

## Exploring the Vietnamese Approach to Education for Sustainable Development

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**Abstract:** This paper first looks at major opportunities and challenges – internal and external – posed by the forces of globalization that are facing Vietnam’s approach to education reforms. Starting with the view that the background of internationalization of education has become more evident, inclining the country to develop an “outward-looking education,” it identifies new EfS pattern and trend which appear emerging in the country by investigating contemporary reforms at upper secondary and beyond levels. With the rising tide of public demand on a qualified and competitive education, Vietnam has made remarkable progress in its socialization of education strategy which preliminary fruitfulness characterized by the proliferation of private educational institutions and a rapid shift away from liberal-arts education toward lucrative career-oriented education. The paper also sheds new light on approach to EfS in developing countries where transformative learning process now tends to target at equipping learners with the new practice-based knowledge and skills to achieve economic prosperity in a globally-competitive epoch. It further makes a significant theoretical contribution to the research field of EfS by proposing the concept of “job-hunting first approach” as the key to understanding contemporary education reforms launched by developing countries such as Vietnam.

**Keywords:** Education for sustainable development; Vietnam education reforms; international standards; Vietnam higher education; education policy

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### I. INTRODUCTION

The last decade has witnessed the strong economic growth and increasingly global integration in Vietnam. The country remains determined to move forward with ambitious plans to attract foreign investment, creating new industries and putting in the necessary infrastructure to continue its economic development. Having experienced a “golden population structure”<sup>1</sup>, it’s crucial for Vietnam to develop a well-trained labor force, which needs to be equipped with scientific, technological, and management skills.

As new industries expand, a university degree is definitely indispensable for young Vietnamese workers searching for higher paying jobs in newly emerging industries. However, the government has acknowledged that the current education system is unable to meet demand. According to the Vietnamese state media, every year there is as many as 90 percent of students in Vietnam want to enroll in a university (Minh Duong 2016). Yet, opportunities for higher education, in practice, are limited since the system can accommodate only a fraction of those seeking admission although the number of university students has doubled since 1990<sup>2</sup>.

More challenging is the fact that Vietnamese universities are not producing the educated workforce that Vietnam’s economy and society demand. Survey conducted in 2011 by the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) has found that a large percentage of university graduates often cannot find jobs in their area of specialization and many must have further on-the-job training courses in order to be useful in the workplace (Kim Ngan 2012). This sad situation demonstrates the disconnection between classroom and the needs of the market is large, thus, highlighting a need for a more practical and effective education for students in the country.

Furthermore, the failings of the Vietnamese education system remain unsettled, highlighted by left-behind curricula, teacher-centered “chalk and talk” method, and a pedagogical philosophy that stresses abstract concepts rather than practical and soft skills at all levels (Horn 2014; Ngoc 2016). As a result, the decades-long relentless educational reforms have failed to turn Vietnamese youth into a competitive work force in the region.

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<sup>1</sup> More than 50 percent of Vietnam’s population is under the age of 30. This means that for every two people working, there is only one dependent person.

<sup>2</sup> Special Report for the Education Minister’s presentation at the High Value Education Forum hosted by the Vietnam Consulate General (SF) in San Francisco, November 16, 2009.

Given such a dire situation, MOET has mobilized to launch a series of education reforms in terms of governance systems, curriculum, mission focus, external relations, research, and financing (Viet 2009:218; Thuy Linh 2015). As a result, the last two decades have seen a rapid change in the education system. However, in countries such as Vietnam where the government exercises tight control over social and economic development strategies, wide scale changes to an education system are often complex and difficult. In response to Vietnam's transition to a socialist-oriented market economy, educational policy planners have had to consider strategies for making the education system more responsive to current and future labour demands. Yet, it still remains unable to meet the demands of industrialization, modernization, international integration and the learning needs of the people (Khanh and Kham 2013; VOV News 2017). So, what are the major obstacles and challenges causing the underperforming education in Vietnam? Do the current waves of globalization offer any opportunities for the country to reform and modernize its education system? How has the Vietnamese approach to education reforms changed under the forces of international integration, especially since the country became official member of international organizations? And to what degree does the approach fit into the national development strategies and regional integration needs?

