunity costs (Nguyen Van Chinh 1991) and Judith and Ralph Biddington's 1997 analysis of education for all (Biddington and Biddington 1997). Demographers and econometricians have used survey data to measure general trends and differentials in education (for example, Anh et al. 1995), as well as specific relationships, such as effects of family size on educational achievement (Anh et al. 1998), economic growth and the demand for education (Glewwe and Jacoby 2004), education and earnings (Moock et al. 1998), and social class and school conditions on boys' and girls' enrolment (Phuong 2006), to name a few. Philip Taylor's work on state policies and peasants (2007) discusses regional variations in education. Taylor questions the validity of the official perception of "low" education levels among ethnic minorities and provides concrete evidence of alternative, non-official education systems in existence among some ethnic minority groups — among the Khmer in particular. Taylor's introduction to the 2004 volume on social inequality in Vietnam and other chapters in that volume also touch on education.

Other recent scholarly articles have pursued such diverse concerns as education and identity formation (Salomon and Vu 2007) and pedagogy in multigrade schools in remote areas, and the globalization of universities and community (vocational) colleges (Oliver and Pham et al. 2009). In the past decade, several doctoral dissertations have addressed educational concerns, including studies of education and stratification (Nguyen Phuong Lan 2004), work (Brisner 2004), social capital (Duong 2004), and political decision making (Lucius 2009). Lucius's analysis is particularly interesting, as it examines how socialization (in the classic sociological sense) through state education, mass organizations, and compulsory military training schemes shapes state decision making modalities. The present author has sought to grasp continuity and change in the principles and institutions governing the provision and payment for

education (London 2003; 2007; Chapter Two of this volume). Scholarship on education in Vietnam in languages other than English and Vietnamese is not covered in this review.

While education has always received attention in Vietnam's print media, the coverage today is surprisingly, and perhaps increasingly, critical. Newspapers are filled with populist critiques of everything from escalating education costs to corruption among teachers and administrators, to cheating students. Established in 1953, *Giáo Dục & Thời Đại* (Education & Era) is the longest running education newspaper and now appears in an online version.<sup>36</sup> Long (2006) presents a compilation of news articles from various sources on the theme "Renewing consciousness and developing Vietnamese education in a market economy". Another recent book consists of letters to editors on educational matters, under the title *Giáo dục, Những Lời Tâm huyết* (Education: Heartfelt Words).<sup>37</sup>

Today, perhaps the most interesting literature on education in Vietnam is found on the Internet. One of the most interesting websites is *edunet*,<sup>38</sup> a site managed by MOET. On this site, Vietnamese from across the country participate daily in vibrant debates and sometimes exchange direct and sharply critical discussions with policy leaders. Remarkably, policy leaders often respond to these remarks at length. This is the kind of policy dialogue that is hard to find even in much wealthier and ostensibly more democratic societies.

### **Issues, Debates, and the Contributions to this Volume**

The chapters in this volume pursue diverse concerns within three broad thematic areas. These include the governance of education and education finance, issues in the general education system, and issues in higher education and vocational training. The discussion below identifies major issues and debates across three thematic areas covered in this book as a way of introducing and situating the individual contributions to this volume.

#### *The Governance of Education and the Political Economy of Education Finance*

The next two chapters broadly examine the governance of education and the political economy of education finance. The governance of education refers to the coordination and ordering of activities within Vietnam's education

system. Governance is dependent on a variety of social, political, economic, and cultural institutions, which may exhibit continuity and change over time. Education finance refers to institutional arrangements and activities governing payment for education in Vietnam.

One of the most striking changes in the recent history of education in Vietnam has been in the institutional arrangements governing the provision and payment for education. These changes should not be seen in isolation from other major developments in the political and economic spheres. In Chapter Two, the present author examines continuity and change in the principles and institutions governing the provision and payment for education in Vietnam under the CPV.

Current debates concerning education and the economy in the country ask what kind of education Vietnam requires in order to promote sustained economic growth along with an equitable distribution of its benefits. What kind of workforce or “human resources” does Vietnam require? But there are other — much less abstract — economic concerns, such as the impact of education expenditure on household economics, tradeoffs between education and work, and education and food, to name a few. In Chapter Three, Jim Cobbe offers a refreshingly sceptical and accessible economic analysis of these issues.

