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Improving the Open and Distance Learning to Accelerate the Quantity and Quality of Education in Vietnam

Prof. Dr. Phan Van Que
Vice-President, Hanoi Open University,
GB member, SEAMOLEC

In Vietnam, although quite a number of new universities and colleges have been and will be established, the lack of facilities and qualified lecturers will continue to increase. The conventional education system is reflecting shortcomings and backwardness in terms of methodology and technology. Open and distance learning has been recognized as an effective solution to improve the provision of the educational system. Distance education technologies, especially ICT, not only facilitate improving the quality but also change the methodology in conventional institutions so that the human resources created by the whole educational system will be improved.

This paper will examine the current status of the educational system and the role of ODL, and explore the demand of the society towards education. Measures to improve the ODL will also be discussed, so that the quantity and quality of education will be accelerated.

Pressing needs to improve education

The educational system includes 2 categories: formal and informal. Formal education operates basing on full-time, face-to-face schooling. Informal education consists of two sub-categories: (1) part-time face-to-face training and (2) distance learning. By law (Education Law 2005), all modes of education are equally recognized.

HIGHER EDUCATION

Institutions | Students | Teachers

□

School-year	99-2000	2000-01	01-02	02-03	03-04	04-05	05-06	06-07
INSTITUTIONS	153	178	191	202	214	230	255	322
Colleges	84	104	114	121	127	137	151	183
Public	79	99	108	115	119	130	142	166
Non Public	5	5	6	6	8	7	9	17
Universities	69	74	77	81	87	93	104	139
Public	52	57	60	64	68	71	79	109
Non Public	17	17	17	17	19	22	25	30
STUDENTS	893754	918228	974119	1020667	1131030	1319754	1363167	1540201
Formal (full time, face-to-face)	509637	552461	579197	604396	653678	689704	687480	941131
Informal (part-time,	384117	365767	394922	416271	477352	630050	575687	599070

distance)								
College	17391 2	18672 3	21086 3	215544	23226 3	273463	346891	367054
University	71984 2	73150 5	76325 6	805123	89876 7	104629 1	101627 6	117314 7
TEACHERS	30309	32205	35938	38608	39985	47646	48579	53518
College	7703	7843	10392	11215	11551	13677	14285	15381
Professors	9	9	11	5	4	4	10	18
Associate Professors	4	4	3	20	23	33	30	35
Doctors	93	109	158	190	182	246	293	216
Masters	1325	1468	1960	2272	2509	3079	3422	3669
University	22606	24362	25546	27393	28434	33969	34294	38137
Professors	1231	1131	1160	1310	1408	1838	432	445
Associate Professors	338	310	303	319	302	413	2084	2432
Doctors	4378	4454	4812	5286	5179	5977	5744	5666
Masters	5477	6596	7583	8326	9210	11460	12248	14603

Source: Ministry of Education and Training (2007)

Education is closely linked to the changes and development of the socio-economy of a nation. This requires the adaptability and improvement of the educational system, including the reformation from elite to popularized higher education. Areas of Standards to Evaluate Quality in Higher education

On 2nd December 2004 the Minister of Education and Training promulgated the Provisional Regulations on Accreditation of Higher Education Institutions. Under these regulations ten standards for accreditation of higher education institutions were set up. Each standard has certain criteria as follows:

Nº	Areas of Standards	Number of criteria
1	Mission and goals of higher education institution	2
2	Organization and management	5
3	Curriculum	4
4	Training activities	5
5	Managing cadres, faculty and staff	10
6	Students	9
7	Research and development of technology	5
8	International cooperation activities	3
9	Library, learning equipments and other facilities	7
10	Finance and financial management	3

Accreditation is a new measure of quality assurance ever applied in Vietnam, therefore in the Provisional Regulations on accreditation the Ministry of Education and Training constructs two levels for each criterion, so that institution can easily reach at least the first level in its first attempt. It can be considered the psychological solution to introduce accreditation into the higher education context in Vietnam. So far, 20 universities declare that they have finished self-evaluating for accreditation. The MoET plans to accredit 20% of the total higher education institutions this year (2008).

