

Historical influences on Vocational Education and Training in Vietnam

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Abstract

This paper will examine the historical influences on vocational education and training (VET) in Vietnam. Although there is little research about vocational education in Vietnam, there exists substantial research on higher education (HE)¹. One significant study by Tran (1998) focuses on the historical influences on tertiary education in Vietnam and highlights how these influences were ‘vietnamised’. This paper will use Tran’s work as a framework to suggest some of the major influences on VET in Vietnam and how these influences have been ‘vietnamised’. It will contribute to a broader understanding of contemporary VET in Vietnam. This paper is a part of a larger study about theorising vocational learning in Vietnam, which investigated the pedagogical practices and historical influences on vocational learning in Vietnam and its underpinning learning theories.

Introduction

Vietnam society and indeed education has felt the deep imprint of many foreign influences. These come from over one thousand years of domination by China; over 100 years of French colonisation; 20 years of American invasion; and then Soviet support dealing with the consequences of colonialism. Much research (Hayden & Lam, 2010; Le, 2003; Tran, 1998) has been conducted on the effects of each of these historical stages on Vietnamese tertiary education. This research paper will show how VET, which is administered as a part of higher education, is also characterised by those effects. This paper firstly describes the historical influences on tertiary education in Vietnam, drawing on Tran’s work as a framework for understanding the consequences of these influences. It then presents some background about VET in Vietnam. The final part of this paper uses some preliminary findings of the larger study to postulate how historical influences impact on VET curriculum and pedagogy in Vietnam

Historical influences on tertiary education in Vietnam

Tran (1998) researched Vietnamese tertiary education in the context of French and the former Soviet Union influences. The research traced the emergence and growth of higher education institutions during the French colonial and the Soviet times. Specifically, Tran’s research investigated the French and Soviet philosophies on which have influenced tertiary education in Vietnam, examining the ways it has been influential, the degree of influence and what the French and Soviets intended to do in Vietnam in the tertiary education field. Tran found that despite the significant influences of the French and Soviets, Vietnamese universities have never been just French and Soviet implants. Instead Vietnam adapted those higher education models to serve the country’s need. Vietnam was not a passive recipient of foreign intervention. The so-called “Vietnamese factor” or “vietnamised” was equally marked

during the French and Soviet periods of colonisation. The influences on tertiary education in Vietnam are outlined below.

Chinese Influences

Welch (2010) stated that Confucianism has long exercised a significant influence on Vietnamese society, in terms of social structure and learning. In fact, Confucianism has existed in Vietnam from the eleventh century until the late nineteenth century during the period of the Chinese domination. It is seen as the foundation of Vietnam's education system (Dang, 2009). Under this strong influence, Confucianism played an active and crucial role in the development of Vietnam's educational system (P. M. Nguyen, Terlouw, & Pilot, 2005). However, this ideology and its values have been adapted and modified, resulting in the 'vietnamisation' of Confucianism, which highly valued education and intellectuals (Dang, 2009). This ideology is also reflected in the temple of literature in Vietnam, which is known as the first university, the "Quốc Tử Giám" (Imperial Academy). It was established in 1076 within the temple to educate Vietnam's bureaucrats, nobles, royalty and other members of the elite. For many centuries it was the principal centre of learning, dedicated to Confucius (P. M. Nguyen, et al., 2005). Additionally, despite the domination of the Chinese imperial regime in Vietnam, its education system has always had its own typical features such as its own unique system of Vietnamese characters developed based on the Chinese language (Dang, 2009; Tran, 1998; Welch, 2010).

The objective of Confucianism is to train learners to be good 'gentlemen' with characteristics such as family loyalty, ancestor worship, and respect of elders. Education is just for a small group of people. The training purpose is to enable students to be successful in examinations. This has had an extensive influence on Vietnamese tertiary education from its teaching content to methodology and assessment (Tran, 1998). The main learning method is learning all the Deity's sayings by heart. Learners achieve their knowledge passively (Nguyen, et al., 2005; Tran, 2012). Students must spend much time reciting and memorising texts and poems; and are not encouraged to have critical thinking or analysis. Gradually, rote-learning and memorisation constituted the learning method in Vietnamese education (Tran, 1998). This learning method is still applied in Vietnamese universities nowadays. In addition, Holliday (1994) found that the teacher in Asian culture is considered the "fount of knowledge, which is delivered without any concession to students", and students must "struggle to attain" the knowledge delivered by the teacher (p. 59). It is a popular comment that Asian students believe that learning is simply memorisation of knowledge in books or provided by teachers in class (Kennedy 2002 cited in Tran, 2012).

