



## GLOBALIZATION AND HIGHER EDUCATION IN VIETNAM

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*With the triumph of the current neo-liberal discourse, many university leaders worldwide have embraced an entrepreneurial model as the answer for change, turning the university from a public good into a commodity. Vietnam, a developing country in Southeast Asia, has become an active participant in this trend. This essay explores how neo-liberal discourse has shaped higher education in both developed and developing countries, with a focus on Vietnam. The expansion in Vietnam of private universities, the introduction of tuition fees, and the corporatization of higher education are all developments associated with trends toward marketization. Given the pervasiveness of globalization and the neo-liberal agenda, serious consequences will follow if the traditional role of the university is sacrificed to the invisible hand of the market. This is confirmed by ongoing trends and outcomes of university reform agendas in different parts of the world, including Vietnam. There is a need to recover the idea of the university as a public good, focusing on academic freedom, autonomy, and human development.*

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### THE CHALLENGE OF GLOBALIZATION

**T**he past four decades have seen a massive expansion of global higher education (Schugurensky in Rhodes & Torres 2006: 314). The universities are opening their doors to more and more people. From 40 million students in 1975, world-wide enrollments reached 150 million in 2007, almost four times the number since World War II (Altbach 2008). The expansion was ignited first in the USA, Canada, the USSR, and Japan, before spreading to other developed countries from the 1960s to the 1990s (Hayhoe 1996). Philip Altbach (2008) notes that developing countries are responsible for much of higher education growth during the past two decades. The overall

scene is that across the globe, from Europe and Asia to America, Africa, and Australia, more higher education institutions are being built, greater numbers of students are being enrolled with ample choices of educational programs, and more courses are being created to satisfy the thirst of an increasingly intensive division of labor in society. Looking at this phenomenon, one may gain the impression that the world is on the right track towards a democratic, equal, and civilized future. However, this may reflect a premature optimism.

It is obvious that the university has gained greater importance in modern society. Besides workforce preparation, universities also play a role in economic development, scientific and technological innovation, and cross-cultural communication and exchange (Rhoads & Torres 2006: 164). Paradoxically, important as it is, the university does not generally enjoy increased financial support from the state. Instead, it faces increased responsibility to increase efficiency and accountability, accreditation and universalization, international competitiveness, and privatization. According to Ronald Barnett (1994), the traditional university as an institution supporting the quest for objective knowledge, and as an autonomous realm independent of the outside world, is being undermined epistemologically and sociologically. The epistemological undermining represents the doubt and challenge by postmodern tenets that view truth as an unattainable goal. Sociologically, the autonomy of the university is subject to increasing control by the state, whereby the university has to meet the demands of the industrial economy by supplying qualified personnel through restricted programs or courses that emphasize instrumental skills or knowledge. Once a realm of an academic community collaborating for the common purpose of truth and wisdom, the university now has become a "multiversity," ranging from polytechnics to colleges of higher education, and including different communities and activities, to accommodate and respond to social needs (Kerr 1995; Barnett 1994).

This paradox is due mainly to globalization, which may be defined as the increasingly interdependent and complex relationships among economies, cultures, institutions, and nation-states (Rhoads & Torres 2006: 164). Though still a contradictory concept, globalization is strongly linked with neo-liberalism, which plays a major role in shaping higher education (Rhoads & Torres 2006: 8). Neo-liberal globalization is forcefully shaping the university worldwide, especially in developed countries. Vietnam, a developing country in Southeast Asia, is also pulled into this trend. In accordance with the

economic transition since 1986, the subsequent dramatic transformation of higher education in Vietnam clearly reflects the impact of neo-liberal globalization. The expansion of private universities, the introduction of tuition fees, and corporatization in higher education are all associated with the “invisible hand” of the market in this country. In brief, the university in Vietnam, under the aegis of neo-liberal globalization, is becoming a private good rather than a public good.

This essay explores how neo-liberal discourse is shaping higher education in both developed and developing countries, with a focus on Vietnam. One needs to recall the academic values of the university grounded in the Enlightenment, before unfolding a critical evaluation of the international context of neo-liberal reforms, and some reflections on meaningful higher education in a Communist Party state like Vietnam. One might begin by asking why has neo-liberalism, a discourse rooted in neo-classical economics, become so pervasive in educational thinking, especially in higher education? And how could such a doctrine on the absolute power of the market go hand-in-hand with globalization which, given the threat of monopolistic and oligopolistic practices resulting from unchecked competition, requires increasing state intervention in the economy? To answer this question, it is necessary to recall briefly the history of economics as a discipline.

