

Higher Education Controversy in Vietnam

My involvement in the current controversy about higher education reform in Vietnam started in December 2007, when the director of the Hanoi Math Institute, Prof. Ngo Viet Trung, told me about a program that had recently been started by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET). MOET was going to pay for American professors to come to Vietnam to show how to teach undergraduate courses. Both Trung and I thought that the money would be much better spent on improving salaries and conditions for Vietnamese professors. In addition, the worshipful attitude toward American education by some MOET officials seemed to me to be naive and foolish.

At Trung's urging, my wife Ann and I met with two MOET officials to explain our objections to the misuse of Vietnamese money. But we were unable to convince them of our viewpoint. At the meeting they gave us copies of a report that had recently been produced by a visiting delegation from the U.S. National Academies. That report is available online [in English](#) and [in Vietnamese](#).

Shortly after, I wrote a critique of the U.S. National Academies report, which was published in the *Kovalevskaja Fund Newsletter*. See [here](#) for the English, and [here](#) for the Vietnamese translation by my colleague Le Minh Ha, who is a mathematician at Vietnam National University (VNU) in Hanoi.

In August 2009 I read an article that struck me as even more arrogant and ill-informed than the report by the U.S. National Academies. It was written by two officials of the Fulbright program in Vietnam, Thomas Valley and Ben Wilkinson (both also affiliated with the Ash Institute of Harvard's Kennedy School). Their article can be found [here](#). A translation of the Valley-Wilkinson piece appeared in the popular newspaper Tuoi Tre. On October 3, I finished writing a response to this article, titled *A Second Opinion by an American on Higher Education Reform in Vietnam*. Le Minh Ha's [translation](#) of my article into Vietnamese became available about a week later.

The Vietnamese translation of my article was widely circulated in Vietnam and was posted on both Vietnamnet and the MOET website. The reactions varied tremendously. I received several emails expressing enthusiastic agreement and a number of requests for interviews; an interview with BBC Vietnamese can be found [here](#). I also received a few hostile emails (including a short one from Ben Wilkinson).

Wilkinson also sent me a longer [report](#) by him and some other people associated with the Ash Institute, The New School, and the U.S. State Department's Fulbright program. In response to that 64-page report I wrote a [Part II](#) of my article; a Vietnamese translation can be found [here](#).

The most surprising reaction to my "Second Opinion" article took the form of a telephone call from Hanoi to our home in Seattle on Saturday, October 17. It was from [Nguyen Thien Nhan](#), who is the Minister of Education and Training and also a Deputy Prime Minister. He thanked me profusely for my article, and said he would like to meet me during his forthcoming visit to the U.S. What he seemed to like most about my article was the refutation of the Valley report's intemperate and exaggerated criticisms of the educational system in Vietnam and my explanation of the lack of qualifications of the two Fulbright representatives who wrote that report. Despite Nhan's warm words about my article, I cannot believe that he liked everything in it; in particular, it strongly opposed his own policy of spending Vietnamese government money to construct new universities. Nevertheless, my commentaries on both the U.S. National Academies report and the Valley report are, interestingly enough, posted on the MOET website.

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