French Influences

Vietnam did not come under Western influence until the French colonisation in 1858. French education policy also took effect at that time. Nevertheless, at this initial stage, more attention was paid to the military and the colonial government seemed to neglect higher education (Tran, 1998). As Vallely and Wilkinson (2008) stated, as a consequence of the little investment by the French in higher education, "Vietnam missed the wave of institutional innovation in tertiary education that swept across much of Asia during the early 20th century, when many of the region's leading

institutions of higher learning were established” (p3). It resulted in Vietnam having a very weak institutional foundation on which to set up its own quality tertiary education system after independence (Vallely & Wilkinson, 2008). Until the twentieth century when the French army controlled the whole country, higher education was given priority consideration by the colonial government. The French education policy aimed to shape the minds of Vietnamese people and disseminate French values. They used education institutions as a vehicle to influence the local people and dismiss the anti-French movement. As Dang (2009) claimed, the education system in Vietnam, especially at the tertiary education level was still heavily based on French programs and content until 1954. Tertiary education at this time focused on teacher training, medicine, pharmacy and the sciences. Curricula were translated from French materials and adapted to the local situation (Dang, 2009).

In terms of governance, the French decided to get rid of traditional education and replace it with a government-controlled school system because it did not teach students the technical and specialised skills that the French needed. The government established the Department of Public Education and Department of Higher Education in 1917, which made all related decisions such as the curriculum, staff, school management. This gave the government a means for controlling the colonial education. It can be seen that Vietnamese tertiary education nowadays has some similarities to France’s tertiary education system that has been known for its central management (Tran, 1998).

In regards to teaching and learning, French was used as the instructional language in schools. Most of the teachers were French and Vietnamese teachers only worked as assistants in some subjects such as Vietnamese language classes. The curriculum overly emphasized the French contexts. A modern science-oriented education was also introduced with the purpose being to provide students with suitable knowledge and skills for the demands of the new era. Student assessment was done by annual examinations and final graduation examinations to finish their studies (Tran, 1998). One of the limitations of French colonial education was the restriction on the numbers of students going to the colleges. Indeed, colleges were only for middle and upper class families because of high tuition fees.

Soviet influences on Vietnamese tertiary education

After the victory against the French (1954), the Vietnamese education system greatly changed. Until the late 1980s, together with the shift of its political and economic model to the Soviet model, Vietnam’s tertiary education was strongly influenced by the Soviet system with its highly specialized mono-disciplinary institutions and large numbers of Vietnamese lecturers trained in Eastern bloc countries. Some universities, such as Hanoi Polytechnic University (currently Hanoi University of Technology), were initially built in Vietnam with Soviet support. The majority of universities’ curriculum and programmes were modelled after those in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, with the exception of medicine, which was still modelled after the French institutions. This Soviet model separated teaching activities from research activities and left the governance of institutions to particular line ministries (Dang, 2009; Dao & Hayden, 2010; Hayden & Lam, 2010)

Indeed, as a famous Vietnamese educator, Prof. Hoang Tuy stated, “The Vietnamese university system is heavily influenced by the Soviet academic system, in which

universities were primarily teaching institutions, while research was carried out by research institutes. The Vietnamese government is attempting to promote university-based research although these efforts have met with little success”, (Valleyly and Wikinson, 2008, p. 2). However, the success of Vietnamese education at that time was Vietnamese students’ achievements in Maths and Science in the Scientific Olympics in five consequent years. This demonstrated that the Vietnamese had worked out their own ways to take good advantage of the Soviet system in Math and Science (Dang, 2009). This strength in the basic sciences has been evident up to the present.

