

## **Interview professor Lê Việt Dũng, vice rector of Can Tho University, September 2009.**

### ***Could you please indicate how cooperation with the Dutch in higher education has influenced this institute?***

CTU has been part of Dutch MHO programmes. One of the programmes trained university staff of CTU in the field of education management. The effects from that training are still apparent. The current generation of high level staff all has strong management qualities because of our cooperation. More concretely, as a result of that training all staff of the faculties and departments is adept in writing plans and projects.

Yes firstly, the introduction of a strategic plan. CTU is the first university in Vietnam to create a clear strategy for its development in its 'strategic plan'. We did this as early as 1996. It was not until four years later, in 2000, that the MoET started to introduce this concept to Vietnamese higher education institutes. While we already worked with this approach, other universities were hardly aware of such a concept and usually worked without clear visions or ideas for the future. In 2000 professor Le Quang Minh and I produced a second strategic plan for the period 2000 to 2005.

Our strategic plan spans five years and it forces us to identify and set clear goals to reach. [In Vietnam rectors of public institutes are appointed by the Minister of Education every five years]. Every new rector has to work with a strategic plan and is responsible for adding new ideas to the strategy and should provide improvements where needed. The Ministry and other universities recognized the quality and uses of our strategic plan and since 2000 other universities have worked with us to learn from our best practices.

The MHO programme also introduced and assisted CTU to implement SWOT methods in its organization and management. All of our staff are now used to the fact that we are working according to SWOT. Meanwhile, we also assist many other universities that are still not acquainted with this concept, how to use SWOT, methods of analysis, evaluation etc.

Another clear result of the MHO projects is quality accreditation. In the past The Netherlands and MoET signed an agreement to cooperate in the field of accreditation, however the project was cancelled. CTU however still developed a project but did not go through the MoET. At present, the MoET is using Dutch accreditation criteria to

evaluate Vietnamese universities<sup>1</sup>. Instead, we worked directly with MHO to acquire accreditation skills. As a result, CTU was one of the very first universities in Vietnam to apply accreditation. In 2003 the MoET choose only 10 [of the 202] universities in Vietnam of which CTU was one. Nowadays, accreditation is a must at all universities in Vietnam. At the CTU we first perform a self-evaluation prior to any evaluations by others. That methodology is a clear result or impact from our cooperation with the Netherlands.

The internal accreditation process at CTU takes place at all levels from the departmental heads, to the design, building and developing of curricula. It also includes the evaluation and accreditation of those curricula. The accreditation process has been one of the most important results of the cooperation with the Netherlands.

Until the year 2000 the alumni from Dutch higher education formed the largest group consisting of about 120 members. That is the reason why the management system at our university is so well organized and stable compared to other institutes. Human resource is the biggest asset of CTU and most of CTU management such as the heads of departments and vice heads of departments have all been trained in the Netherlands or have received training by Dutch experts here in Vietnam.

Secondly, curricula.

The curricula stemming from before 2000 are out of date. At that time [2000] none of the universities had implemented the credit system. Currently almost all universities in Vietnam have introduced this system. Thanks to MHO we were able to implement this system within a year.

Annually, the CTU has a budget to adjust its curricula. Lecturers, departments and faculties with experience adjust the curricula so that they match the social needs of the surrounding region and the world of work. These are modest adjustments.

Almost all staff members such as deans and vice deans, were trained in the MHO programme in the time while they were still staff of departments. Currently although we still use the lessons learned from MHO, the programmes we use are not the exact programmes as they were introduced by MHO. Still the programmes still appear in different forms. We are currently investing in the construction of a publishing house for example.

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<sup>1</sup> The NPT project VNM/057 was implemented to set up and develop a quality assurance system for higher education in Vietnam.

Thirdly, joined programmes

Not many students in this region will be able to join such programmes [reasons: limited financial resources, low level of English]. If the Netherlands offers a full program in Vietnam there will be no complications. But it is complicated if the CTU and Dutch partner aspire to develop a joint programme. Our university is inclined towards such endeavors, but in order to do so a mass survey in the region needs to be done to see how feasible it would be. Which fields need to be taught? Does CTU's infrastructure suffice? Does the CTU have enough qualified staff to teach these subjects? Another point is the often troublesome and complicated administrative procedures in Vietnam. But in principle we are open to ideas.

[In Vietnam] There are two kinds groups [of educational providers attempting to meet the demands] in the current market. The first is group of people who cater to the needs of managers who wish to 'polish their degrees' to strengthen their academic stature and have the funds to pay for their education. The other group provides majors that are closely related to the needs of the wider society such as technology, environment, agriculture, fisheries. The CTU aims to be one of the latter.