This paper first outlines some prominent opportunities and challenges – both internal and external – confronting Vietnam in its transforming education. It then identifies and examines the country's approach to education reforms in recent years which is characterized by three major features – (i) outward-looking education, (ii) socialization of education, and (iii) job-hunting first approach. The paper concludes with a discussion on how education reform can be guided by practice-based approaches in developing countries such as Vietnam.

## **II. TRANSFORMING EDUCATION IN VIETNAM: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES**

### **2.1 Dynamics and promises for education reforms**

Under the forces of neo-liberal globalization and deeper regional integration, Vietnam education appears more receptive and innovative to the global education. Internal institutional and policy reforms, years-long sustained economic growth followed by expanding middle-class, and increased inflows of foreign investment all have resulted in dynamics and opportunities to promote innovating education in Vietnam.

First, since the country is entering an epoch of modernization and industrialization, global economic integration creates a constant stream of new, highly specialized jobs. To create a workforce capable of supporting a different type of economy, improving the education system is absolutely necessary (Daniel and Chia-Ling 2013:480). Faced with such a context, Vietnam has propelled education to the top of the government's agenda<sup>3</sup>, while the number of skilled labors is also deemed by the government as “the vital weapon” to increasing national competitiveness and bolstering investment. Thus, education is one of the nation's top priorities, enabling the MOET to allocate greater central funds to facilitate education innovation efforts.

Second, the booming middle-class population and a young labor market, whose educational demands vary and increase to meet diverse job-hunting needs, are driving factors inspiring and boosting practice-based education reforms in Vietnam. Since strong economic growth continues and disposable incomes grow ever faster, many families – from rural to urban areas – now are able to afford private tutoring and education needs outside of the limited education services in state-funded schools. Furthermore, in recent years individuals and civil society groups have played their part in education development through their proactive investment and engagement in semi-public and private education sectors (AUCV 2013; Xuan Trung 2014; The Nam and Manh Thang 2016). Given the proliferation of these non-public educational institutions, the general education has witnessed profound changes, turning from a highly centralized educational institution to a socialized one where the pressure to compete against one another has led both public and private schools to improve their academic quality, governance capacity, and facilities (Daniel and Chia-Ling 2013:480; Horn 2014).

The third promise comes from the overseas Vietnamese, or “Viet Kieu.” The country's education has long been supported, in terms of financial and human resources, by the Vietnamese diasporas predominantly living in the U.S., and other countries that experience the world's best educations such as Australia, France, Canada and Russia. As part of the national conciliation policy, the communist government has opened door wider to millions of Vietnamese exiles to return and send money back to Vietnam. According to data released from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, since 2000 onward some \$US 6-8 billions (about 8% of the country's GDP) have been sent to Vietnam each year to sponsor education and healthcare, expand businesses and support extended families. These capital flows have significantly contributed to improving the standard of living, and the remitters now tend to devote their funds to education development through

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<sup>3</sup> Education development is listed among the top seven foreign investment promotion categories in Vietnam.

multimillion-dollar school-building projects and sustaining private universities whose owners primarily are, or backed by, “Viet Kieu” (Viet Nam News 2015).

In addition, it’s worth noting that not only do the overseas Vietnamese communities contribute to the country’s development through remittance flows, but many of the 1975 Vietnamese refugees, who are now being recognized professors at world-class institutes, and their well-educated children have been involving in instruction and management tasks at universities in Vietnam. Some have also played key roles in connecting the world’s think tanks and educators with those in Vietnam, while some others have engaged in the country’s educational policymaking (Vietnam News Agency 2016; Wang and Ji 2016).

Another positive prospect is the emerging internationalization of education trends. “Open door” means an inevitable reception to tsunami of culture and education, among other things, pervaded from the West and other dominant societies. The increasing diffusion and penetration of dominant educations into less-developed ones, on the one hand, are likely to bring more opportunities than threats – even though the threats in turn may challenge, and thus, induce the backward educations to change and develop. On the other hand, regular exchange and inter-state collaboration in today’s globalized education appear to substantially narrow academic gaps between different educations in over the world.