The development of economics as a discipline began with classical political economy, which employed a historical and social analysis of the market and the nature of profits (Allais 2010). This means that the economy was seen as part of a complex socio-cultural and historical milieu. The move from classical political economy to neo-classical economics, however, involved a strict focus on the market as detached from other social forces. In this new discourse, the individual was seen as a free economic actor (*homo economicus*) capable of sensible choice reflecting one’s interests, and the market as a perfectly functioning entity. With this deductive tool of analysis, influential economists attempted, successfully, to apply some economic notions void of empirical content (such as “utility maximizing individual,” “choice,” and “efficiency”) to other social sciences. Gary Becker’s concept of “human capital,” for example, despite its conceptual deficiencies, has come to shape educational thinking, directing its vision “through the lens of neoclassical economics, as individuals must decide what human capital to obtain for themselves” (Allais 2010: 11).

More recently, due to information asymmetries and transaction costs, economic thinking has shifted to acknowledge the imperfect nature of the market in addressing social issues, while maintaining its core ethos. This also involves the “visible” hand of the state, whose main role is limited to “improve how the market can function.” This neo-liberal doctrine has found a receptive audience in higher education in the context of globalization (Allais 2010). Boaventura Santos sums up the guiding neo-liberal logic for the expansion and commodification of higher education, as proposed by the World Bank, the World Trade Organization and its General Agreement on Trade and Services: (1) The information society we are living in requires a qualified workforce and increased productivity to thrive; (2) The economy based on knowledge demand (knowledge economy) relies on human capital; (3) The survival of the university depends on an information society and a knowledge-based economy; (4) Unless the current institutional and politico-pedagogical ethos of the public university changes, it will be impossible for it to survive in the global era; and (5) Therefore, it is essential that the present institutional culture of both public and private universities be replaced by an entrepreneurial model performing in the global educational market (in Rhoads & Torres 2006: 68-69).

### THE RISE OF THE MODERN UNIVERSITY

Although the historical university reflected great diversity of civilizations and cultural contexts across the world, for example, the university in the Confucian tradition in most Oriental countries or the Islamic university in the Middle East and some African nations, the university in the modern sense was predicated on the traditional European model during the Enlightenment. This was achieved during the nineteenth century through both imperialism and the expansion of European civilization (Hayhoe 1996).

Autonomy and academic freedom are the two crucial elements defining the identity of the traditional European university (Hayhoe 1996; Ward 2006). The first value represents the relative independence of the university from hegemonic forces, such as the state or the church. During medieval times, the widespread recognition of autonomous guilds (*universitas*) of merchants paved the way for the formation of guilds of scholars, which included guilds of masters, such as the Universities of Paris and Oxford, or guilds of students, such as the University of Bologna. Being a guild means a legal entity, in which the members (masters and students) were given rights “to elect their

own representatives, set the standards and requirements for degrees, determine the fees paid to the masters by the students, times of lectures, various penalties and fines and such" (Georges 2006: 78). Although the general function of the medieval university was, like that of the modern university today, to prepare one for a future job, what was taught (liberal arts, philosophy, law, theology, medicine) was considered relevant to the church and the government--the largest employers at the time--yet it never served exclusively as "the arm" of either institution. Academic freedom was characterized by two features. First, it was the condition for scholars to seek the truth, to advance knowledge for its own sake, as long as it conformed to the rules and traditions validated by the disciplinary community. Second, it was centered on epistemology, that is, knowledge was built on logical reasoning and theoretical debate, rather than through experimentation or application in practice (Hayhoe 1996).