The Sovietⁱⁱ contribution in regards to human resources and institutional resources should not be underestimated. Nevertheless, “the Soviet legacy was ultimately rather ambiguous, with the Vietnamese educational and training system suffering from most of the rigidities of a command economy” (Welch, 2010, p. 201). The existence of many old Soviet-style institutions under the control of specialised ministries is an example of this ambiguity. This pattern of Soviet influence persists in the Vietnamese educational system nowadays with 13 ministries having responsibilities for their own higher education institutions (Hayden and Lam 2007 cited in Welch, 2010).

One of the characteristics of the Soviet model that differs from the French model was its top-down approach to higher education. Each year, the State Planning Committee sent the Ministry of Higher Education a quota specifying the number of students for each training specialism. The Ministry allocated a quota to each university or college. For the institutions, they just implemented all plans passed down from the top. This type of management is still practised in the current Vietnamese education system.

The teaching programs in the Soviet model had an extensive effect on Vietnamese higher education. Despite the recognition of demands on their own teaching program, it was quite hard for teachers to design training programs because they had no experience of doing this. Vietnamese planners and teachers therefore, established the structure of specialisation, training programs, curricula, and teaching methods based on the Soviet model using the guidance of Soviet specialists and through the use of translated Soviet textbooks (Tran, 1998). Within this model of education, political education and foundation science was heavily emphasised and accepted by the Vietnamese leaders. The enrolment of students was an issue in this model of education. Apart from the quota allocated by the Ministry of Higher Education and the priority for specific training specialisms, a student’s good political background was a key selection criterion for a place at higher education institutions. This contributed to the poor quality of Vietnamese education at that time. A report on the tertiary education system in 1974 showed that while most students had good political backgrounds, their academic level was rather low. Although Vietnamese universities adopted a Soviet-style organisational structure, Tran (1998) claims that decision-making on all issues was assumed by the Vietnamese.

In summary, since its establishment, the Vietnam’s tertiary education has had various external influences but has developed a capacity to adapt these ways and ideas for the Vietnamese context and values.

Background – vocational education and training in Vietnam

When Vietnam moved towards a market-orientated economy in 1992, the TVET system was exposed as deficient in supplying sufficient numbers of workers with the required skills to meet industry's needs. It meant that skills and knowledge learned in TVET programs were irrelevant and industry had to take time to retrain graduates. This may have been the reason why the number of enrolments in TVET dramatically decreased, from 171,100 (1985) to 62,614 (1995) (World Bank 2007). In contrast, enrolments into universities increased quickly. The decrease of VET enrolments caused an imbalance in the labour force (MOET, 2006).

The Vietnamese Government's Development Strategy proposed that Vietnam will become a substantially industrialised and modernised country by the year 2020. To put it into practice, human resources development was one of the three strategic breakthrough solutions, in which vocational training quality was regarded as a critical element in socio-economic development. Vietnam is in the process of adopting the principles of "radical and comprehensive educational renovation", including vocational training, which poses a new opportunity for vocational training development (General Department of Vocational Training - MOLISA, 2012; TVET Vietnam, 2008; Vietnamese Government, 2012).

Vietnam's system of technical and vocational education is a diversified and segregated structure comprising parallel formal, non-formal and informal delivery with a variety of providers (TVET Vietnam, 2008). The "formal" TVET system includes various programs from secondary education level to university level. The Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA) and the General Department of Vocational Training (GDVT) have the main responsibilities for policy, legal documentation, quality assurance, planning and monitoring those programs.

VET institutions in Vietnam are owned and financed by a variety of different organisations, including provincial and district governments, different central ministries, trade unions, companies and private institutions (TVET Vietnam, 2008). Private institutions make up about 30 per cent of the institutions governed under MOLISA and 20 per cent of those under MOET. The complexity of VET governance with the resulting overlapping of responsibilities causes duplication of training offers and confusion among beneficiaries. A college can run both courses funded and overseen by MOLISA and MOET.

The network of vocational training in Vietnam spreads throughout the whole country and every province has its own vocational college and/or school systems. According to the Report on vocational training 2011 (Mac et al., 2012), Vietnam has 1293 vocational training providers including 443 vocational colleges and vocational schools, and 849 vocational centres. If all the other educational institutions which deliver vocational training programs such as universities, colleges and centres are counted, the number of vocational providers reaches upwards towards 1975 vocational providers. Among these vocational providers, public colleges, schools and centres account for 67.2% (Mac, et al., 2012). However, these statistics do not include informal vocational training at family workshops and traditional craft villages which have existed for a long time in Vietnam.