In this respect, Vietnam is a natural hotspot for education integration. Like Singapore, Vietnam’s geographic position uniquely motivates it to support adequate approaches to education development as both a labor-intensive economy and as a potential dynamic market for international education-related services. More and more wealthy families in major cities such as Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, and billionaire farmers in rural areas are seeking to enhance their children’s education so they may obtain skills which meet the ever increasing demands of the labor market. Thus, foreign universities and private schools with state-of-the-art facilities and world-class teaching quality are being seen as the most effective means of obtaining a leg up for their children, especially when the competition for places at top educational institutions grows ever fiercer (Lewellyn-Jones 2016; Stanley 2017).

In recent years, foreign direct investment in education has begun to increase in Vietnam. Most of foreign-invested education entities are keen on investment in the language prep market, prep schools, and joint-venture universities, etc. At higher education level, Vietnam also has established four universities of excellence and four other 100-percent foreign-owned universities.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, joint-venture international schools at general education level<sup>5</sup> started to mushroom as late as 2005. Some outstanding competitors include Vietnamese-American School system, Asia Pacific College system, and Vietnam-Australia International School system, etc. with tens of centers in big cities. Given the traditional notion that non-public schools are less reputable than those state-run, the private education providers have employed long term investment strategies to attract students and the Vietnamese public. Their strategies appear different from one another, but basically emphasize learning and teaching quality and more focus on having strong teacher training systems, comfortable learning environments with enough modern facilities and low student-teacher ratios.

## **2.2 Vietnam education reforms: Well begun and unsettled challenges**

Vietnam has made remarkable progress in education reforms since the first official renovation of general education curricula started in 2000.<sup>6</sup> After years of piloting, debate and modifications to reach a final decision, from academic year 2006-2007, the new streamed curricula and textbooks have been introduced and used for teaching and learning in all grades at general education level. Since then, several more separate renovations have been undertaken by the MOET to revise the curricula and textbooks. Basically, the 2000 renovation of the general education curricula was viewed to meet the objectives and requirements of educational content and methodology prescribed in the Education Law (World Bank undated).<sup>7</sup> By 2016, the renovation has

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<sup>4</sup> Since 2008, four universities of excellence were established by the Vietnamese government under the supports of four countries: Vietnamese-German University, Vietnam-France University, Vietnam-Japan University, and Vietnam-UK University. Other four foreign-owned universities include RMIT, British University Vietnam, Tokyo Medical University and Fulbright University Vietnam.

<sup>5</sup> General education in Vietnam consists of 3 levels: primary, lower secondary and upper secondary (or high school).

<sup>6</sup> Historically, this is the fourth general education reform in Vietnam dating back to 1945 at national level: the first education reform in 1950, the second in 1956, and the third in 1979 (Thu Hien 2013).

<sup>7</sup> According to a report on Vietnam education by World Bank in 2006, the revised curricula has “improved consistency in learning, and has also facilitated continuation and development among levels; it has enhanced linkages across general, vocational and higher education; and provided the basis for creating pathways in the national education system. The revised curricula have made for better harmonization between a subject’s content and the teaching/learning methodology, and it has improved links between curriculum/textbook and teaching equipment. It has strengthened practical components and lightened theoretical elements; and

achieved some encouraging outcomes: right at its first participation in the OECD-organized Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2012, Vietnam's 15 year-olds, ranked 17<sup>th</sup> in maths and 19<sup>th</sup> in reading, performed on par with their peers in Germany and Austria and better than those in two thirds of participating countries that are much more wealthier than Vietnam such as the United States, Australia, and other OECD member states. In the 2015 PISA test results, Vietnam again ranked 8<sup>th</sup> out of 72 countries in terms of its scientific performance.<sup>8</sup>

At higher education, during the period of 2006-2015 the majority of tertiary institutions, particularly public universities, have successfully refined the division of training programs into two categories of research and career application, completely shifted from old-fashioned year-based courses to a credit-based training system while institutional autonomy and accountability of all aspects have increasingly improved in accordance with the Higher Education Law. The MOET has also finalized the higher education quality assurance and accreditation system, and further reached agreements of mutual recognition of qualifications with some 16 countries.

