

Reconstruction higher education in Vietnam

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Introduction

The circulation of educational ideas and practices in the time of globalization has been the centre of attention in the debate on education reform. This circulation goes along with the aspiration of improving education systems. It is also a source of optimism that encourages educational reform programmes in many countries, including Vietnam. Vietnam is unique for its concern to maintain the leadership of its Communist Party and the socialist State.

The Vietnamese higher education system builds on the past, its unsettled present reality, as well as its future aspirations. Returning to the past, this system was rooted in the Confucian tradition of valuing education, the French-built universities of the early 20th Century, and the Soviet model of mono-disciplinary universities (Hayden &Thiep,2010). Moving closer to contemporary Vietnam, three milestones are salient, the *Đổi mới* policy in 1986ⁱ, the system expansion in 1993 and the higher education reform agenda of 2005ⁱⁱ have all contributed to shaping current Vietnamese higher education. First, the year 1986 is one of the most important imprints with the *Đổi mới* Policy replacing the Soviet-styled central planning economy with the socialist-oriented market economy. The *Đổi mới* policy started the country's initial experience of marketization and privatization in many areas, including higher education. The second milestone is the expansion of the higher education system in 1993ⁱⁱⁱ, marked by restructuring and the merging of mono-disciplinary universities into national and regional ones as well as the introduction of fees. Thirdly, in 2005 the Vietnamese Government enacted its higher education reform agenda aiming to achieve comprehensive and fundamental changes by 2020. It proposed multiple scenarios with general and detailed objectives to restructure the university network, governance, teaching and research, teaching content and processes, lecturer training, international cooperation and funding. Three decades after *Đổi mới*, the higher education system remains located between the country's socialist-orientation and marketisation. In addition to

their remit in generating and delivering knowledge, contemporary Vietnamese universities have an important mission in preserving and continuing the country's socialist transition.

This paper draws on narrative themes emerging from interviews with senior university, teacher union and student leaders in three public universities on reforming the current system of higher education. Their accounts are based on experiences and expectations as well as their identification of problematic university practices. Their assumptions and aspiration shaped their views on the what, the why and the how of reforming Vietnamese universities.

Social imaginary

The perspectives of university leaders, teacher union leaders and student leaders are their reflections on their professional positions within the collective imaginary and assumptive world. The concept of social imaginary anchored their perspectives in reconstructing higher education in Vietnam. Social imaginary is defined by Taylor (2002) as

the way ordinary people 'imagine' their social surroundings, and this is often not expressed in theoretical terms; it is carried in images, stories, legends, and so on (p.105).

Rizvi and Lingard (2010) suggest that the social imaginary of neoliberal globalization has become the dominant imaginary, especially in the global communities of politicians, economists and policy makers. The neoliberal imaginary is closely related to the market-based forms of aspirations (Gale & Parker, 2015): from learning, to teaching and to leading. One of such imaginaries is the aspiration to pursue self-maximisation that has different meanings and opportunities for students, teachers and leaders. However, these aspirations are situated within not only their own identification but also by how this is perceived within the social ambience (Sellar, 2013) such as their professional contexts and constraints. In particular, students' aspirations for higher education are shaped by how they imagine themselves fitting in with others (Gale & Parker, 2015). This is also the case for teachers' and leaders' aspirations. Again, it is the question of how they imagine and accept themselves, in other words, how they interpret the scenario that best fits themselves.

In the context of Vietnam, for example, education development is considered as ‘the cause of the Communist Party of Vietnam, the State, and the People’^{iv} that might be far away from the ordinary people’s imaginary of education. Whilst the Party and the State aspired to embrace market principles in educational development to build the precondition for the socialist transition, the People might merely internalize expected changes for their own good. However, the convergence between the political imaginary and the individual imaginary is the aspiration to better the status of the country’s higher education. In addition to the Vietnamese methods with the continuity from the past to the present, adopting the neoliberal methods have opened up Vietnamese higher education to the diversity of the global methods.