National Conference on Quality in Higher education

On 5th January 2008, in Ho Chi Minh City, the National Conference on Quality in Higher Education, with 340 participants from 17 ministries, central offices, universities and colleges, was chaired by Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Education Nguyen Thien Nhan. The Conference overviewed the current quality in higher education. According to the MoET, the higher education system has not been well accessible to the advanced levels of the region and the world; it has not met the demand of the country's socio-economic development; it has not been adaptable enough with the requirement for high-skilled human resources.

The seven causes to limit the quality have been identified, including: the criteria for quality accreditation is vague, not specific enough; quality assessment and accreditation are still in initial stage; scientific research in universities and colleges have not been paid sufficient attention to; leading scholars are rare; international collaboration in training and research has been limited; conditions for quality assurance are poor; financial mechanism and investment for facilities are problematic. Mr. Arjan Koeslag, the Chief consultant of the Vietnam-Holland Higher Education Project, points out 4 weak points: the ability to response to the demand of the society is limited; the relation between the universities and the labor market is loose; the curriculum and teaching method are out-of-date; the financial resources are low.

According to Vietnam Education Fund (funded by USA), the higher education should be more open for the school leavers; the leading universities are to train good lecturers; the curriculum are overloaded with unnecessary subjects. There search shows that only 20% of what students learn from universities and colleges relates to their jobs' requirement.

Targeted Educational Program 2008-2010

On 10th January 2008, the Deputy Prime Minister signed the Decision of approval of the Targeted Educational Program 2008-

2010, the estimated budget of 20,270 billion VND (around 1,267 million USD), including 7 projects:

1. Popularize lower secondary education
2. Renovating curriculum, textbooks and teaching materials
3. Training human resource for ICT, introducing ICT to educational institutions
4. Training and upgrading teachers, lecturers and educational administrators
5. Supporting education in mountainous areas, ethnic minorities and regions of difficulty
6. Improving educational facilities
7. Improving ability for vocational training.

Among these, Project 2 attempts to build 100 standardized frame-curriculums for 25 areas of vocational training, 250 standardized frame-curriculum of university and college level, 1,000 open course wares to upload to the Internet. This project also emphasizes on creating self-learning materials for distance education. Project 3 pays more attention to utilizing ICT and modern media in education.

Open and Distance learning

Distance education has been introduced to Vietnam since 1993 to meet the demand of the country for human resources. The traditional education system with limited resources and provision cannot meet the growing demand for education of the people, especially in higher education. As the population grows and the human resources develop, over one million new students need education and training from the system. The conventional universities and colleges are able to enroll only 350,000 out of 1,200,000 school-leavers every year. Besides, millions of working people need retraining and upgrading. Currently, 12 universities and colleges are offering distance courses.

Education Law 1998 and reconfirmed by Renewed Education Law 2005 officially recognized distance education. The Prime Minister's

Decision coded 201/2001/QD-TTg (signed on 28th December 2001) pointed out “Development of distance education should be regarded as a measure to mobilize the whole country to build a learning society, creating opportunities for education to all people; priorities will be given to the open universities including technologies, equipment, materials, so that distance education could be improved and developed”. The Prime Minister’s Decision coded 164/2005/QD-TTg on Approval of the MoET’s “Proposal on Improving Distance Education 2005-2010” (signed on 4th July 2005) identifies the two open universities (Hanoi Open University and Ho Chi Minh City Open University) to be invested for improving distance education. The Government’s Resolution coded 14/2005/NQ-CP on “Overall Renovating the Higher Education System” with a vision to 2020 (signed on 2nd November 2005) directs “Consolidating the open universities to improve capacity for better enrolment”. To innovate with educational technologies for quality improvement, the Government’s Resolution also directs “Introducing distance education technologies, especially ICT, to other modes of informal education, such as part-time face-to-face schooling”. Both the Prime Minister’s Decision and the Government’s Resolution pay much attention to improve distance education technologies and assign Hanoi Open University to be the pioneer in researching the solutions to the issues.