Regarding social equity in education and equity in opportunities for access to education, the Vietnamese government has offered greater learning conditions for everyone to guarantee their learning and professional development rights. The government ensures this principle of social equity in education by strictly implementing policies on social subsidies, scholarships and fee exemptions or reductions with priorities given to ethnic minorities, children from socio-economically disadvantaged families, and people with disabilities. The government also provides financial support so that non-public schools will be able to apply fee exemption/reduction policy to their disadvantaged students (World Bank undated; PetroTimes 2016).

Despite the achievement of such encouraging progress, Vietnam however needs a further strengthening of education reforms, especially at secondary and tertiary levels, due to domestic obstacles remain unsettled and emerging challenges.

At the pre-tertiary education level, Vietnam's general education curricula still retain strongly influenced by the classical approach: various mandatory subjects, e.g. literature, history, geography, mathematics, physics, chemistry, etc., remain distinct rather than interdisciplinary – necessary for the integration of different specializations that is repeatedly expected; curriculum specialists/authors tend to impose the learning path and methods that they themselves have already experienced on present-day students; educational policy planners are also under criticism for their over-dependence on ambitious yet unrealistic educational philosophies/models while paying little attention to, or without consulting, those directly affected – the teachers, the students and their parents; and the current limitations of school management capacities and teacher qualifications appear unable to meet the requirements of any revised curriculum (World Bank undated; Horn 2014; Thuy Linh 2015).

In higher education sector, as I mentioned earlier in the introductory section, Vietnam's higher education retains ill-suited and left behind to rapid changes in society and economic development. It is difficult to overstate the seriousness of the challenges confronting Vietnam tertiary education, but the existing lack of even a single university appearing in any of the recognized league tables of leading Asian universities appears to bode well for the future that "Vietnamese universities lag far behind even their undistinguished Southeast Asian neighbors" (Vallely and Wilkinson 2008). In addition, the poor quality of tertiary education – both undergraduate and post-graduate – adds another flaw to higher education development in Vietnam (Tuoi Tre News 2014).

From the standpoints of educators and experts, the set-back of Vietnam higher education has long been caused by internal factors – historic legacy and poor governance. Particularly, due to decades-long tragic and devastating wars throughout its modern history, the war-torn country had missed the waves of institutional innovation in higher education introduced from the West during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when many regional leading tertiary institutions were established in Singapore, Thailand, and the Malay World (Vallely and Wilkinson 2008; Woo and King 2013). Furthermore, after Saigon's surrender in 1975, Hanoi strictly eliminated those educational advisors who were trained in the West and quickly became a carbon copy of its communist mentors – the Soviet and China PRC – by employing a subsidized education system characterized by teacher-delivered lectures, or factory-model schools. The bitter legacy of this educational style still runs deep in lecture halls across Vietnam, challenging the country's transforming education process.

Meanwhile, Vallely and Wilkinson (2008) in their report entitled "Vietnamese Higher Education: Crisis and Response" conclude that profound governance failure is the most immediate reason causing the poor quality of Vietnamese higher education. Many agree that the tertiary institutions lack autonomy since the

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recognized social and humanity sciences, and science and technology achievements that are appropriate to a student's cognitive abilities." (2006:21)

<sup>8</sup> Vietnam's PISA test scores from 2012-2015 can be found at <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/home/>

education system is highly centralized and completely controlled by the communist-ruled government.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, prevailing lacks of transparency in personal affairs, accountability, and meaningful international connections in most of universities are other prime culprits and intractable hurdles, denying the universities and institutes the incentive to compete or innovate. These problems also undermine the intellectual dynamism and academic freedom, and prevent Vietnam's post-secondary institutions from the mainstream of global education integration.