Foreign funded models

Apart from the current model of VET in Vietnam that is financed by the Vietnamese governments and private providers, other models funded by foreign providers or Foreign Development Aids Projects are in existence. Specifically, two Asian Development Bank (ADB) projects for enhancing vocational skills have supported the setup of 15 targeted vocational colleges to train advanced skilled workers for Vietnam with technical and facility supports, and ongoing training programs (Mac, et al., 2012). With support of the German Government, German VET models under the Gesellschaft fuer Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) projects to help Vietnam develop vocational education have been established in 5 selective vocational colleges in the Northern area of Vietnam. Market-oriented training programs using a module delivery method has been introduced and implemented in those colleges through the establishment of an enterprise relationship. The infrastructure and facilities have been equipped in a similar way to a vocational college in Germany, including entertainment and sport areas. Other foreign vocational training models from Korea, Singapore and Australia are also evident. These countries have responded to tenders to deliver specific training programs, and use their own VET models. Establishing policies to attract and encourage foreign vocational training providers to bring their advanced training programs to Vietnam is perceived by the government as a good step to achieve the specific objectives for vocational education and training.

Influences on VET in Vietnam

As VET in Vietnam is part of higher education, it is not possible for VET to avoid the forces that have influenced higher education more generally. However, little research had been done to explore the historical influences on VET. This research paper will now discuss the historical influences on the curriculum and pedagogy of vocational colleges (representing formal VET and family workshops for informal VET) based on preliminary data from a doctoral research study about theorising vocational learning in Vietnam. The methodology for that study includes document analysis, qualitative interviews and observations of teachers, students and leaders at three sites – a Vietnamese government funded college, a foreign funded vocational college and a family workshop. Documents analysis, analysis of curricula, reports, photos, websites of the research sites, students' notebooks, lesson plans in addition to an initial analysis of 960 minutes of interviews and 2160 minutes of observation and 40 pages of observational notes are used for this research paper to investigate the historical influences on VET in Vietnam, its teaching and learning, curriculum and management. The interviews were undertaken in Vietnamese and translated into English after getting all participants' signatures in the consent form. Substituted names for the research participants and English translations of their quotes were used. The data analysis was supported with Dedoose software to look at key things. The findings from the initial analysis data postulated historical influences on VET in Vietnam which will describe in the following section.

Curriculum at Formal VET (Colleges)

As mentioned in the above, VET is mainly under the management of MOET and MOLISA. Curriculum frameworks by those ministries according to the Law on Vocational Training in 2006 and Decision No. 58/2008/QĐ-BLĐTBXH dated 06 September 2008, govern the design and regulate the time allocation, the amount of

knowledge, assessment and main teaching materials. Within the bounds of the frameworks, directors of VET institutions are responsible for developing their own curricula. Despite the variety in the curricula, the common educational aims are to train Vietnamese people for well-rounded development in all aspects including morality, knowledge, health, professional skills, loyalty with the ideal of the independent Nation and Socialism, cultivating revolutionary virtues, fostering the human dignity and the ability of a good citizen to meet the demand for developing and safeguarding the country (National Assembly of The Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2005).