But the medieval period was not the golden age for academic freedom and autonomy due to the ultimate power of the church. University scholars frequently encountered tension with the church over the dominance of theology, and academic freedom was somehow limited. The role of the university during this time was constrained to the preservation and transmission of knowledge officially recognized by the church, and this remained powerful even during the Renaissance. In the early nineteenth century, when the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution began to transform the nature of European society, universities experienced a period of crisis, a loss of meaning of their role in society and, mainly, conflict with the state. Unlike in the previous period, the position of a person was not limited to the church or the state, but also enterprises. Scientific and professional knowledge became the order of the day, and this required the university to transform itself for survival. The University of Berlin, founded by Wilhelm Humboldt in 1810, solved the dilemma and became the prototype of the modern university as "a national institution with academic freedom to pursue truth" (Ward 2006: 96). Humboldt followed Immanuel Kant's differentiation between knowledge controlled by the state, such as law and medicine, and philosophical truth. He also advanced the idea that the role of the university was to transmit national identity through cultural knowledge, reason, teaching, and learning. In exchange for freedom and autonomy, the university was to produce highly trained professionals for industry and new inventions. The integration of teaching and research thus became for the first time a distinct feature of the modern European university.

## THE TRIUMPH OF THE ENTREPRENEURIAL UNIVERSITY

The influence of neo-liberal discourse on higher education means the university shifting its role from a public good to become a commodity. In reality, this commodification of higher education is a gradual process shaped by diverse actors, where the WTO and its General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), and the Agreement on Trade-Related Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS), play a dominant role (Spring 2009). These actors promote the transformation of the university into a business enterprise that Burton Clark (1998) calls an "entrepreneurial university." According to Clark, the difference between the traditional and the entrepreneurial university is the institutional culture. He argues that the entrepreneurial university is managed in a way that is responsive and flexible to changing environments. Besides, the head of the entrepreneurial institution takes on both academic and administrative leadership, while in a traditional university the head is elected by his peers and considered a "*primus inter pares*." Clark refers to this change of institutional culture as having a "strengthened steering core," the university's administrative backbone which embraces central managerial groups and academic departments (1998: 5). Such a core works to fuse new managerial values with traditional academic ones via the strong-minded change agents who actively seek resources for the institution as a whole (Clark 1998: 137).

The marketization and commodification of higher education as a response to neo-liberal globalization is promoted in many developed countries in the world. On 19 June 1999, ministers of Higher Education in the European Union signed the Bologna Declaration, with a common goal to establish the European Higher Education Area in 2010. To achieve this goal, the EU aimed at reforming their universities in order to create uniformity at the European level. The ethos of the Bologna Process could be described by such terms as "mobility," "employability," "competitiveness," and "attractiveness" (Guruz 2008). Yet, the Bologna Process did not originate with institutions of higher education, but rather was subtly imposed by politicians (Guruz 2008). The control by transnational states over the universities was increased in the Lisbon Agenda. In March 2003, ministers from the European Union gathered in Lisbon to outline the "2010 Strategy" or the "Lisbon Agenda." The objective of this plan is to turn Europe into "the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater

social cohesion." Accordingly, the EU required a reform of European universities so that they could become more effective and competitive in contributing to the Agenda (Guruz 2008; Spring 2009).

Similarly, the developed Anglophone countries, including Japan, responded to the marketization of higher education by joining GATS (Guruz 2008). According to Michael Peters, the transformation of higher education in the Anglophone countries follows a similar pattern shared by several OECD nations, such as the introduction of corporate managerialism, strategic planning, user-charges, and student loans. The reforms also challenge faculty representation of university governance, and exhibit "a creeping privatisation of the system as a whole" (Peters 2007: 2). Peters illustrates how universities in some countries became radically aligned with neo-liberal globalization. One example is his analysis of the "Dearing Report," published by the UK government in 1997. Peters notes how much the impact of globalization is felt in Great Britain by pointing out the change in three interrelated functions of the university: knowledge, labor, and institutional. First, knowledge is increasingly legitimated through its "attraction to, and service to, global corporations" (Peters 2007: 14). Second, the globalization of the labor function is manifest in "both the production of technically skilled people to meet the needs of global corporations and the ideology of lifelong learning" (Peters 2007: 14). And third, the institutional function of the university has changed into a global international service and a tradable commodity.

Directly or indirectly, universities in many developed countries have experienced a fundamental shift in their identity, from knowledge-oriented institutions to a supermarket model, in which "students are clients, knowledge is a piece of merchandise, and professors are salary earners who teach" (Mollis in Rhoads & Torres 2006: 204). With the triumph of the current neo-liberal discourse, many university leaders embrace an entrepreneurial model as the answer for change, turning the role of the university as a public good into a commodity, which involves a shift from seeing education as a form of consumption to seeing it wholly as an investment. This has sparked polarized debates between those who support and those who oppose the current global regime.