### **III. VIETNAM'S APPROACH TO EDUCATION REFORMS**

As a left-behind education set to shoulder the increasingly unbearable impacts of the above-mentioned historical legacy and poor governance, Vietnam has persistently made many modifications to curricula, educational perceptions, and textbooks within some 15 years (2000-2015). But, the outcomes of those reforms are allegedly modest while questions remain, challenging any educational modernization attempts. To that end, in November 2015 the MOET once again announced to launch ambitious schemes on education reform that aim to make major changes to the country's current education system (Thuy Linh 2015).

In April 2017, a new curriculum scheduled to be in place in the academic year of 2018-19 was introduced by reputable educators, curriculum planners and educational policymakers. The MOET-championed 80 million-dollar program, that is believed to attach special importance to expectations from students, parents, and the society, "seeks to thoroughly transform the country's national education by introducing a shift in educators' outlook on pedagogy" and "transforms general education from a system that provides knowledge into one that develops capacity" (Thuy Linh 2015; Tuoi Tre News 2017).

In order for the tertiary education level to keep up with the international standards, the new leadership in MOET has urged state and private post-secondary institutions to innovate and modernize in their own ways through any legal means available to them (Dan Tri News 2016; Phuong Linh 2017). The minister also commits to governance reforms, including greater academic freedom and financial autonomy and more merit-based selection mechanisms in university. As part of effort to achieve regional and international integration in education sector, the ministry is willing to actively participate in the activities led by regional and international organizations such as UNESCO, UNICEF, UNDP, and SEAMEO, etc. In addition to this, it further calls upon foreign education investors and world's leading universities to establish institutions/training programs in Vietnam, either independently or, most commonly, in partnership with Vietnamese public institutions, and other direct investments on high quality infrastructure, physical facilities and equipment (World Bank undated; Valley and Wilkinson 2008).

Given the anticipatable challenges in the coming years, Vietnam apparently has been trying to triumph over the existing adversity to improve standards of its education system. The country's enduring endeavors have constituted what may be called "the Vietnamese way of education for sustainability," which overall aims to translate the current educational style into a transformative learning process that equips students with the new knowledge, soft skills and perspectives to achieve economic prosperity at the local and international levels, pursue life-long learning and further professional development, and become responsible citizens.

The Vietnamese way is characterized by education policies and strategies that incline the national education system to be more competitive, open-minded and modernized. The following sub-sections appear to outline three strategies that shape the Vietnamese approach to modernizing education, namely: (i) outward-looking education, (ii) socialization of education, and (iii) "job-hunting first approach." These are also the core elements of the Vietnamese way of education for sustainability.

#### **3.1 Outward-looking education**

Objectively speaking, the Vietnamese academic environments have long been very inward looking and not matched any international standards. Thus, under the forces of deterritorialization, followed by regional integration in education, among other sectors, the recent education reform schemes, including the current plan, appear to deal with the existing weaknesses and mismatches. The common objectives of those renovation measures eventually focus on developing an outward-looking education system.

Specifically, in general education sub-sector, the reform plans aim to reduce pressure on students, more focusing on developing integrated elementary and lower secondary education (grades 1-9), and a differential and elective upper secondary education (grades 10-12). At pre-high school level, students are equipped with general knowledge on basic disciplines – Vietnamese literature, maths, arts and music, geography and history, and technology – to form and develop various qualities, including patriotism, charitableness, diligence and discipline, honesty and responsibility. At high school level, the 10<sup>th</sup> grade is identified as a career orientation

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<sup>9</sup> For instances, the central government determines how many students universities may enroll, and (in the case of public universities) how much university instructors are paid. The MOET strictly controls the pre-university and undergraduate curricula and determines the leadership (i.e. rector) in every public university, too.

grade with 11 compulsory courses. These courses are reduced to 6 in grades 11-12 so that students can choose electives that complement their career choices. High school students are also expected to possess and develop core competencies such as self-control and self-learning, communication and collaboration, and problem-solving and creativity.<sup>10</sup> These qualities are hoped to help students be able to live and work in the future society where different cultures meet and compete against each other.

As for the higher education, the degree to which university's actual autonomy is accorded has been increased, though slowly. Public universities are given autonomy in all aspects – training, research, international cooperation, organization and personnel and financial affairs. The MOET has expressed a willingness to gradually decentralize the education system by reducing the role of government in university operation and academic collaborations, empowering post-secondary institutions to work with the highly decentralized Western education systems.