As can be seen from the educational objectives, the focus on the education and the development of one's personality is one of the characteristics of Confucianism which is still maintained in the current system. As Welch (2010) affirmed, the influence of Confucianism, including its emphasis on harmony, dignity and morality in both family and society is said to still permeate contemporary Vietnamese society. However, from the educational objectives, the ideology of Confucian has been modified to fit with Vietnamese contexts and the Socialist government. In addition, educating people for loyalty to Socialism, strongly influenced by Soviet times, is found in the curriculum. For example, within the content of the Mechanical Engineering MOET training program in the Vietnamese college in this study, (2110 periods/3 years), students must spend 805 learning periods (of 60 minutes each) for general education, including the principles of Marxist - Leninist, Ho Chi Minh ideology, Vietnamese Communist Party, Law, maths and advanced maths, physical education, security of national defence education and so on. When interviewing one college leader about the general education in the training programs and the degree of Soviet influence, he stated that general education is an obligation with an allocated amount of study periods and subjects, in both MOET and MOLISA programs. He gave an example of Advanced Maths 1 and Advanced Maths 2 (MOET programs) that adopted the whole of the Soviet maths curriculum and still applies it today without any changes. Teaching materials for those subjects have also been adopted from Russian books, following translation and modification suitable for the Vietnamese context. So the teaching materials have been 'vietnamised'. As the College leader affirmed that it is Soviet influence from the top level, "We just follow what the related ministries request" (Mr. Duong's interview, 2013). A teacher with more than 25 years of teaching experience, claimed that such general education, like Advanced Maths, is irrelevant to some majors but students must study all of it despite its lack of clear application to their future career.

The focus on the delivery of theory in VET provides further evidence of Soviet influence. For example, in the MOET VET program, there are only 16 credits (246 periods) for practice at workshops and 3 credits (45 periods) for internship during the 3 years of training. Within 2110 study periods over 3 years, it provides little opportunity for students to achieve the required practical skills. MOLISA programs are slightly different with more periods for practice (2583 in the total of 3750 study periods) (MOLISA, 2008). However, it is thought that students have enough practice at school, so there are no internships for students at 'real' workplaces. One of the issues is that there are not enough workshops to provide internships for students of all VET institutions. As observed during the study, students were divided into three shifts (morning, afternoon and evening shifts) in order to have an opportunity to practice. Equipment and facilities were outmoded and of poor quality, often reflecting the

priorities of donor countries. Students when interviewed also remarked on this issue. For example, students who were in their second year of a vocational college, stated that they spent too much time learning in theory classes while spending little time in practice classes. When doing practice at the College workshop, they have to take turns, and only work at the machine about once or twice during the 5 practical periods per shift. They added that there are 9 machines but only 4 or 5 functioned properly for one group of 6 to 10 students. Another issue is the theoretical classes were sometimes delivered in the first year or first semester; then they started practice at the workshop in the second year or second semester. This allocation meant that teachers at workshops must spend 15 minutes, called theory explanation at the workshop sessions to revise the 'theoretical' material and provide instructions for students to practice at the machines.

Pedagogy in VET Vietnam

According to the 2020 VET Development Strategy, reforms on training procedures and teaching and learning methods have been targeted to improve the training quality. The findings of this study to date shows that traditional teaching and learning are still being applied at vocational colleges in Vietnam despite the efforts to make good use of teaching and learning technologies. Indeed, during 48 observation periods of theory classes and workshops at the vocational colleges, a teacher centred orientation was the most common. In theory classes, teachers transmit all required knowledge for the students, who are required to sit quietly in rows, listening and copying all notes from the blackboards. Some teachers use computers as teaching aids to show slides rather than write on the blackboard. However, from the interview data of students and teachers, it was revealed that computer usage is not frequently taken up in classrooms because of the lack of available computers and the additional work for teachers, such as taking computers and projectors with them. A number of students at interviews at a vocational college also commented that computers are not often used in theory classes with the exception of sample periods for observations. Teachers interviewed at a vocational college, mentioned this issue - that it is hard for them to use computers frequently for their teaching because the preparation time required is in addition to their already huge workloads and the difficulty in carrying projectors and computers while climbing too many stairs throughout the college. Therefore, a teacher concluded that although some teachers are using computers as a teaching aid, the college is still using many traditional methods and does not have much renewal or innovation in teaching methods (Mr Quang's interview 2013). Another teacher commented that in the classroom, teachers often explain the lesson and write on the blackboard.

At the foreign funded vocational college, facilities and teaching equipment are better and students have more opportunities to use advanced technology. Teachers tried to apply technology in their teaching. But when interviewed, the leader and teachers stated that traditional teaching is preferred at present (Mr Anh's interview and Mr Binh's interview). In fact, during observations in this college, students were in rows of tables with pens and notebooks copying what the teachers explained. "We just copy to our notebooks" (Chuong-student's interview 2013). The teacher held the lesson plan and followed it step by step.

