



### Vietnam-Netherlands Higher Education project e-Newsletter



#### In this issue:

Editorial	2
1. Progress calendar	3
- Profed Workplan session	
- Seminar on Quality Management	
- Profqim final missions	
- Student's feedback meeting	
2. Interview	8
Guest interviewee: Prof. Jim Cobbe, international educational expert	
3. What's coming up next?	12



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## 2. INTERVIEW

### Interview with Jim Cobbe, Professor of Economics, The Florida State University, USA

#### 1 Can you describe briefly the scope and type of the higher education projects you worked on in Vietnam?



I was a Fulbright grantee at Đại Học Kinh Tế Đà Nẵng (Danang University of Economics). I taught introductory economics, on an English-language program alone and together with a Vietnamese colleague for the regular business administration first degree. However, circumstances did lead me to take a lot of interest in issues of administration and finance of higher education in Viet Nam, and somewhat to my surprise my views and opinions on those topics seemed to be of interest to people. I presented two-day workshops for University administrators and academics in both Ho Chi Minh City and Ha Noi on “Resources Allocation and Financial Management at the University,” which were both quite well attended (about 60 participants in HCMC and 40 in Ha Noi). I also presented papers, on “Matching Academic Programs to Market Demand” at a meeting in Đà Nẵng, and on “Implications of the Globalization Process for the Challenges facing Vietnamese

Education: An Economic Perspective,” at a conference in Ho Chi Minh City. In addition, three Fulbright colleagues and I were all sufficiently concerned about the manner in which the credit system was being introduced in Vietnamese universities that we drafted short papers on various aspects of it, versions of which I believe will be published soon (perhaps November?) in the MoET’s Vietnamese language Education Review. I also acted as a consultant to Vietnam National University (Hanoi) on the economics portions of their American Studies curriculum and to the Faculty of Education of VNU in Ho Chi Minh City on the economics of education, and attended a national meeting on American Studies in Ho Chi Minh City. Lastly, I assisted a number of colleagues at Đại Học Kinh Tế Đà Nẵng on issues concerning research and project proposals and curriculum.

#### 2 How would you anticipate the developments of Vietnamese Higher Education (HE) in Vietnam, with regards to: The challenge to improve quality and extending the HE system in Vietnam at the same time; The methods of teaching and quality and relevancy of the study programs; Lecturers and professional development; Governance and management restructuring ?

What will happen depends very much on what reforms are made, and when, with respect to finance, internal administration and governance, and quality control. Very substantial reform is needed in all three of those areas, and they are very inter-related, so that change in some that is not coordinated with change in others could have counter-productive effects. Fundamentally, the biggest current problem is the level of remuneration of academic staff and the incentive structure they face. In the public sector, academic staff do not have base salaries that are competitive with the levels that competent staff of similar training can hope to obtain in the private sector of the economy (to give one example, a highly competent colleague was offered ten times his DHKTDN salary to go work for a company outside education). This situation is exacerbated by the incentive system which rewards quantity of teaching, and does not reward (in fact, tends to penalize) quality of teaching and research. The result is that many academics spend far too much time teaching (in order to obtain adequate income) to be able to do any of a good job teaching, keep current with their field, or do research. The expansion of the system over the last 15 years is admirable, and the authorities are to be congratulated at having succeeded in expanding academic staff numbers roughly in line with full time regular student numbers.

But, part-time, evening, and distance programs are largely uncontrolled and unmonitored and often of questionable quality, and have expanded too fast. Academic staff frequently do not have adequate training in the conduct of research, adequate access to resources to maintain currency and do research, and adequate knowledge of pedagogic methods. This, together with the incentive system and the inability for economic reasons of many students to access learning materials beyond what they get in the classroom, tends to perpetuate the rote 'regurgitate what the teacher said' stereotype that continues to have some basis in fact in Vietnamese universities.

## 2. INTERVIEW

The amazing thing is that so many academic staff do seem to be very well motivated, want to do a good job for their students, and make observable efforts to actually do a good job and improve course content and student learning. As with all large organizations, individuals differ but my superficial observation is that much tends to depend on the quality of management at the academic unit level and above; where leadership and management are good, quality is often as good as it can be expected to be given resource constraints and incentive systems. Where it is less good, the outcomes are less good too. But I do not have systematic evidence to back that up, it is simply a personal impression.

Somewhat similarly, the internal administrative structures of universities tend to be formally highly bureaucratic and authoritative, with commands issued down the chain, and strict 'silo' structures – no lateral communications or coordination without approval from the top. In practice, different units and institutions seem to operate in a variety of ways, some with highly participatory and cooperative systems for making actual operational decisions at unit level, and much informal consultation and communication with other units, while others are more rigid and follow the formal structures more strictly. The problem with the 'silo' structure is that it results in duplication of effort, isolated academic staff without peers to communicate with, and a less-good product delivered to students than would be possible with better usage of the same resources. What I am referring to is the tendency for each program to teach almost the entire curriculum that its own students follow, with students not taking courses from other programs that may be much better equipped to teach some of the courses. Of course, the staff of a program always think they know better than others what their students 'need,' this is a world-wide problem in universities of all kinds, but it is particularly severe in systems that still have heavy inheritances from Soviet models. The introduction of a credit system can alleviate this problem if done appropriately, but the way it has been done so far still keeps room for improvement.