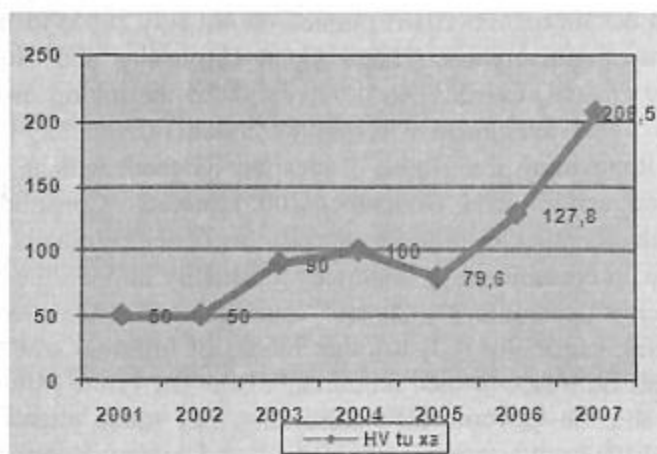
Distance Education Providers in Higher education

No	Institutions	Students	Graduates
1	Hanoi Open University	34.050	11.500
2	National University, Ho Chi Minh City	12.000	2.500
3	Ho Chi Minh City Open University	25.200	7.500
4	Hanoi University of Education	35.459	23.153
5	Hanoi University	14.500	5.120
6	University of Post and Telecommunication Technology	11.300	0
7	University of National Economics	3.200	0
8	Hue University	48.418	53.941
9	Danang University	10.200	3.150
10	Dalat University	3.200	1.000
11	Binh Duong College	7.500	0

No	Institutions	Students	Graduates
12	Tra Vinh College	1.500	0
	Total	206.527	107.864

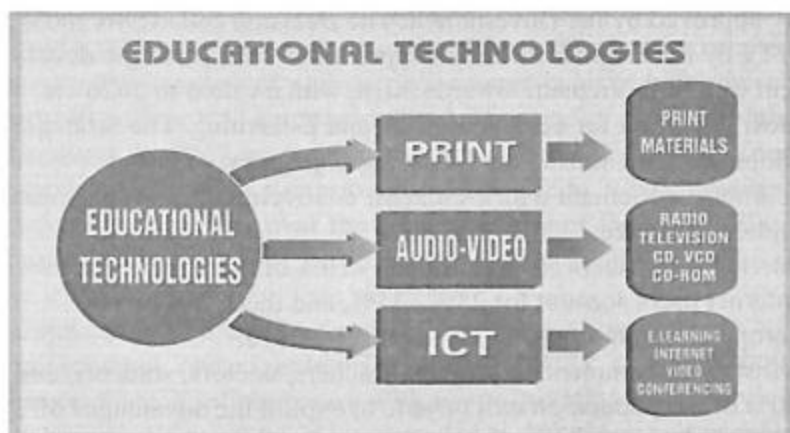
Source: Ministry of Education and Training (August, 2007)

Distance Student by Year



Academic areas and Technologies

Several training areas of great demand are being offered via open and distance learning, such as business management, law, ICT, finance, accounting, education, English language, rural development, social sciences. Most of the providers use print material as the main medium supplemented by CD, VCD, and CD-ROM. E-learning has been utilized by several institutions. However, it is just at initial stages.



Open and Distance Learning 2008-2020

The Government and the people of Vietnam have been aware of the philosophy of “life-long education”, “education for all” and “building a learning society”. Developing the human resources will always be a pressing need. With the population growth of 1.2 million/year, there will be 100 million by 2020. Statistics from the MoET shows that 62.7% of the population is in the working age; only 32% of them have been trained; 60% of the laborers are working in agriculture, forestry, fishery, but most of them have not been trained.

Though the number of conventional universities and colleges is increasing, they cannot meet the demand of the people for education because of lacking physical facilities and lecturers. Distance education has its special target students, i.e., those who are not accessible to face-to-face courses for various reasons, such as financial difficulty, geographical isolation or employment involvement. The MoET has set the objective that DE will serve 20% of the total students throughout the country in 2010 and 30% by 2020, i.e., there will be 300,000 DE students in 2010 and 500,000 DE students by 2020.

