

Comments on the U.S.-Vietnam Education Task Force Final Report

The U.S.-Vietnam Education Task Force was organized on the U.S. side by the Department of State and on the Vietnamese side by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET). On 30 September 2009 the Task Force released their *Final Report*. Its recommendations are based on the reports of six "advisory groups", which comprise the second half of the 55-page *Final Report*. The most important is Advisory Group 1, whose task was to write a "Roadmap to Establishing an American-Style University in Vietnam". The American co-chair of Advisory Group 1 was Thomas Vallely.

The planned American-style university has the following characteristics:

1. It will cost Vietnam at least USD 100 million, probably much more.
2. It will be what Vallely calls a "research college", where the term "college" (rather than "university") is used to indicate that it will be a "college serving undergraduates" and (at least initially) will have no post-graduate programs. It should be noted that the term "research college" is not a term used in the U.S. In fact, the term is self-contradictory, since research institutions need post-graduate programs in order to thrive, as everyone knows.
3. It will be run for a ten year period by U.S. administrators. (This is one reason for the very high cost.)
4. It will "follow an American curriculum, American teaching style, and have American management." (What does "American teaching style" mean? Anyone with any sense knows that there is no such thing.)
5. It will "create incentives to attract American faculty, which will be the lifeblood" of the college.
6. It will not have a focus on basic science. (This is not stated directly, but it is clear from other parts of the proposal.)
7. It will not have a focus on the humanities either.
8. It will be a center for the spread of U.S. influence, training a cadre of young people who are steeped in U.S.-based neoliberal privatization ideology and are subservient to U.S. political and corporate interests. (This also is not stated directly, but it is clear.)

The American advisers are using a time-honored marketing technique called bait and switch. The Ash/Fulbright report spoke of an "apex university" and hooked MOET with the promise of a prestigious world-class research university. But what the American group will actually deliver is far less than the seductive promise. The American-style college described in the Task Force report in most respects will function like a trade school -- like Saigon Tech and Houston Community College in Ho Chi Minh City and the Thang Long University in Hanoi -- with two important differences. In the first place, the American-style college will be financed primarily not by student tuition but by the World Bank loan of USD 400 million; it will be housed in expensive new buildings with luxurious facilities and PowerPoint-ready classrooms; and it will be run by high-paid American administrators. In the second place, through its programs in economics, social "science", and political "science" the American-style college will have a heavy component of ideological indoctrination, aimed at furthering a neocolonial agenda.

The five American members of the Task Force are Robert Berdahl (former chancellor of U.C. Berkeley, currently president of the American Association of Universities), F. Beccali-Falco (president and CEO of GE International), Craig Barrett (chairman of the board of Intel), Kristina Johnson (provost of The Johns Hopkins University), and Bob Kerrey (formerly a U.S. senator and currently president of The New

School). In addition, the U.S. ambassador to Vietnam and two State Department officials are ex-officio members; each Task Force member has an assistant member from the same organization; and each of the six advisory groups has an American co-chair.

In its analysis and recommendations the Task Force's *Final Report* closely follows the Ash/Fulbright report, which I responded to in Part II of my "Second Opinion" article. I will not repeat the points that I made there. It is no surprise that much of the Task Force report essentially repeats what was in the Ash/Fulbright report: some of the same people -- such as Bob Kerrey and Thomas Vallely -- played key roles in the writing of both documents.

Like the Ash/Fulbright report, the *Final Report* emphasizes what its "Executive Summary" calls "the pressing need for... fundamental changes in governance". In fact, the main reason Vallely's advisory group gives for "stewarding a new Vietnamese institution rather than strengthening an existing one" is that in the latter case the Americans would not be likely to have "sufficient freedom of action...to overhaul governance". According to the section titled "Recommendations in Key Areas", the needed governance structure for the new "research college" will be ensured by "administrative and managerial stewardship" by Americans. The *Final Report*, just like the earlier U.S. National Academies report and the Ash/Fulbright report, implicitly defines good governance as imitation of the administrative structures of U.S. universities.

Those of us who are not looking at American higher education through rose-colored glasses have to question whether U.S. universities provide a model of exemplary governance that should be imitated by other countries. Compared to most other countries, American higher education is weighted down by a cumbersome, top-heavy, and very expensive bureaucracy. The vast number of unnecessary and overpaid vice-presidents, deans, associate deans, assistant deans, associate provosts, assistant provosts, and so on are a major drain on finances. There is also corruption on a significant scale -- falsification of credentials, acceptance of gifts in exchange for exclusive access to students' business (e.g., by companies that arrange study/travel abroad), favoritism in exchange for sexual favors -- and the cases that make it into the press are only the tip of the iceberg. Finally, there is the problem of just plain incompetence.

As an example of university governance in the U.S., let's look at the one American Task Force member who himself is a university president. Bob Kerrey has been president of The New School since 2001. According to his Wikipedia entry, Kerrey's tenure at the university has included opposing the adjunct faculty (almost leading to a strike in 2005), running through five provosts during eight years, and in December 2008 receiving a vote of no confidence from the university's senior faculty. The latter vote was a "response to his management style... his inability to reconcile with the academic nature of a University." Major student protests against Kerrey erupted the same month and again in April 2009. Thus, Kerrey's presidency of The New School has not exactly been a great success. The Wikipedia article also comments that "the Board of Trustees, themselves under fire from the students for questionable investment of school money and connections to the defense industry, have thus far stood by Kerrey." In view of the American advisers' attitude of smug superiority on the issue of university governance, it is ironical that the university president in their group, Bob Kerrey, exemplifies not good governance, but poor governance according to the opinions of student protestors and the majority of senior faculty at his university.

It seems to me that the condescending tone in the Ash/Fulbright and Task Force reports on the question of university governance in Vietnam and the generous offer of "administrative and managerial stewardship" by Americans (at the cost of a big chunk of Vietnam's USD 400 million World Bank loan) would make a lot more sense if our own universities in the U.S. were run more efficiently and competently.

Finally, none of the reports that I've critiqued -- not the U.S. National Academies, Vallely, Ash/Fulbright, or Task Force reports -- has a word to say about gender equity. Many Vietnamese understand the importance of increasing female participation in university life and scientific research. On 8 March 2010 (International Women's Day) Ann and I will be in Hanoi for a celebration of 25 years of the Kovalevskaia Prizes for women scientists. The event will be presided over by Nguyen Thi Binh (former Vice-President of Vietnam), and many dignitaries as well as former prizewinners and young women will attend.

Despite some progress in this area -- and the recent passage of a comprehensive Law on Gender Equality -- the status of women in the academic and scientific professions in Vietnam is far from equal. Many international observers -- including even the World Bank in its 2000 report *Higher Education in Developing Countries: Peril and Promise* -- have noted that a country cannot realize its intellectual and scientific potential unless it gives full opportunities to its female citizens. Yet none of the American advisers saw fit to comment on this, and none of their recommendations address this pressing need.

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[Back to main webpage](#)