University as ‘a taken for granted dream’

The first narration of reconstructing Vietnamese higher education is the university rush as university is considered as ‘*a taken for granted dream*’. The social imaginary of education of Vietnamese people was no longer as learning to know how to read and write but as learning to be able to enter university. University dream is attached to the Vietnamese tradition of valuing education, the dream of escaping subsistence farmer life and the outcome of achievement from the country economic reform (Linh, 2010). The ‘*taken for granted dream*’ was the remark of a retired senior officer of Ministry of Education and Training in elaborating on the university rush of young people. He also associated the expansion of the current system with the new generation of students coming to university as a must rather than a should:

In the past, not everyone had the privilege, capacity and expectation to study in university. But now it is the must for young people to go to university, because of family, society or situations. It is the move from should to must or from generations of should-learn students to the must-learn students.

This expansion linked with changes in the social imaginary of attending university: from *should-university* to *must-university* with generations of *should-learn students* and *must-learn students*. From *should* to *must*, there is a difference between the self-identification of choice and the external identification of encouragement. It is an acceleration of compulsion that illuminates as the dominant imaginary of entering university among young people. In locating their position between the *should*

imaginary to *must* imaginary in entering university, students might easily lose track of their own aspiration in thinking about what and who university is for.

The imaginary of *must-university* is so dominant that attending university is considered as a taken for granted dream among young people. Take student leader of Capital City University (CCU)^v for an example. Being able to attend university is so important that she rather chose to spend one year in her least wanted university waiting to re-take the entrance examination to her most wanted university rather than not being a student.

This university is my first choice since I entered high school. It not only has the reputation for foreign languages but I can also study economics in English. But when I did the entrance exam I thought I would not pass the exam. I was thinking to study at a particular university for one year to wait for re-taking the entrance exam so that I can get into CCU.

That might sound unreasonable but for school-leavers and their families, staying in a random university for a year might save them from losing face due to failing the entrance exam to the desired university. This aspiration is shaped by collective views of *must-university* from their peers, families and a society that is obsessed over education.

The obsessed dream of university among young people makes the effort of getting into universities one of the most memorable milestones. It is so memorable that almost everyone could reflect on his or her experience with different stories. There used to be the ‘*examination preparation oven*’ for university examination in the big cities such as Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. Students called it as an oven as the metaphor to describe the density of space and heat in small classroom for extra numbers of students. It reflected the social atmosphere of the obsessed dream: entering university. Reflected on his experience in learning for the entrance examination to university, one of the senior leaders of Science and Technology University (STU) commented, ‘*We all studied like buffalos and horses for the entrance exam to universities. Once we got there, we started to slide down in laziness*’. The illuminative imaginary of *must-university* is urging young people to empty themselves out for passing university entrance examinations. Additionally, it is the social imaginary of a qualification-valued society (Thiep, 2006) and the emphasis on qualification in job recruitment and promotion (Wilkinson and Chirot, 2011). This phenomenon has created a tendency of

'so many teachers (intellectuals), so few workers', according to another university leader. He recommended that *'Life not only needs Einstein but also Edison'*.

Perhaps, it is not only the story for Vietnamese students but also for students in other countries getting lost in translating their future aspiration: whether university is a *should* or a *must*; a taken for granted dream or the dream that needs thinking otherwise. When students take the agency to internalize their capacity to aspire, university is still a desired destination but among many others.

University lecturers as 'teaching workers'

The second narration captured the social imaginary of teacher union leaders in reconstructing Vietnamese higher education. Their narratives unpacked the difficulties for university teachers in teaching and doing research. Compared to the account of students getting lost in their university dream, in a sense, the *'teaching workers'* seem to experience the similar confusion in understanding their professional self.

On the surface, the *'teaching workers'* concept reflects an overload of teaching and low salary but underneath, it implied the burnout of teachers as well as the repeating act of teaching. The teaching-focused practice in Vietnamese universities is partly the consequence of the residue from modelling the Soviet higher education in 1950s in Vietnam. In this Soviet model, universities were teaching-oriented while research was carried out in the independent institutions outside universities (Hayden & Thiep, 2010). The teaching overload can be seen in the regulation for teaching hours (Decision 64/2008/QD/BGDDT^{vi}) in which the regulated number of hours for university teachers is 40 per week, 1,760 per year with 900 for teaching, 500 for research and 360 for other professional activities.