### *Issues in Primary and Secondary Education*

Chapters Four, Five and Six examine selected issues in general education (that is, primary and secondary) education, with individual chapters on “people-founded” schools, dropouts, and schooling in an ethnic minority context. One of the most important developments in general education is the increasing role of non-state schools, including people-founded and private schools. In Chapter Four, Trần Thị Bích Liễu examines the strategies these schools deploy in their efforts to improve and expand their operations.

The next chapter on general education concerns school dropout. School dropout rates were highest in the late 1980s and early 1990s, a period of crisis in the education system during which the dropout rate from secondary schools approached 40 per cent in some areas. Although Vietnam saw subsequent declines in dropout rates, actual dropout figures can be misleading as children who discontinue their studies at the end of any school year are not included in dropout figures. Across time, dropout rates have been consistently higher in rural areas, among the poor, and in ethnic minority groups. Widely-cited reasons for dropping

out of school include perceptions of the low value of education, distance to school, costs of schooling, gender norms among some groups, and the poor quality of education, real or perceived. Dropout numbers are highest in upper- and lower-secondary education, where the costs of school attendance also increase. Dropout rates saw significant declines between 1999 and 2006 but have since surged upwards, as Bùi Thái Quyên shows in Chapter Five. Recent research suggests that increases in the cost of housing, food, health care, and other services are cutting into spending on education, though no sharp escalation in dropout numbers is apparent (UNICEF 2008).

The educational status of ethnic minorities in Vietnam has consistently lagged behind ethnic Kinh and overseas Chinese (*Hoa Kiều*). Research on education and ethnic minority groups suggests a diverse range of economic, cultural, and linguistic barriers. Long-standing barriers such as physical remoteness of minority populations to schools, have declined over time, alongside the state's efforts to make schools more available. The higher incidence of dropouts among non-Kinh minorities is frequently attributed to their comparatively lower economic status, but also various ethno-linguistic barriers (including a wide lack of bilingual education as well as direct and indirect forms of discrimination). Nor have these problems eased with economic growth. A 2003 news report noted that the plight of Khmers in the education system was so dire that temples were playing a more important educative role than schools (Tran Bính 2002). As Trương Huyền Chi demonstrates in Chapter Six, linguistic and cultural barriers, as well as the structural exclusion of ethnic minorities in the schools and in the local political economy, combine to promote and reproduce educational and social stratification.

### *Issues in Higher Education and Vocational Training*

The final chapters in this volume examine selected issues in higher education, including higher education reform, university autonomy, collaboration between educational institutions and industry, and vocational education in the context of Vietnam's membership of the World Trade Organization (WTO).

As the urgency of higher education reform grows more acute, the Vietnam's government has renewed efforts to reform higher education. In 2005, MOET released a fifteen-year master plan for the development of higher education, and in the same year issued Resolution 14 on higher education reform. These were by no means the first attempt at reforming

the higher education system in the era of Đổi Mới, as an earlier attempt was launched in 1991 intended to address many of the same problems. It is fair to say, however, that the current round of higher education reforms is more sweeping and dynamic, even as its prospective outcomes remain unclear. There are many issues in higher education that are currently being debated.

One of the major themes of higher education reform efforts has been the uncertain division of authority between universities and the Ministry of Education. In Chapter Seven, Elizabeth St. George puts these processes in perspective with an analysis of higher education governance. One of the key challenges of higher education institutions is to produce graduates equipped with skills needed in Vietnam's changing labour market. In one of the more interesting foreign-sponsored projects, the Dutch Government has been assisting Vietnam in the development of professional education. A key aspect of this work is to develop programmes that more effectively link higher education curricula with the "world of work". In Chapter Eight, Nguyễn Minh Hồng addresses efforts to improve the relevance of higher education curricula to the practical needs of students and employers. Nguyen has discovered that many of the obstacles are due to the rigidity of the bureaucracy, particularly that within universities.

In Chapter Nine, Hồ Vũ Khuê Ngọc, who has found that the University of Đà Nẵng is busy reinventing itself in the face of new market opportunities, explains the top-down and bottom-up nature of Vietnamese educational institutions' responses to globalization and how they are viewed by university staff.

Another interesting dimension of collaboration between academia and industry concerns environmental governance. Vietnam is said to be among the most vulnerable countries to threats posed by climate change and rising ocean levels. In Chapter Ten, Marea Fatseas investigates the link between environmental research institutes and industry. Her analysis includes discussion of general sustainability concerns and examinations of specific collaborative projects.