Those who espouse commodification in higher education believe that the traditional management style of the university is inefficient compared with the competitive, performance-driven approach of the entrepreneurial university

(Clark 2005; Gibb 2005). Emphasizing the role of public higher education as an engine of economic growth, they call for the university to be more financially responsible, more competitive and business-like, and this means pushing the university into a closer bond with for-profit, private enterprises.

However, on the other side of the discussion table, critics of neo-liberal discourse point out that neo-liberal tenets corrupt the core values of the university. Sheila Slaughter and Larry Leslie (1997) associate neo-liberal policies in higher education with "academic capitalism," arguing that the encroachment of the profit motive in public higher education corrodes the freedom in teaching and research, contaminating the noble role of the university in its community service provision. Maria Nedeva also suggests that the university's economic development mission may result in a loss of public respect for higher education (in Epstein 2007: 85-104). In brief, critics of the neo-liberal approach dismiss it as a corroding factor of the moral values of the university. Where the challenge of neo-liberal globalization is greatest for higher education, counter-hegemonic responses are also felt the strongest. In developed countries, many scholars are critical of the university being treated like a commodity. For them, the commodification of higher education is bringing about the destruction of democratic values and the distortion of the educational mission of the university as a public good. Critics include Daniel Schugurensky, who stresses the withering of the university's social responsibility as students are trained to go forth into the labor market rather than being educated to develop their critical thinking and achieve their maximum intellectual capacities (in Rhoads & Torres 2006: 301).

David Noble fears the undermining of educational and research quality due to the profit motive and the alienation of the relationship between teachers and students through the medium of the market, whereby "teachers become commodity producers and deliverers," and "students become consumers of yet more commodities" (2001: 4). Tudiver Neil (1999) provides empirical evidence of the influence of marketization on his University of Manitoba, Canada. He points out that academics are under more pressure to produce research that is increasingly judged by its potential for profit-producing rather than pedagogical values. Yet others are concerned how the entrepreneurial model and partnership between the university and private sectors causes an income gap among faculty staff due to the more or less lucrative values of their field for the university, which is not only a problem of inequality but also an ethical issue (Campbell & Slaughter 1999).

Such a situation may be observed also in Latin America, where governments adopted GATS despite protests by the heads of many universities. In April 2002, university leaders in the region gathered in Brazil to sign the Porto Alegre Declaration. To exclude higher education as a service from GATS, they emphasized the role of education as a public good:

The Iberian and Latin American academics hereby gathered, reaffirming the commitments made by the governments and by the international academic community at the World Conference on Higher Education held in Paris in October 1998, conceiving higher education as a public good, alert the university community and the entire society about the disastrous consequences of such proceedings and require the governments of their respective countries not to subscribe any commitment on this issue within the framework of the WTO General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) (Porto Alegre Declaration 2002: 2).

The defense of public education is manifest also in many social movements and public declarations around the world (Morrow in Rhoads & Torres 2006: xvii). In the EU, after heated debates around the Bologna Process, European ministers decided in the Prague Communiqué (May 2001) that higher education should be a public good (Hufner 2003).

Yet, given fiscal constraints and the escalation of economic globalization, the role of the university in economic development and competition is becoming even more pronounced. The difficult question, again, arises: Should the university be a public good or a commodity? The reconciliation of this conflict, proposed by Klaus Hufner (2003), is that the university should be treated as a mixed good. In Hufner's analysis, the university as a mixed good is predicated on three perspectives: economic, legal, and normative-political. Each perspective is analyzed in relation to the three functions of the university: teaching, research, and social service. Hufner concludes that higher education is a mixed good due to the overlapping of the three perspectives. Thus, a relevant dose of marketization, such as imposition of tuition fees and competition, is reasonable to enhance university efficiency. The problem is that, even if the university could be logically considered both a public and a private good, neo-liberal globalization does not stop there. Its influence is becoming greater on all national economies to the extent that commodification of higher education seems to be what we must accept finally.