Looking externally, the government acknowledges that overseas training of graduates provides an efficient way of transferring advanced overseas knowledge and research and development experience to Vietnam. To that end, it has offered up to 10,000 government scholarships for overseas doctoral study between 2014 and 2020 to tertiary and research institute staff through many separate scholarship schemes, notably the well-known 911 Project and other state-funded scholarship and fellowship projects such as the 599, 322, 165 and Mekong 1000 projects. The most popular education destinations for selected scholarship recipients are the U.S., U.K., Australia, China, South Korea, Germany, the Netherlands, Russia, Japan, and Taiwan, etc. It's worth observing that not only does the success of these projects and programs lie in how many western educated professionals return to work in Vietnamese tertiary institutions, but also lies in intensive collaboration with relevant organisations in overseas destination countries (Hoa 2016).<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, the current higher education reforms reveal that Vietnam plans to “outsource” higher education to foreign universities, especially from the U.S, U.K. and Australia, by fostering and actively preparing promising proposals for cooperation with those stellar institutions.<sup>12</sup> In addition, some Vietnamese universities have begun offering professionals who study abroad better working conditions and attractive incentives.

To address the underperforming education quality, the MOET issued legal grounds for quality assurance and enables universities to use quality assessment tools offered by international independent agencies such as ABET and AUN-QA. By 2016, there are about 35 advanced programs in association with 23 foreign universities and 17 high quality undergraduate engineering programs have been established in ten leading universities in Vietnam.<sup>13</sup>

Most of undergraduate curricula in public universities have been revised and updated to match lectures with employers' demand and global mainstream knowledge evolution. Concepts-stressed modules have been replaced with practice-based coursework which emphasize student capacity building, practice-based vocational skills/professional skills and life-long learning mindset. Each year thousands of undergraduate students are selected to attend advanced programs and international exchange short-term courses in other universities outside Vietnam. This contributes to increasing and enhancing student mobility which is an integral part of Vietnamese universities' internationalization thrusts.

### **3.2 Socialization of education**

Vietnam implemented policies of educational socialization in the early 1990s with cautious steps. Since then, permission was given to open private kindergartens, and semi-public and private schools at all levels, including post-secondary level. In 1994, the number of people-funded schools was limited: 5 universities and 12 lower and upper secondary schools mostly located in major cities. By 2017, the number of private universities and pre-tertiary schools reaches 60 and 37 respectively, with hundreds of centers across Vietnam, handling over 13 percent of undergraduate students and approximately 4 percent of lower and upper secondary students in school year 2015-16 (Nguyen Dung 2017).

Some joint-venture or 100-percent foreign-invested secondary schools have provided bilingual curriculums (English and Vietnamese) while foreign universities, Vietnam-German University and RMIT for

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<sup>10</sup> To meet these goals, many high schools have applied active learning methods with teachers in the role of a co-ordinator, instructing and encouraging students to take part in educational and capability-developing activities. These activities are held inside and outside of classrooms as theoretical lectures, experiments, role plays, research projects, conferences and picnics, as well as collective and community service activities.

<sup>11</sup> One example is the Vietnam Education Foundation in the United States, which has collaborated closely with the Vietnam International Education Development under the Ministry of Education and Training to increase successful higher education outcomes.

<sup>12</sup> See remarks by Prof. Bui Van Ga, Vice Minister of MOET, at Vietnam-UK Education Forum held in September 2015 in London.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*

example, offer English-spoken programs. Though non-public education services do not come cheap in Vietnam, many private and foreign institutions usually provide an international-quality education at about one third or half the cost of studying overseas. Thus, those institutions appear to become an option for the increasing number of students who either have the ability to pay or are fortunate to win a scholarship. The success story of some private and foreign universities like FPT and RMIT is expected to become a catalyst which creates a competition with the state-run universities (*see subsection 2.1*).

