

Interview with vice rector Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City, Lê Quang Minh, September 2009.

Could you share your thoughts on the current situation of Vietnamese education?

At present, the main problems in post secondary education in Vietnam, both in colleges as well as in universities revolve around the lack of qualified personnel. People often talk about the lack of quality, but, in fact quantity is just as important. We lack both qualified staff and we lack great numbers of them. We will not discuss the large number of less than qualified staff here. It suffices to say that in this context, the more countries and the more universities assist Vietnam the better. In brief, in this situation there is room for everyone [room for all countries and universities to enter the Vietnamese market].

How do you see the role of the Netherlands in this situation?

Speaking of Holland, what is the position of Holland? How can the Netherlands assist Vietnam most efficiently? Firstly, one of the Dutch strengths is their extremely long experience and their understanding of Vietnam. One could say that apart from France, Holland has the best understanding of Vietnam of all countries in Europe. Because of that for the Netherlands it will be easier to assist Vietnam than for other countries. Secondly, Holland has a very open culture, not unlike Vietnamese culture which makes it easy to adapt [to new situations]. Apart from those aspects, Holland has opened its doors to the international educational market a long time ago already. For example Wageningen University established an international curriculum in English as early as 1972. So basically, I suggest that Holland has met the necessary conditions.

Apart from that, the Netherlands has also established itself as a house hold name in certain subjects such water management, irrigation, urban planning, rural development, agriculture. I would like to stress that those fields are in great need in Vietnam and will be extremely beneficial to our country. At the same time the popular market has a limited demand for such subjects. In popular demand are subjects relating to IT

technology, finance, economy and business administration. In fact the Netherlands are extremely strong in those fields. For example Amsterdam, Erasmus and Tilburg are highly ranked in those fields.

We need a strategy to further stimulate the cooperation between Holland and Vietnam. We should stimulate further cooperation in the fields where the Dutch have a global reputation or a brand that hardly need to be promoted any further such as water management for example. But at the same time we need to have a strategy that also stimulates the cooperation with Dutch strengths that are less known to this market, for example the subject of economics at Erasmus University. Tilburg has an extremely strong high quality curriculum in economics, but hardly anyone here knows this institution. Take me for example; I studied at an university with an agricultural curriculum ranked one of the best in the world, in Wageningen. But if I mention Wageningen hardly anybody here knows where it is. That is the result of the way Holland has marketed itself here.

At present, the Vietnamese government intends to establish four international high-ranked universities [New Model University (NMU)]: The first one exists already, Viet-Duc [Vietnamese German]. The second one is already on the way, the Viet-Phap [Vietnamese French]. France and Germany's support has already been formalized. The French will work with Hanoi, the US with Cần Thơ and Japan in Đà Nẵng. In fact this is an enormous opportunity for The Netherlands. If in The Netherlands on a governmental level or a ministry could be mobilized to implement this, it could be a wonderful project.

What does the Netherlands need to do and who does the Netherlands need to talk to in order to partake in such projects?

Currently you have to meet with the MoET. It has several programmes and I know that they are looking for international counterparts. The first programme is the establishment of NMUS. The second programme is the training of 20.000 PhDs [by 2020]. Vietnam is actively seeking countries strong in education to sign [MoUs to train students with full

tuition waivers], I do not know how many partners will be enough to reach the goal of 20.000 PhDs by 2020. It is very large number.

I would like to propose to Neso and the Dutch government to pay special attention to the following: In Holland there are 14 Universities teaching economics, 6 of which, according to my knowledge are ranked in the world top 100 lists¹. This boils down to 50%. I assure you that hardly any other country has such a high rate of top ranked universities relatively. This needs to be presented to the MoET. Only Switzerland and Holland have such rate. If we want to work with the MoET we have to present such facts. Then you inform the Ministry of education that in Holland those six universities are willing to cooperate for example as a conglomerate [in such programmes]. You need to indicate that such a conglomerate of Dutch top universities is willing to assist in the implementation of these two programmes such as the establishment of the New Model Universities and secondly in creating 20.000 PhDs.

The Netherlands has another strength and an opportunity and that is the training of Masters. You can assist the MoET by training Masters because these are extremely important as well. The MoET will be quite at a loss if they implement the 20.000 PhDs programme, when there are no people with master's degrees. One first needs Masters. So the Netherlands could assist creating a source of Masters. This could be new and original for the Netherlands to focus on.

Could you clarify how the Netherlands should work with Vietnamese counterparts and which subjects the Netherlands should focus on?