## THE CHANGING ROLE OF THE UNIVERSITY IN VIETNAM

Vietnam is a Southeast Asian country bordered to the North by the People's Republic of China and the West by Laos and Cambodia. Although a small country, almost as big as Japan, it is relatively densely populated with a diverse ethnic population of some 86 million people in 2009. The university in Vietnam in the modern sense has its root in the Western model, but this root is "twisted," as Altbach and Viswanathan Selvaratnam (1989) allege, due to its complex history of different external contacts. Vietnam's history reflects long struggles for independence from dominating outsiders. Thus, Vietnamese education has been open to a mixture of influences in its development. However, most discussions of higher education in Vietnam offer only an overview of its history as a "passive" response by the Vietnamese university to external influences, thus downplaying its own interpretation (Pham & Fry 2004; Welch 2010). Yet, what is needed is to highlight how the original core values of the traditional Western university were transformed in the Vietnamese context and, thus, gain a preliminary understanding of the nature of the Vietnamese university.

Like Japan, Taiwan, Korea, and Singapore, Vietnam belongs to the Confucian tradition, which spread from China. The influence of Confucianism on Vietnamese education was strong mostly because for almost a thousand years Vietnam was ruled by China (111 BC-938 AD). After gaining independence, Vietnam was the first country in Southeast Asia to build an institution of higher learning (*Quoc Tu Giam*), originally to educate the sons of emperors, which soon became an incubator for bureaucratic scholars, or mandarins, who worked for the state. Through a civil service examination that involved several rounds, from regional to central levels, male scholars from all over the country, and all walks of life, competed at *Quoc Tu Giam* in the final exam to be chosen as ruling elites. This is why Alexander Woodside remarks that "no ruling class in any medieval or early modern Western state ever owed its exalted position to its educational achievements as conspicuously as did the old Chinese and Vietnamese scholar-gentry" (1983: 404). Confucian education continued in Vietnam even after the Chinese conquest due to voluntary borrowing, not necessarily submissive, as Woodside (1976-77) points out. Innovative Chinese inventions, from paper to gunpowder, and other creative ideas, were appealing. However, even with millennia of development, as Ruth Hayhoe argues, the traditional Chinese university possessed neither autonomy nor academic freedom equivalent to the

Western model, and “there was no institution in Chinese tradition that could accurately be called a university” (1996: 10).

The French came in 1858, and the first university in the modern sense, the University of Indochina, was established in 1906. However, higher education in Vietnam under colonial rule was in a paltry state, like a foster child, because French investment was politically motivated, despite protests by the colonized. In contrast to the French university operating in Europe at the time, the colonial university did not enjoy real academic freedom or autonomy. Students were trained only in basic skills to support the colonial bureaucracy, without access to knowledge of scientific and technological innovations or the right to question the colonial power monopoly (Woodside 1983). The August 1945 Revolution marked the beginning of the end of French colonialism. The Vietnam Democratic Republic was born with the declaration of independence, but shortly after that the war continued as the French returned. Higher education was in disarray until 1954, when the Dien Bien Phu victory brought an end to Western colonialism in Northern Vietnam. The 1955 Geneva Treaty marked the temporary division of Vietnam into North and South, and unification was to be realized under the condition that a general election be held, but alas it never happened. This was so because the two regions’ political machineries vied for supremacy by seeking international allies, with the Soviet Union and China in the North, and the USA in the South. As a result, between 1955 and 1975, there were two different systems of higher education in Vietnam: the Soviet model in the North, and the American model in the South.

The Soviet university was strongly influenced by the German and French models during the 1917 Revolution in Russia, probably more by the French. Academic freedom and autonomy were tied more to French tradition, which emphasized independence from government but, at the same time, “loyalty to the higher moral and intellectual interests of the state” (Hayhoe 1996: 6). Meanwhile, the German model, exemplified by the University of Berlin, enjoyed greater autonomy than its French counterpart, since it was predicated on the Hegelian view of the state. German academic freedom was based on Kant’s view that reason is the unifying idea of the university, serving as a source of criticism, reflection, and governance, and a tool protecting the university from outside authority (Readings 1996; Peters 2010). Such values were translated in Russia in a way that suited its socio-cultural and political context. While intellectual freedom should be embraced as an implication of

Marxist epistemology of dialectical holism, academic freedom and institutional autonomy, Soviet-style, were limited due to the Leninist view of the state. Soviet leaders believed in strong specialization of knowledge as a way to promote scholarly standards, achieved via a stricter classification of knowledge than in the German model, while "causing minimal threat to political order" (Hayhoe 1996: 8). Another feature of the Soviet model that departs from Western influence is the separation of teaching and research, in contrast to the Humboldtian tradition. Research was the monopoly of a system of academies that resulted in a "derogation of the universities, as the faculties had been derogated by the Napoleonic system in France in the preceding century" (Hayhoe 1996: 9).