In this respect, the socialization of education on the one hand contributes to improving and diversifying the national education system. On the other hand, the policy represents the government's commitment to surrender its monopoly on forming the minds of young Vietnamese and appeal to both domestic and foreign private investors to help its education lift out of underdeveloped situation. The swift expanding private and foreign-funded education sub-sector further has potential to trigger a quiet yet profound race on innovation in terms of curriculum, training approach and methodology, international collaboration, and quality, between public and non-public education institutions at all levels in the near to medium term.

### **3.3 “Job-hunting first” approach**

This approach appears to cope with the existing mismatches in Vietnam higher education which result in the popular high rate of unemployment year after year (Kim Ngan 2012; Minh Duong 2016). The current education reforms plan that was made public in April 2017 is a visible example for this approach. For years, the Vietnamese educational policymakers and educators have resolved to apply career orientations in high school activities to help students finalize their choices on specialization that they will pursue at higher education institutions. Meanwhile, in universities undergraduate students are encouraged to take part in practice-based modules so that they can get used to real work when enter workplace. Multimillion-dollar technology transfer projects have been approved by the government to improve school facilities and university labs. Additionally, more and more vocational education centers and universities now tend to move closer to employers, companies and recruiters in order for them to understand and keep themselves well-informed with the latest changes in labor market. By doing so, education institutions can modify their admission requirements and training program to ensure that their students' qualities fit neatly with the society's demand.

The Vietnamese people also acknowledge that bad English proficiency skills are the biggest obstacle that prevents students from approaching international high-quality training, professional development and high-paid job opportunities. In fact, many Vietnamese graduates who have good professional knowledge are often failed in job-hunting due to limited foreign language skills and lack of negotiation skills with employers, especially those from abroad. Thus, to deal with this shortcoming, the government has approved an ambitious plan called “the National Foreign Languages Project 2020”. This \$US450 million project is hoped to enable Vietnamese youth to be more confident in communication, enhancing their chances to study and work in an integrated and multi-cultural environment. An independent survey also reveals that Vietnamese parents, especially in urban areas, enroll their children to English classes at very early ages and that the Vietnamese people spend much more time and money on learning English than many families developed countries do (Vietnamnet Daily 2016).

## **IV. CONCLUDING REMARKS**

Decades of relentless education reforms and modifications since Doi Moi have witnessed some remarkable progress and improvement in education quality and integration. The early fruitfulness of Vietnamese education reforms are resulted from dynamics and opportunities – both domestic and foreign – while “made-in-Vietnam” factors such as poor governance and historical legacy are driving factors causing the poor education quality at all levels and challenging the future development of the education system.

However, by observing the measures and policies undertaken by the Vietnamese government in the past and current reforms, this paper identifies three strategies that shape the Vietnamese way of education for sustainability. These include: the outward-looking policy which stresses international cooperation, the educational socialization policy empowering social resources to get engaged in the government's education reforms, and the “job-hunting first” approach that emphasizes the career-oriented training. They are integral elements to ensure the country's education modernization which in turn produces qualified “products” – skilled labors – to satisfy the requirements of highly-specialized jobs in today's knowledge-based economy.

As a developing country set to face increasingly fierce impacts and challenges posed by the forces of neo-liberal globalization, Vietnam apparently wants to overcome the adversity and sustain socio-economic development by boosting its education modernization attempts. This is clearly a prudent and patient policy alternative for self-help economic development strategy in poor countries such as Vietnam where the pressure to compete internationally always requires both an increase in educational efficiency and an investment environment that encourages skilled workers and the acquisition of new technology.

Accordingly, education quality is being improved and there is a rapid shift away from liberal-arts education toward lucrative career-oriented education. Educational development in this environment is no longer

constrained by how fast the liberal arts colleges could progress; instead, it is now able to target at external job markets by providing competency-based education that appear to fit neatly into the international qualification standards. In this respect, the paper sheds new light on approach to education for sustainability in developing countries where transformative learning process now tends to target at equipping learners with the new practice-based knowledge and skills to achieve economic prosperity in a globally-competitive epoch. By proposing the concept of “job-hunting first approach” as the key to understanding contemporary education reforms launched by Vietnam, the paper also elaborates how education reform can be guided by practice-based approaches in developing countries.

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