Firstly, which gate should the Dutch use to enter Vietnam? The easiest way is still to select several Vietnamese universities as partners. This is not complicated and does not deviate much from the traditional approach used in the past. One of the universities that have opened their gates to the Netherlands is Cần Thơ University (CTU). In fact it

¹ The Leiden ranking limits itself to the evaluation of European research. This list has ranked 9 Dutch Universities in the top 50 best Universities. ARWU focuses on global research and has ranked 12 Dutch universities in the global top 400. The THES measures research output as well as reputation and lists 10 Dutch universities in the global top 200. <http://www.vsnu.nl/web/show/id=89744/langid=43>

has done so longer than any other university in Vietnam. Cần Thơ has a long lasting relation with the Netherlands, but it caters to the Mekong Delta.

I am currently also facilitating cooperation with the Water Resources University in Hanoi (WRU²). This institute in Hanoi also has entertained very long relations with Holland. The only problem is that it teaches a limited number of subjects. It goes without saying that when we wish to introduce other curricula to attract a wider market, such as business administration, this school is too limited [lacks academic staff to implement curricula]. If we wish to cater to large markets we need to develop cooperations with the National University in Hanoi, or in preferably in HCMC [which has the largest market for such subjects]. If you want a programme to cover its expenses you should aim at the two large cities.

Should the Dutch cooperate directly with the MoET instead of working with the universities for example with the 20.000 PhDs programme?

It is very easy to work with the MoET. There are two ways in. The first is via Mr. Nguyễn Xuân **Vang** – the Director of the Vietnam International Education Department (VIED), the second way in is via Mr. Trần Bá Việt **Dũng** Director of the International Relations Department.

But for you [Nuffic Neso] it is of great importance that the Dutch government, the Ministry provides you with something to offer when you work with these officials. If you could get an official document authorizing you to implement a concrete project, then you could work with anyone, the minister, the vice-minister. But if you do not have anything, it will be extremely difficult. In that case, there is not much you can do but to find out how the lower echelon departments function and explain to them how the Netherlands wishes to assist.

You should request the Dutch Ministry of education to invite the Vietnamese Minister of Education and Training to come to Holland. When he experiences Dutch education first-

² <http://www.wru.edu.vn/web/default.aspx>

hand, he will naturally have a positive view and you will gain his trust. If the Dutch decide to invite him, you will have to work with Mr. Dũng and provide him with the information we have discussed here.

Could you share your thoughts on the coming trends of higher education in Vietnam and the strategies to cater to the social and economic situation in Vietnam?

In fact in line with the strategy for Vietnamese higher education, the MoET will divide universities into two types. 75% of the universities will become universities of applied sciences similar to universities of applied sciences in the Netherlands and the 25% remaining universities will become research universities. That is the biggest trend. Another trend is that the Ministry encourages universities to contact large international universities to further their own development.

This latter trend seems to be of limited use to the Netherlands. At present, there exists a problem. The difficulty is that except for the subjects for which Holland has long been famous, such as irrigation, agriculture, urban planning, rural development, Vietnamese universities tend to choose American universities. The Netherlands should not overly concentrate its efforts on this second trend.

Things will be different if the Netherlands develops large projects related to agriculture [bring together known Dutch strengths and traditional partners] especially with Cần Thơ University. In such cases, the Dutch will be able to access the market of the whole Mekong delta region. But to introduce other curricula [not known as Dutch strengths] is somewhat difficult even though the Netherlands can easily compete with any university in the U.S.

Apart from subjects, could Vietnam benefit from Dutch teaching methodology?

That is another Dutch strength. For example Maastricht University has a curriculum which I think should be promoted. The faculty of medicine of Cần Thơ University has implemented this curriculum with very positive results. Regrettably, that faculty of

medicine was later separated from the CTU and transformed into the University of Medicine, falling directly under the ministry of health. In its promotion, the Netherlands should not limit itself to the Netherlands alone; instead it should advertise and promote itself as a gateway to Europe. It should provide programmes on European law, or European business. Currently Vietnam is starting to intensify its business with companies in Europe but we seriously lack knowledge about the European legal system.

You indicated that in order to inform and influence key stake holders such as politicians, the Netherlands should invite state officials. For example, not long ago New Zealand invited several officials for a tour around to New Zealand.

That should happen, it is prerequisite. The Netherlands should invite the ministry or a delegation, so that they can have a look with

What about staff training, capacity building?

Maybe the Netherlands should focus on skills, capacity building for lecturers and experts, instead of focusing the modernization of curricula in Vietnam. For the modernization of curricula the Vietnamese universities will mainly work with the U.S. because they are not convinced that the Netherlands has enough know how. The Netherlands needs to develop a long-term strategy. The Netherlands needs to inform the public [of its strengths in other fields as well]. Concerning the 322, the ECV 1000 and the Mekong 1000 scholarship programmes, the main aim on the Vietnamese side is to reduce tuition fees [at foreign universities for their candidates]. If the Dutch government has some funds, it can divide them into 2 scholarship funds for Vietnam. One programme of full scholarships would focus on excellent students. The other programme would be partly funded scholarships for good students, not excellent students. The point is that Vietnam has more good people than people who are excellent. The second scholarship would be financed fifty-fifty by the Netherlands' and Vietnamese governments.