Commenting on the low income of teachers in public universities, teacher union leaders of University of Economics- the Middle Region University (UEMR) explained

Just think about this reality: for a two-year-old child in kindergarten, the fee for a month is 3 million Vietnam Dong-VND (about £100) while for a public university student, tuition fee for the whole semester of 5 months is 3 million VND).

However, almost nobody working at the university has only a single source income from the official salary. Being in their academic profession helps them gain respect

and status within community, which is favourable in doing other businesses alongside with being '*teaching workers*'.

In another account, teacher union leader in the Capital City University (CCU) raised the challenging issues for female teachers in balancing between the professional duties and family duties. In her words, such duties are '*billions of responsibilities*':

In our university, 70% of teachers are female and we go to work like men.

Therefore, for us, there is the pressure of going to work and raising children.

Now, most of the families have two children. We go to work, pick up children, take care of children and husband and fulfil duties with the in-laws.

In her account, CCU's teacher union leader used a series of verbs from '*go to work*', '*pick up children*', to '*take care of children and husband*' and '*fulfil duties with the in-laws*' to picture a typical day of a female teacher working at university and taking care of their families.

In addition to the teaching overload, low income and family responsible, challenges for teachers in doing research were voiced as another account needing to tackle in reconstructing Vietnamese higher education. Teacher union leaders see doing research as '*the silent business*' and as '*for the sake of appearance*'. Doing research becomes less favoured part of university teachers that a number of them agree to teach extra hours to compensate for the required research hours. This might be explained by the mind-set of Vietnamese in thinking about schooling and higher education as the means of social mobility (Linh, 2010) but not as a place to do research. As such, in the social imaginary of teachers, doing research somehow becomes secondary to teaching. '*The silent business*' refers to the lack of networking in sharing ideas in the academic community. However, approach to doing research has improved as pointed by CCU's teacher union leader for the change '*from doing research for the appearance sake to the more applicable and practical orientation*'.

Social imaginary of teacher union leaders in reconstructing higher education depicts their struggles in teaching, doing research and gaining professional satisfaction. These narratives suggested the necessity of altering the current realities of '*teaching workers*' and of research as '*silent business*' into the more fulfilled realities.

Conditional autonomy

Conditional autonomy is the final narration from university leaders as the quest for more freedom for public universities. The conditional autonomy is new governance paradigm in which the Ministry of Education and Training and the Vietnamese Government step by step lose their control over three areas of institutional autonomy (in terms of academic, finance and staff). Liberating universities from the State-centric management has been a part of the Government agenda identified in the Agenda in 2005 (Hayden and Thiep, 2007) as well as the University Charter^{vii} in 2010. Since 2010, the governance model has been renovated from state control to state supervision (Pham, 2012). However, from policy to practice, the stagnation of theory and reality is not always clear.

Granting autonomy for university is compared with the act of '*hands freeing for universities*' according to the president of University of Science and Technology (STU). In his account, '*public universities are no different from children living in the house where the ceiling is too low to stand tall*'. One of the consequences of the previous paradigm of governance is the passive practice of waiting for the permission from the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), or '*All things wait for MOET*' (Madden, 2014). University autonomy has been proposed and placed into practice in the Agenda in 2005, University Charter in 2010 and the University Autonomy Project^{viii} in 2014. However, the real autonomy given to public universities in Vietnam remains conditional (Dao, 2015). It is the change from the asking and giving paradigm to the reporting practice as in the case of Science and Technology University (STU)

The practice of autonomy for university is something newly formed and has not been well practiced yet. For example, STU already got the autonomy from MOET, autonomy in offering qualification for STU that means rather than asking and waiting for permission as in the past, now there is no need of permission but you have to report so that people know what you are doing.