Both China and North Vietnam adopted the Soviet model of higher education during the 1950s-60s, with, *inter alia*, a disciplinary curriculum that emphasized applied sciences and specialized knowledge. However, in the late 1950s, Mao Tse-Tung, the Chinese Communist Party leader, decided to turn against this model in search of a system that relied on "cultural authenticity" and "creativity," which culminated in the notorious Cultural Revolution, lasting more than a decade. In this process, the boundary between school and society became blurred, and teachers were targeted because academics were considered distant from lower classes such as peasants. This did not occur in the Vietnamese context. It seems that Vietnam was more "conservative" than China in this respect, and one might draw the conclusion that the Vietnamese university was merely a mechanical, unimaginative copy of the Soviet model.

However, as Woodside notes, the reason for Vietnam's alternative was not simply the different weight of the Confucian tradition, different tastes of leaders or the "mentality of servitude of foreign countries" (1976-77: 662). Rather, it was Vietnam's different historical and social conditions at the time, especially the immense need for specialists to serve the construction of the Northern region while fighting for the country's unification. In pointing out why Vietnam decided to continue the disciplinary curriculum, Prime Minister Pham Van Dong made it clear in 1973 that a "regular" and "contemporary" school system required "discipline" and "hierarchy," in which "teachers are teachers, pupils are pupils," and in which even the spirit of valuing graduation honors and the various ranks of university teachers had a necessary and "positive" side, which could not be dealt with in a "mechanical way" (cited in Woodside 1976-77: 659).

Few records were left of higher education in South Vietnam, 1955-1975, partly because after the country was unified, all education was aligned with the Soviet model applied in the North. However, the influence of the American system was evident. The pragmatic ethos of American culture was reflected in the integration of theoretical and practical knowledge in the credit-based curriculum used in South Vietnamese universities. More research is needed to evaluate the extent of academic freedom and autonomy in this period. It is difficult, if not impossible, to compare the core values of academic freedom or autonomy in the Western tradition to what constituted the Vietnamese university. Diverse cultural and educational patterns shaped the Vietnamese university, including Confucianism, colonialism, and socialism, on the one side, and Vietnamese ideas of their own practical needs, on the other. While the identity of the Vietnamese university remains an open question, it is increasingly evident that neo-liberalism is another factor that now influences the course of its development. The neo-liberal discourse appeared in Vietnam as the country experimented with a market-based economy.

#### THE VIETNAMESE UNIVERSITY AND MARKETIZATION

In the early 1980s, following unification in 1975, Vietnam was still closed to the outside world, while its centrally-planned economy was in a severe crisis. At the time, the Soviet Union was on the brink of collapse. In response to the Communist Party's call for a comprehensive reform, the Vietnamese government undertook *Doi moi* (sweeping economic renovation) in 1986, steering the country toward a market-oriented economy to pursue the goal of modernization and industrialization (Hayden & Lam 2007). Unlike most former communist states in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, the Vietnamese government did not want to become a capitalist market economy, but chose instead to follow a socialist-oriented market economy, in which the role of the Leninist Party-state holds sway (Gou cited in Dang 2009).

Since *Doi moi*, the economy and living standard of the Vietnamese people have improved significantly, with increases in GDP and annual economic growth rates, a reduction in poverty and, especially, a boost in export income (Hayden & Lam 2007). Central to this reconstruction was a reform of higher education, which was transformed to "satisfy the increasingly diverse demands of various sectors of the new economy, and to prepare competent human resources for the nation's industrialization, modernization

and global integration” (Ngo 2006: 231). Higher education development in Vietnam has always received special attention by the Vietnamese government. Particularly, the public university is considered a public good, funded by the state. However, as the socio-political context changes, both nationally and internationally, the university’s status as a public good is increasingly challenged by neo-liberal discourse.