I do my utmost to promote the Netherlands, but when the [people's committees at the] provinces agree to send students there, they see that the tuition fee in the Netherlands is 11,000 Euro, which is equal to 15,000 – 16,000 US dollars, while the tuition fees at U.S universities are much lower [from tuition fee waivers up to tuition fees of 8000 dollars/ year]. Of course the quality of those universities is lower as well, but Vietnamese society is not aware of those differences. The Dutch ministry of education should provide two kinds of scholarships. This so-called fifty-fifty scholarship will dramatically increase [the influx of Vietnamese students into the Netherlands] quantity. But it needs to be attractive for the MoET as well so that it will fund the remaining part of the scholarship. Vietnam should not continue to depend fully [on the Netherlands].

One delicate question: I know that the candidates for the 322 scholarship are excellent. Do excellent students choose the Netherlands?

I will answer this delicate question a little less delicately: excellent candidates do not go to Holland. That is the biggest problem today. Therefore, the Netherlands must promote its brand. If I ask 10 people where they wish to study, 9 of them will want to go to the U.S. Students prefer countries where English is the native language so they choose the U.S. first, the UK second, Australia third and Canada. Holland is one of the last on the list.

Could the Netherlands play a role in the development of education management in Vietnam as part of capacity building?

This is another chance for the Netherlands. The way Dutch Universities are governed is not unlike the way we do things in Vietnam. If Vietnam would try to emulate the U.S. it would be too complicated as the systems are very different. For example in the U.S universities are often managed as businesses. It will take a long time before such concepts will be implemented in Vietnam. Currently the Vietnamese legal system does not allow the implementation of such approaches. In the Netherlands in particular and in Europe in general, the governments subsidize and evaluate, control the quality of education strictly. Universities in Europe and in Holland in particular, are still places catering to the needs of society instead of their own needs to make a profit. These

places attempt to provide much needed training to the wider society. I think that Holland can apply this approach in Vietnam.

During other conversations you mentioned the possible role of the Dutch in training Vietnamese state officials. Could you elaborate?

The National University of Ho Chi Minh City is cooperating with Delft University and Wageningen University to set up 2 master programs in Vietnam to train Vietnamese officials. Delft University will assist with a master on urban planning and management and Wageningen University will assist with a master of rural programming and development. Dutch Universities need to contact Vietnamese universities to implement similar models.

Actually, some smaller Dutch universities are already doing so, but the problem is that the large Dutch research universities do not. If small universities continue like this, the Netherlands will gradually lose its prestige. The Dutch government should develop some policies to encourage large research universities to expand their activities in Vietnam. Without such policies in place, the influence of small universities will increase while the influence of the larger universities decreases. In the long term, this process will do more harm than good. Therefore, the Dutch government should support these two programs [Delft University and Wageningen University] to develop a model and gain experience. If Wageningen introduces a curriculum to Vietnam I can assure you it will be an excellent program because I know Wageningen from the time we cooperated in Cần Thơ. I know their curricula very well. These are extremely high quality international curricula.

Until now Wageningen University, Leiden University and Erasmus University have not officially cooperated with Vietnamese institutes to provide offshore degrees. All of them have the capacity to develop large projects in Vietnam, but they need policies from the Dutch government to stimulate and encourage such initiatives. Dutch universities are very practical, as soon as such policies exist and especially if there is a financial

incentive, they will compete for projects. This also provides us with an insight into the Dutch mentality.

Dutch projects at the CTU had a big impact. The CTU received MHO funding for staff training. This created a platform of professionals within the CTU. After completion of the project this team continued to operate on its own according to the standards set in the project. [Considerable numbers of staff belonging to one institute need to be trained at the same time] If each Vietnamese university only has two or three people who receive training, the effect of such a project will be lost. Based on the experiences from Cần Thơ, when the project was completed, everything was working, there existed a new method of working, and all of us shared ideas and worked together.

I also want to remind you that we at the CTU have sent the first students joining the Mekong 1000 scholarship programme to Delft University. However Delft University did not introduce any arrangements [e.g. lower tuition fees for the Mekong 1000 project]. This was very difficult for the provinces [provincial people's committees who sponsor the students partly]. The CTU has learned this the hard way. As a result, the provincial officials send their staff joining the Mekong 1000 programme to be trained at more affordable universities. They have no idea which university is better, as long as it is not Vietnamese. They do not know the difference between Thailand and Germany. They did listen to us, but the Netherlands was too expensive for them.