Autonomy also means cutting down the State funding for universities and imposing the restriction of maximum for tuition fee

However, in terms of finance, you have the autonomy to increase the tuition fee under the ceiling level of MOET. This put the public universities

like STU in the dilemma of funding: cutting down state funding but limiting the sources generating tuition fees.

Such is the similar case for the Capital City University (CCU). CCU was selected among four public universities for the University Autonomy Project from 2014- 2017. However, there is the ceiling regulation on the adjustment of increasing tuition fees, according to a CCU's senior leader:

In fact, CCU had the financial autonomy since 2008, meaning it no longer got the financial support of the State and the university self-raised the income to pay for staff and teachers' salary. Every year, the university only receives a small support of the expenditure for maintenance of infrastructure. The full autonomy means, such allowance from the state no longer exists.

In this case, universities like CCU are free to set their own fees but only up to a government legislated maximum. This might make a number of universities have budget deficits.

The quest for enhancing university autonomy in the social imaginary of university leaders reflected institutional demands of self-governance for self-maximization. The university leaders aspired their management model shifting from the passive waiting for permission to the active self-designing institutional strategy. The conditional autonomy for public universities is the distinctive governance character of Vietnamese higher education reflecting the political imprint in educational management.

Discussion and conclusion

Situated in the time of globalizing educational practice, these accounts are not only embracing the distinctive Vietnamese characters rooted from the past, constrained in the present practices but also aspire towards the future. For students, the university obsess dream rooted in the tradition (the past), that students get lost in translating their own expectation for university (the present), as such reform aspiration linked with this imaginary to make it better. For teacher, because of the absence of research culture (residue from the past), the over-teaching practices make them see themselves as '*teaching worker*'. For university leaders, the past and the present reality are shifted from the passive waiting for permission to the active self-designing institutional strategy. These narratives internalized neoliberal imaginary in their own terms with the

absence of the individualistic and economic nature but the presence of the humanistic nature of the unsettled professional practices of each individual. These narratives have brought the agenda of reforming universities to life and expressed the disappointment, frustration and hidden expectations. They depict the eagerness of the new members of university (new students) in contrast with the burning out of the teachers and the limited freedom of university leaders. As such, there should be a paradigm for all three groups to relocate where they are, what their initial purposes are. Students should re-examine if university is the taken for granted dream or the dream that need thinking otherwise. Teachers' duty as the academic staff is more than simply teaching, they should integrate teaching with doing research as part of their professional identity. In the account of university leaders, higher education is governed with the strong imprint of political ideology. The ideological commitment has a crucial role in all the educational policy documents guiding the management of higher education.

Reforming is a big word and it refers to the need of change and upgrading as the current practice or situation no longer functions or fails to meet regulated requirements. In the system of higher education where academic staff becomes '*teaching workers*' and their research prospect is '*silent businesses*', reform should start with form. In other words, reform should be started with forming a research culture in universities. The same suggestion goes with the students. When the university system became one of high participation, university cannot give all students what they are looking for at the start of their journey. This is particular true for the generation of *the must learn students* who see universities as their *taken for granted* dream. As such, the meaning of re-form constructed here briefly is re-questioning, re-visiting, re-thinking their professional dreams before stepping into universities.

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- i In the 6th National Congress Document of the Communist Party of Vietnam, December 1986
- ii Resolution 14 /2005/NQ-CP on comprehensive and fundamental reforming higher education in Vietnam 2006-2020, dated November 2, 2005
- iii Decree No. 90/CP on reforming education and training, dated November 24, 1993.
- iv Education Law, Law No.38/2005/QH11, dated 14th June 2005
- v Names of three universities are pseudo names.
- vi Decision number 64/2008/QD-BGDDT regulation on working hours for higher education lecturers, dated 28th November 2008
- vii University Charter, *Decision No. 58/2010/QD-TTg, dated September 22, 2010.*
- viii Resolution 77/NQ-CP on piloting the autonomy mechanism with several public universities period 2014 -2017, dated 24th October 2014