National policy on ICT education and E-learning

The application and development of ICT and E-learning have been highly approved by the Government. The Decision coded 246/2005/QĐ-TTg by the Prime Minister on approval of “The Strategic development of ICT in Vietnam towards 2010, with a vision to 2020” is the most important for developing ICT and E-learning. The Strategic Development Plan aims at the following objectives:

- To improve Vietnam with e-citizens, e-Government, e-enterprises, and e-commerce;
- Internet subscribers account for 8% - 10% of the population, Internet users account for 25% - 35%, and there will be 10 computer holders per 100 inhabitants by 2010.
- Most of Government employees, teachers, doctors, students, and 30% of the population will be able to exploit the advantages of ICT and Internet.
- Products of ICT training at universities will reach the advanced level in ASEAN.
- ICT will play a leading role in transforming Vietnam into a communicational and knowledge society, an industrialized and modernized country by 2020.

Key Programmes

- “Developing and Improving Telecommunications and Internet Infrastructures”, headed by the Directorate General of Post and Telecommunications
- “Developing IT Human Resources”, implemented by the Ministry of Education and Training
- “Establishing and Developing the Software Industry”, by the Ministry of Science and Technology
- “Establishing and Developing the Hardware Industry”, executed by the Ministry of Industry.

The speed of utilizing ICT in Vietnam is high. Currently, there are 5.2 million Internet subscribers (including 1.3 million broadband

subscribers) for 18.5 million users accounting for 22% of the country population. Most of universities, colleges and professional schools are connected to the Internet. The MoET gives name to 2008 “The School-year of ICT” and requires all educational institutions to connect to the Internet. The number of mobile phone users is quite high, there are nearly 40 million SIM cards being used. The number of new telephone subscribers in 2007 was estimated achieving 18.5 million (nearly equivalent to the total subscribers in 2004, 2005, 2006), totaling the number of subscribers over the country at end of December 2007 to 46 million.

In 2008-2009, Vietnam Post and Telecommunication Group (VNPT), a government owned enterprise, invested US\$ 1,000,000,000 to upgrade the ICT infrastructure with new generation net (NGN). The national cable capacity will be upgraded to 200 Gbps and capable to 300 Gbps, equivalent to the level of a developed country.

E-learning situation

Over 400 universities, colleges, professional and vocational training schools in Vietnam, and most of the high schools are equipped with computers and connected to the Internet. So too are many secondary and primary schools. Vietnam has 12 universities providing distance learning at different levels for over 200,000 students. However, e-learning programs account for only 10%. The largest program on ICT training is conducted by the National University of Ho Chi Minh City, which has a capacity for 8,000 students. Hanoi Open University (www.hou.edu.vn) is also a leading institution in researching and providing e-learning at www.dhm.edu.vn/moodle.

E-learning is also being operated at:

- Hanoi University of Post and Communication technology (www.pttcl.edu.vn)
- Faculty of Education - Hanoi National University (www.eduf.vnu.edu.vn)
- Hanoi IT centre (www.hanoi-ittc.edu.vn/daotao)
- Hanoi National Economic University (www.neu.edu.vn)
- Danang EA College (www.dayhocstructureuyen.com)

- Can Tho University (www.dec.ctu.edu.vn)
- Hanoi Pedagogical University (www.el.hnue.edu.vn/lwp)
- Ho Chi Minh City Open University (www.ou.edu.vn/dttx)
- Danang University (www.dbavn.com/elearning), (www.ud.edu.vn)
- Hue University (www.it-jsc.com).
- MoET's e-library (www.ebooks.moet.gov.vn)

Several e-learning programs have been developed in projects funded by the IDRC and the World Bank, and conducted by organizations including Viet Nam Development Information Centre, Viet Nam Data Communication Centre, Da Nang Polytechnic University, the Institute of Information Technology, and Fisheries College # IV, Bac Ninh.

Apart from formal degree courses, many institutions are offering vocational or short training courses. Private enterprises are successful in providing e-learning to secondary school students. For example, (www.truongthi.com.vn) runs tutorial courses to those who expect to pass the national entrance examination for universities; while (www.hocngoingu.com.vn) offers English courses.