In such a pedagogical process, there is little interaction between teachers and students, and usually only in one direction - from teacher to students. One of the students

commented that he seldom asked teachers any questions even when he didn't understand what is being spoken about. Other students agreed. They often asked their friends first. If they could not find the satisfactory answer, they then asked their teachers.

At the family workshops, pedagogical practices were found to be quite similar to the college. The interaction between the Master and the vocational learners is mainly in one direction. The Master guided and showed them how to do this and the vocational learners followed the guidance. In cases in which they had something to ask, they usually sought the answers from the older and more skilled workers in the workshop. They seldom questioned the Master. When asked the reason why they didn't raise questions with the Master, a student said, "naturally didn't want to ask, not afraid of anything" and then said "the master is so strict, I seldom asked the master, mainly asked the skilled workers". A skilled worker with over 10 years of experience at a family workshop talked about the ways he guided and encouraged vocational learners to question and "showed them directly on the machine how this product was done" and showed them the best and quickest way to get skills and knowledge easily (Quan's interview).

The descriptions of pedagogical practices gained from the initial data analysis, as described above, illustrate the influences from Confucian ideology - the teachers are held in high esteem; teachers are models for learners to imitate and learn from them. Teacher-centred teaching methods are quite popular (Ngo, 2011; Nguyen, 2012). Teachers are highly respected and proverbs such as "Without a teacher, you cannot do anything successfully" are common. "Teachers and vocational learners couldn't sit and talk together because teachers were very strict" shared by the Master at a family workshop when recalling how he had learned his skills and knowledge. Learners were requested to absorb whatever knowledge and skills their teachers imparted. They would never raise any question since they had a responsibility to unconditionally respect their teacher. "Questioning their teachers in any way could be considered as disrespect, disloyalty of the student and caused the teacher to lose face" (Tran, 1998, p. 37). The ideology of Confucianism adapted in Vietnam was modified to be suitable for the conditions and requirements of VET in Vietnam.

The qualification preference in Vietnamese minds also has effects in VET. As mentioned previously in the section on Confucian influence on Higher Education in Vietnam, Confucian values and ideologies have strongly merged in Vietnamese society and families. Parents prefer sending their children to higher education with higher degree qualifications. This reflects Confucian ideology that considers higher education as a privilege and an honour for learners and their families (Welch 2010). As the leader of a vocational college stated, vocational colleges in the minds of many Vietnamese people are seen as the last gate to achieve a degree. A higher education degree can be a status symbol to proudly show off their children with friends and neighbours. This is in spite of the fact that they know that 70% of university graduates are currently unemployed or working at a totally different trained field (Mr. Anh's interview 2013).

Conclusion

The research to date illustrates how VET in Vietnam has been strongly shaped by the various colonisations together with the ‘Vietnamese factor’. While the analysis of the research data is still incomplete, there is a strong indication that this influence has been in relation to the pedagogical practices – from the learning and teaching largely adopting Confucian principles of teacher-centred education, to a curriculum and institutional arrangements strongly influenced by Soviet presence, as well as some French influences. But as Tran (1998) has suggested these influences have been ‘vietnamised’.

The new challenges of providing a qualified productive labour force to meet society’s demands has encouraged the Vietnamese government to look to other influences – such as from countries such as Germany, Singapore, Australia, through ADB and aid funded initiatives in VET. Plans such as the 2020 Development Strategy for Vocational Training look to a different future for VET. The plan points to a renovation in teaching methods, with a student-centred orientation and the establishment of enterprises in VET training. Furthermore, there is an understanding that, in parallel with the renovation in pedagogy, curriculum, facilities, infrastructure, management, there is a need to ‘popularise’ VET, so that the population also appreciates that VET in Vietnam is playing an increasingly important role in response to national demands for a high quality and skilled labour force. It will be interesting to trace the historical influences in these new initiatives.

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ⁱ Higher education is a term used in Vietnam to refer to what would be understood in Australia as tertiary education. For example, Tran's research only focused on universities and not other higher education institutions such as VET colleges, although it uses the term higher education

ⁱⁱ Soviet in this context includes Eastern Bloc countries such as East Germany, Hungary, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Rumania.