The whole process was set in motion in the early 1990s, when the government was under pressure from the World Bank to alleviate poverty through human resource development. Higher education reform became one of the prescriptions by the World Bank, whose ideology reflects neo-liberalism (Spring 2009). In fact, there was already an internal need for higher education reform in Vietnam. But, as Que Ahn Dang (2009) shows, the World Bank, with its large funds, low interest loans, and “political technologies” (evidence-based reports, networking, meetings, conferences, dialogues with Vietnamese academics and policy makers), without any need for explicit and coercive actions, sought to change the mindset and ideology of educational leaders in Vietnam, toward an acceptance of its technocratic initiatives. The extent of the Vietnamese government’s “acceptance” of World Bank prescriptions remains an open question, but the landscape of higher education shows the influence of neo-liberal thinking.

A clear sign of change in Vietnamese higher education is the rapid differentiation of the kinds of universities due to a limited state budget, and increased student enrollments to meet the human resource need. From 1.54 percent in 1992, total gross enrollments in tertiary education increased to 8.56 percent in 2001 (Tran & Nguyen 2011). While the government commits to financially supporting the public university on an annual basis, the state budget of a low-income country burdened with external debts and tied loans from international aid has failed to cope with the dramatic expansion of higher education (Pham & Fry 2004). Consequently, as the public university no longer enjoys a monopoly in providing higher education, numerous other non-public institutions, ranging from small, private to people-founded and semi-public universities, and other vocational or business training institutes, attract students on a competitive basis. Notably, in 2005, the government adopted a Resolution which requires a “substantial and comprehensive renewal of Vietnam’s tertiary education in the 2006-2020 period.” Besides the call for increased privatization as a solution for higher education expansion, the Resolution also proposed that “public higher education institutions should

regulate their own revenue and expenditure, and diversify their income streams by engaging in the sale of contract services and the commercialization of technological developments” (Hayden & Lam 2007: 79). It is not difficult to recognize market ideology in this document concerning higher education.

A second important trend is the introduction of corporate rationality into the university. According to Schugurensky, corporate rationality is manifest in “the growth of a distinct administrative class, including specialist public relations, fund-raising, and marketing” (in Rhoads & Torres 2006: 308). This administrative class usually enjoys much higher incomes than the faculty. In Vietnam, although there is a lack of research on this issue, observations in the media show incidences of unequal pay between faculty and administrative staff. For example, an online newspaper reports a case in which the head of the Foreign Relations department of a university was paid 86 million Vietnam dong—ca. 15 times higher than a lecturer (*Vietnamnet*, 22 December 2009). This issue has raised a wave of resentment and concern in the academic community and the public.

There is also a flourishing of instrumental education offered by Vietnamese universities due to the escalation of economic globalization. Educational instrumentalism is understood as “the ways in which academic majors and programs that directly affect the economy and that lead to specific careers within the economic sectors are increasingly elevated over other fields of study” (Rhoads & Torres 2006: 337). More and more Vietnamese students tend to choose majors that are promising and profitable in the labor market, such as Information Technology, Business Administration or Banking. In fact, the number of students rushing to such majors has outnumbered those studying social sciences and humanities to the extent that tuition fees applied to the former are significantly higher in the 2009-10 academic year.

Educational instrumentalism is also manifest in the reform of the university curriculum. In 2005, the Higher Education Reform Agenda (HERA) was approved by Vietnam’s government for a comprehensive reform of the higher education system by 2020 in terms of governance, privatization, expansion, funding and, most important, curriculum restructuring. In part, this plan was in response to an unfounded but widely held opinion that universities face a quality crisis, offering outdated and overly theoretical curricula which do not produce qualified graduates who can deal readily with practical workplace problems. Such claims are predicated on the assumptions that the

chief role of the university is to meet economic needs, and that knowledge that is not contextual, practical, and oriented toward problem-solving is deemed irrelevant and useless. The HERA aimed at a curriculum responsive to the needs of society, in which learners are expected to gain relevant workplace knowledge and skills, empowered to be flexible, competent, and employable in various professional contexts and, especially, equipped with learning and know-how as life-long learners in a knowledge economy aligned with globalization.