Realizing the importance of ICT in DE technologies, the MoET has recently assigned Hanoi Open University to head a consortium including Ho Chi Minh City Open University, University of Post and Telecommunication Technology, Hue University and Hanoi University of Education to develop and implement nationwide e-learning programs.

A master plan has been designed for distance and e-learning infrastructure and capabilities, which provides the most comprehensive view of how distance learning should be developed on a national scale. Since it is needed to reach out to hundreds of thousands of students throughout the country, not all of them are accessible to good technology infrastructure, the project is required to implement all delivery provisions: self-learning materials, CDs, Radio, TV, online text and graphics, online audio/video, etc. Of course, e-learning should receive emphasis wherever the infrastructure is available, and

even mobile-learning .Students in remote or poor communities can make use of CD players, radio and TV broadcast programs, or just better quality self-learning materials. Development efforts should be coordinated consistently on all levels: government and ministry level, university level, local learning center level, and even at the level of students. Creative support schemes should be developed so that more students have good learning equipment available (PCs with broadband connection at home or in nearby learning centers, or even just a digital TV receiver or a VCD player); training programs should be implemented so that students will have basic IT skills necessary for e-learning.

To ensure quality, consistent courseware will be developed, which would essentially be the same content in SCORM format online, on radio or TV broadcast, on offline CDs, print-based materials or even mobile devices. We have built a central courseware database and standard processes, in order to capture content developed with various authoring tools (word, power-point, html, flash, and others), and then publish the content in different formats whenever needed. These courseware development processes will follow rigorous method: analysis of student needs and available resources, design of suitable structure and format, development of multimedia content, small-scale implementation to test the course, collecting evaluation and feedback, and then starting over with analysis in order to implement on larger scale.

Conclusion

Vietnam has been and will continue to be under pressing needs for human resource development. Although quite a number of new universities and colleges have been and will be established, the lack of facilities and qualified lecturers will continue to increase. Besides, the conventional education system is reflecting shortcomings and backwardness, resulting in relatively unacceptable quality.

ODL has been recognized as an effective solution to improve the provision of the educational system in Vietnam. ODL is taking advantage of the availability of media and technologies, which can also be deployed in a formal regular face-to-face teaching and learning situation.

Statistics from a recent survey shows that, although there are a number of institutions providing web-based courses and programs, most of which are in the form of "office-word", "pdf" and "html". There should be more programs developed in the form of multimedia packages, such as CD-ROM and two-way-interaction programs on the Internet. The shortage of multimedia packages for education is due to the limited funding and investment. The accessibility to the Internet in urban areas is quite good. Most of the educational institutions are equipped with new generation computers and broadband while quite a number of institutions in the rural areas do not have adequate computers and the Internet connection is mainly relies on dial-up modem. However, the national ICT infrastructure will have been greatly improved by VNPT by mid-2009, creating favorable conditions for e-learning and other DE media to develop.

In a few years time, blended learning will still be effective, so print will remain a major medium for ODL, as it is accessible to majority of students. However, the international methodology for course development in print is still unfamiliar to most of DE institutions as they rely much on the experience of face-to-face schooling. Few managers and instructors have been formally trained. Support materi-

als which have been designed for face-to-face courses, are unsuitable for distance delivery. Most training are designed locally and delivered with the assistance of face-to-face tutorials at the local centers. E-learning method is currently still in the initial stage at individual universities and colleges.

Distance education technologies, especially ICT, not only facilitate the improvement of quality of ODL but also change the methodology in conventional institutions so that the quality of the human resources created by the whole educational system will be improved. To improve methodology and technologies for sustainable development of the ODL system in Vietnam, there should be further training courses to managers and practitioners, either online or face-to-face methods to particular groups of participants. Areas of training and pilot-testing should be focused on the following:

1. DE methodology, course-design and course-development (print-based);
2. Interactive web-based design and development;
3. SMS-enabled technologies;
4. ICT-based learning models (both independent and blended) to be tested to particular groups of students.

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