While the demand for skilled labour continues to increase, state education policies are struggling to keep pace. In the meantime, the globalization of Vietnam's economy and Vietnam's WTO commitments are raising new questions about trade in educational services. In Chapter Eleven, Alexandre Dormeier Freire addresses many of these concerns through an analysis of skills formation and globalization.

The analysis of education in Vietnam can be approached from innumerable perspectives. This introductory chapter aimed to provide an introduction to education in Vietnam, if perhaps in quite general and lengthy terms. What this collection of essays aims to provide is an analysis of several key issues in contemporary Vietnam's education system, pertaining to the political economy of education, the provision and payment for primary and secondary education, and the development of vocational and tertiary education in a context of rapid social and economic change. It is hoped that this volume will contribute to existing knowledge of Vietnam's education system and to a broader understanding of social conditions in contemporary Vietnam.

## Notes

1. An education system of some form is likely to have existed in Vietnam no later than 250 BCE, though available evidence is too thin to permit thorough analysis. As one observer (who did not wish to be named) put it, education in Vietnam is a mix of the present and the past (*kim cổ*).
2. Perhaps especially minority ethnic groups.
3. As Alexander Woodside (1983, p. 401) has argued, "Confucian societies were based on the principle of *chính giáo* ("government" merged with "teaching"), the belief that political leadership and the power of moral and intellectual indoctrination must always be fused together."
4. Examples of expert English language scholarship on Vietnamese Confucianism includes Whitmore (1984), Taylor (1997), Taylor and Whitmore (1995), and Cooke (1994).
5. The Lê and the Mạc existed in parallel during a period called "Nam-Bắc triều" (Southern-Northern courts), from 1527–92. Between 1529 and 1592, the Mạc held twenty-two exams, while the Lê could organize only seven exams in the same period.
6. Woodside (1971, pp. 169–223) gives a particularly rich description of the imperial education and examination systems as they existed in the middle 19<sup>th</sup> century. With respect to the development of Vietnam's education systems, by the 1840s, it is estimated that Vietnam had twenty-one provincial educational commissioners, sixty-three prefectural educational officers, and ninety-four educational officers, two-thirds of whom were stationed in provinces from Nghệ An north (KĐĐNHĐSL 1842–51, cited in Woodside, *ibid*).
7. In the late 16<sup>th</sup> century Nguyễn Thị Duệ, from Hải Duong, passed the last exam held under Mạc dynasty, though she did so under a man's name.
8. For an especially vivid account, see Ho Tai (1982), pp. 10–11.

9. Phan Chu Trinh studied the classics and attained Candidate degree level (Phổ bảng) in the 1901 exam, while Phan Bội Châu passed exams at the prefecture level.
10. Phan Chu Trinh was born to a wealthy scholar from Quang Nam, but lost his father at age nine. Phan Chu Trinh's political views developed from a more to a less patient attitude towards French colonialism, culminating with outright challenges to the legitimacy of French occupation. Phan Boi Chau (1867–1940) was founder of the Duy Tân Hội (Reformation Society) and Đông Du (“Go East”) movement that encouraged nationalist Vietnamese youth to study in Japan. Later, he founded the Vietnam Quang Phục Hội (Vietnam Restoration League). Phan Bội Châu was himself a descendent of a family of outstanding (though economically poor) scholars in Nghệ An Province.
11. According to Nguyễn Thế Anh. *Việt Nam Thời Pháp Đô Hộ*. Saigon 1971. Cited in Trần Kin Đình et al., *Cơ Cấu Xã Hội Trong Quá Trình Phát Triển Của Lịch Sử Việt Nam*. (Social Structure and Development in Vietnam's History) (Hanoi: Nhà Xuất Bản Chính Trị Quốc Gia. Hanoi, 1998).
12. In one famous study of education in colonial Southeast Asia, the scholar J.S. Furnivall estimated that the French colonial regime provided rudimentary schooling to only slightly more than two per cent of the population, making it worse than any other colonial government in the region (Furnivall 1956, p. 211; cited in Woodside 1983, p. 404).
13. David Elliot's *The Vietnamese War* includes a fascinating account of these educational activities in the Mekong (Elliott 2003, pp. 87–88, 600–01).
14. Official poverty rates have declined, from 58 per cent in 1993 to less than 11 per cent (under a higher poverty ceiling) in 2006. Poverty declines in Vietnam were even steeper than in China (according to the Ministry of Planning and Investment's report of March 2006), making what was just recently among Asia's poorest countries into Asia's most recent entrant into “middle income country” status.
15. The 1994 figure is cited in Nguyen Thi Canh (1997), p. 28.
16. According to the Ministry of Education and Training, <<http://www.moet.gov.vn/?page=11.6&view=9268>>.
17. Trần Hữu Quang (2007), for example, cites the figure of 41 per cent, based on government sources. Given that primary education is (in principle) entirely state-funded, the share of household spending might be higher for other educational levels. Whatever the case, this is one of the highest shares on household spending in Asia. See also Kattan and Burnett (2004).