My impression is that many staff in universities are interested in modernizing the curriculum, making it more relevant, improving pedagogy, and generally improving quality. However, current arrangements make all these things happen very slowly if at all, although at the same time I would say that Vietnamese universities are an extreme example of the difference between the efficient and the ceremonial, to use Bagehot's terms, or the formal and the informal, to use perhaps more familiar terms. What I mean is that one set of obstacles to change is in fact the degree of regulation from the center, with respect to all sorts of things, curriculum, workloads, remuneration, incentive schemes, promotion criteria, etc. However, in reality on the ground, my impression is that local practice often deviates from official guidelines in ways that are not generally reported.

My prediction would be that the Vietnamese universities will become more differentiated with respect to mission, sources of finance, quality of intake, and activities, and will be more honestly recognized as legitimately differing in mission and quality. I think this will tend to happen whatever reforms are actually made officially. I do not think there will be any difficulty finding places for all those who wish to go to University and have the resources to do so. In fact, my fear is the reverse – that the authorities will permit university intakes to expand too much too fast, with the result that there will be a problem of low-quality unemployed graduates on whom society will have wasted resources. But appropriate reforms could avoid that, and could raise the quality of both the education made available to undergraduate students and the quantity and quality of research and service activities performed by the universities.

The universities need more resources. Some of them should come from students and their families, by means of higher tuition and a well-organized and administered loan system, with the loans to be repaid on an income-contingent basis through the individual income tax system. Some should come through much greater but competitively-awarded funding for research of all kinds. But some more funding should come from government, at all levels – provinces and cities should be encouraged to provide supplemental finance, especially for buildings and equipment and local students, to the universities in their areas.



## 2. INTERVIEW

The internal governance and administration of universities needs to become more open and participatory. Academic staff should have a stronger formal voice in issues of appointment, promotion, and selection of their colleagues and leaders. The curriculum should be more clearly controlled by the academic staff, and systems of quality control need to be devised and implemented both internally to the university and externally and very carefully monitored and the results made public. Universities are agents for government and students and the public; therefore they must be accountable for the resources they receive and for what they do. To be accountable, there must be robust mechanisms for quality control and reporting that actually provide useful information. This implies among other things that graduates must be tracked and their success (or lack of it) traced back to what they experienced as students. But that is not enough: in ten years, a combination of income-contingent loan repayments and modern data processing has the potential to provide very compelling data on what universities do for their graduates, but that is a long time off: in the interim, the public and the government deserve some meaningful information on the content and quality of different university programs, and that implies some rating mechanism such as that used in the UK. Such quality control systems are expensive, but necessary if universities are truly to be accountable.

Professional development of academic staff needs to be taken much more seriously and systematically than it currently is. Relative to the universities' total resources, huge amounts are spent on staff development, especially through overseas study. Some of those resources need to be redirected to professional development units in the universities themselves that give academic staff, particularly the newly-hired junior academic staff, guidance and counseling and plain instruction on modern pedagogy and research methods and professional ethics and responsibilities. Too many junior staff are keen to do a good job but don't know how; staff cannot just be ordered to do this; the units must be well resourced and staffed, they should have the best teachers available, and be able to call on successful researchers, and they should offer incentives to junior staff for accessing their offerings.

The incentive systems in place for academic staff need urgently to be reformed. This implies remuneration systems that reward not only quantity but also quality, and also promotion criteria that encourage curriculum improvement, better teaching, and meaningful research. Within universities, the implementation of the credit system needs to be taken as an opportunity to think through how much flexibility the university wants in its curriculum, how much choice it wants to make available to students, and the extent to which it can eliminate duplication and encourage cooperation between separate programs. Properly done, a credit system can improve all of efficiency, flexibility, speed of adjustment of programs to changing circumstances, students' range of choice, quality, and collaboration between programs. Done badly, it is another obstacle to quality and efficiency.



## 2. INTERVIEW

**3** What would be your recommendations to the Vietnamese government to implement most effectively POHE at a national scale by 2020 (in 2020 70% of all HE students should be enrolled in Profession Oriented study programs) to match the goals of resolution 14 of the Higher Education Reform Agenda?

If the rationale is correct – that the national economy will be best supported if 70% of HE students are in such programs – then it will be achieved indirectly if the programs are there with adequate capacity, students are given freedom to choose, reliable information is available to students and wages and salaries are appropriate. In other words, I would say that students will vote with their feet and the target will be achieved, if the target is correct, students are given access to reliable information and the freedom to choose their programs, the universities have the capacity and flexibility to respond, and the labour market is reasonably free. Forcing the result by quotas would almost certainly be an error, and a costly one.

**4** Reflecting on your experience at Danang University of Economics, what did you learn the most from your students/colleagues?

Early in my career I taught at a small university in Africa for four years. We taught in poorly equipped classrooms with blackboards and chalk. Looking back on it, many of our students were extremely successful. So I was reminded that at least in economics, a poorly equipped overcrowded classroom with a blackboard and chalk is all you need as a university instructor; well-motivated students can and will learn as much if not more under those circumstances as pampered students in high-income countries learn in high-tech classrooms with web-based homework between classes. I learnt once again that by far the most important input into student learning is the time and effort of the *student*, and neither the environment nor the qualifications of the instructor matter all that much. I learnt that in fields like economics and business, and doubtless the natural sciences, internet access is absolutely essential to be able to stay current, and is much higher priority for students than textbooks are. I learnt that in such fields, libraries as such are not important any more, but recent textbooks available to staff are very important, so they can know what is being taught in high-income countries. And I learnt that even when nobody has much of an income or any real spare time, good colleagues can be collegial and have a very good time together whenever there is a half-way decent excuse for a party!