Another significant trend is the imposition (or increase) of so-called "customer fees." Since Vietnam is a socialist country, people expect that education should be heavily subsidized by the state and, thus, tuition fees for university should be only a negligible issue. However, many people, especially the poor or those living in rural areas, are concerned about a recent document, "The Proposal for Educational Finance Reform for 2009-2014," introduced by the Ministry of Education and Training, and approved by the government for further consensus in the Parliament. The aim of this Proposal is to increase tuition fees for all levels of education, with higher education fees showing a significant rise. To defend this idea, the Ministry argues that an increase in tuition fees is justified because the state budget is now seriously limited in coping with the expansion of higher education, though the country's GDP has improved much in recent years. While promising also to strengthen the current student loan scheme to aid poor learners, there has been severe criticism by the public and intellectuals accusing educational officials of blatantly committing to the commodification of knowledge. In sum, the trend of commodification of knowledge in Vietnam has led to business ascendancy in higher education. Thus, neo-liberal discourse challenges the survival of the public university embracing values other than economic benefits.

## CONCLUSION

This essay has sought to explore how neo-liberal globalization has radically altered the university from a public good and its "emancipatory elements" into a commodity through the medium of the market. Unintended consequences abound concerning the quality of teaching and research, such as the profit motive that could result in a decline in the quality of academic research and teaching, unequal pay among academic staff, and the problem of increased tuition fees that could further widen the gap between rich and poor. Universities in developing countries like Vietnam, however, face additional

challenges due to the heritage of colonialism and a long war-torn period. Some, like Altbach (2008), argue that contemporary Western-based universities in post-colonial states tend to downplay indigenous intellectual traditions, and thus may impede positive development. Similarly, some African scholars urge "Africanizing" their university, an outlook that reflects a one-way dimension: Africa and the West. By accusing the West of acculturating African university students, Ali Mazrui and others advocate an indigenous university model. Yet, it is doubtful whether a pure "African" university could help Africa improve the life of their people as expected. History shows disastrous consequences when the struggle for cultural authenticity is carried to extremes, such as the Cultural Revolution in China.

It is, then, not the issue of East or West, Confucianism or Enlightenment, Islam or Christianity, that matters in thinking about the idea of a university for a country. It is the ideas, and not where they originate, that are important. Hence, it would be better if we learn positive elements from others, and incorporate them into our own thinking. The important thing is, first, on what basis can we agree that certain elements from others are positive? And, second, how can we incorporate such elements into our context? For example, in considering to what extent academic freedom and autonomy are desirable for a university in Vietnam in the current state of higher education, it is necessary to contemplate where the Vietnamese university is now, its conditions (both constraints and opportunities) in relation to its purpose. Again, there is a need to question the current purpose of the university. It seems that the Vietnamese university was always meant to be a means for solving political and economic problems at the expense of social issues, considering the diverse ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds of the population.

The dominant thinking among Vietnamese education leaders today is that the decline in the labor workforce is due to the quality of education, especially higher education. Various efforts have been attempted so far to "reform" the system, gearing it to economic purpose even stronger than before, but they never paused for a moment to question the idea of a university itself. One wonders about the consequences if such a trend continues in Vietnam. To anticipate this, in part, there is a need to look at such systems as in Japan, Singapore, and China. They share some cultural and historical aspects, their universities also experienced marketization in higher education before Vietnam, but what actions they took, what lessons they gained, and

what losses they suffered, might be important for Vietnam. The lessons concerning the purpose of the university in these countries are also valuable. The case of the Vietnamese university is interesting in that its history illustrates the complex interplay of diverse cultural and educational patterns, as well as various external influences and interests. It is worth examining and conceptualizing what kind of an institution was shaped by such intricate value complexes, as well as its potential trajectory of development.

Looking beyond the Asian context, it seems that universities elsewhere in the world, not necessarily in Europe or the Anglophone countries, are also struggling for their identity in modern society, and such values as academic freedom, autonomy, and the question of the purpose of the university in relation to the state and society, and human development, need to be addressed. Such concepts, like other concepts in human knowledge, are a product of history and history is socially constructed, and it is this sociality that gives them objectivity. They are not absolute truth, but they have asserted themselves through the course of history in giving people more decent options to live and engage in society, and therefore need to be embraced as positive elements. Thus, a university with academic freedom and autonomy is more desirable than one without, or one which subordinates such values to political and economic interests.

There is a consensus that the university plays a crucial role in the economy and the future of a country. If this is true, then the idea that investment in higher education is unproductive is nonsense. Besides, if the university is not a place where young people can enjoy opportunities for intellectual development, and critical reflection about themselves and their society (both their country and the world at large), then where and when can they do that?

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