18. For example, the first large-scale World Bank project, a US\$70-million primary education project, focused on textbook development and teacher training. The project was widely regarded as a failure, according to ADB (1998).
19. World Bank (2010). Figures obtained from the online Projects Database and calculated by the author. <<http://web.worldbank.org/external/projects/main>>. Accessed October 2009.
20. <<http://www.diendan.org/thay-tren-mang/400-trieu-usd-xay-dung-bon-truong-111h-201ctrinh-111o-quoc-te201d/view>> (Accessed May 2009).
21. For example, the Bank-affiliated International Finance Corporation has, along with the ADB, invested in the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology's private university in Ho Chi Minh City. The World Bank, Report No: 24621-VN, Memorandum of the president of the International Development Association and the International Finance Corporation to the executive directors on a Country Assistance Strategy of the World Bank Group for the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 16 September 2002, Vietnam Country Management Unit, East Asia and the Pacific Region.
22. Only a few examples of NGO activities can be mentioned here. One, a 1997 OXFAM UK/Ireland study of education in a Mekong Delta district of Tra Vinh province, assisted with providing housing for teachers, the great majority of whom were Kinh from outside areas and working (at the time) with quite low salaries, but required to fend for themselves on housing arrangements (OXFAM 1998). The international charity Catholic Relief Services has actively promoted the cause of inclusive education for children with physical disabilities.
23. Take Vietnam's 2006–10 five-year socioeconomic development plan, which stated that 97.5 per cent of children were attending primary school at the right age. As we will see, this is an exaggeration (MPI 2006, p. 35).
24. Day care has been shifted mostly to non-state provision. As of 2008, only thirty-six public crèches (nhà trẻ) remained. (There are nearly 42,000 preschool groups (so-called nhóm trẻ), 75 per cent of which are “people-founded” and therefore entirely people-paid.)
25. As of 2007, 170,000 of 172,000 instructors were women.
26. The multicluster index survey includes the wealthier and well educated Hoa Kiều within the broad category non-Kinh.
27. Decision 112 (2006) provides for cash payments to children of eligible poor and minority households.
28. Lao Động. Chưa khắc phục được triệt để tình trạng học sinh bỏ học. <<http://www.laodong.com.vn/Home/Chua-khac-phuc-duoc-triet-de-tinh-trang-hoc-sinh-bo-hoc/200810/110397.laodong>>. (Last accessed 15 October 2008).

29. VHLSS (1993, 1996, 2002, 2006).
30. But nonetheless true. Interview with Văn Như Cương, Hanoi, 2008.
31. Sources: VLSS 1997–98 (GSO 2000, 52); VLSS 1992–3 (GSO 1994, 50); and for the years of 2004 and 2006, the author calculated on the basis of VLSS (2004; 2006).
32. UNICEF Transition Study.
33. <<http://www.moet.gov.vn/?page=11.5&view=930>> (Accessed October 2008).
34. For example, see Bùi Trọng Liễu. *Vì sao không nên cổ phần hóa đại học công?* <<http://www.diendan.org/viet-nam/co-phan-hoa-truong-111ai-hoc-cong/>> (Accessed May 2008).
35. It is estimated that by 2007 more than 45,000 Vietnamese had university degrees from “Western” universities. Until now, education authorities have not taken advantage of this resource. For a recent study of higher education and internationalization, see Pham The Nghi (2006).
36. <<http://www.gdtd.com.vn/>>. Last accessed April 2009.
37. Giáo dục: Những loi tâm huyết. No author. Nhà xuất bản thông tấn, 2006.
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