***Could you elaborate on the trends and developments of education in Vietnam from now to the year 2015?***

I cannot say much about the trends and developments of education from now to the year 2015. Mainly because the distance between theory and practice is enormous. However, currently in education there exists the clear distinction I mentioned [above]. Society will evaluate the quality of both. The one of lesser quality will no longer be used.

***What can you say about the way your curricula prepare students for society and the world of work after graduation?***

It is difficult to evaluate quality of students because that quality does not only depend on a curriculum alone, but also on the environment where skills and training is provided. It goes without saying that when there are more curricula, students have more choices and may study a wider variety of curricula. Students should at least also receive soft skills training.

***Could you explain to us how you decide to adjust your curricula? Do you take the needs and demands of the society and the world of work around you into account?***

CTU has an academic council, a training council and a research council. Every six months those councils meet with participants both from within and outside the school.

Politicians [people's committees] but also businesses discuss the content of existing and future curricula. They also assist the university to establish which courses are no longer of use to the wider society or the market in their current shape. One weak point of the CTU is that does not have strong relations with businesses in all areas. CTU works closely with business in the fields of economics and business, but does not yet have solid links with organizations working with culture or social sciences.

Furthermore, CTU has a wide network of alumni who are specialized in specific fields. These experts also contribute advice and practical content. In 1999, we had 48 disciplines at CTU. Now in 2009, the number has gone up to 78 disciplines and 12 faculties. The Mekong 1000 programme is also focused on the needs of the wider society<sup>2</sup>.

The CTU also has very effective internship programme in place with private and corporate sectors. It is very successful and implemented in close cooperation with businesses. Basically, depending on the fields they study, almost all students have the possibility to do an internship for their major, their curriculum or as a graduation project. Our education is based on the needs of the market. For example, the Holcim cement factory needs one hundred students per year after they have graduated. So every year the company's representatives come and provide one hundred third-year students with scholarships. For their graduation students often analyze and write their thesis based on problems or cases provided by the company. After graduation students have work immediately. They know what kind of work they will be doing even before they graduate.

Students at CTU study general knowledge in the first two years and study their professional majors plus soft skills when they start with their third year. At that time students will figure out what really interest them and will be able to develop and focus their knowledge according to their interests. For example, at the faculty of mechanics if students develop an interest in machine design, or in production or in making moulds, they will develop soft skills while further focusing on those fields. Another example is agriculture, where for example students want to research pesticides have to gain experience in cultivation and farming. They indicate what they wish to learn and we attempt to provide that to them. We even try to create a close connection between their graduation project and the organization they will join after graduation. Another recent example is a group of students from the faculty of economics who studied the rice

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<sup>2</sup> Mekong 1000 was launched in 2005 as a platform for high-level human resource training project between provinces of the Mekong Delta, Viet Nam. It is aimed at promoting the regional development goals of the Delta through training young university members of staff and staff of the local administration. [http://app.ctu.edu.vn/mk1000/mk1000\\_en/](http://app.ctu.edu.vn/mk1000/mk1000_en/)

export chain in Can Tho City. After their graduation they were able to open a research facility.

***Does the university teach logistics?***

Not yet, at the moment CTU has not yet been able to set up a logistic faculty. Before we set up any faculty we need to identify some main issues. For example do we have enough qualified staff to teach and administer a new faculty? For example, we have use for a faculty of social sciences and humanities for a long time already, but we do not have enough PhDs, MAs.

***What advice would you give Dutch higher education institutes who wish to enter the Vietnamese market?***

This is a difficult question. I could write a PhD thesis about this subject. Our first priority is capacity building, the training of human resources. As I said before, we have as many as 120 Dutch alumni working at our institute. You do not have to explain the Netherlands to any of them anymore and many of them try to stimulate their students to study in the Netherlands. We have a scholarship programme called Mekong 1000 which is funded by provinces including and surrounding Can Tho. [From the 150 candidates who went abroad,] Only 10 students have studied the Netherlands while the majority of our staff is positively biased towards the Netherlands. It provides staff with the opportunity to study abroad.

Many of us advise the provincial leaders to choose the Netherlands for certain fields, but there are two problems. Firstly, they do not know the strengths of Dutch education. Also the Netherlands is not well presented in these regions. They do know the about the US and they believe that whatever comes from the US must be of quality. Secondly, the Netherlands is too expensive compared to other countries even the US. That is why the provincial leaders choose the US instead of the Netherlands. We have sent a student to Wageningen University because of our long standing relations, but they too are expensive. The Mekong 1000 programme has the following funds available for a student: USD 740/ month living costs, up to USD 900/ year for insurances and 10000/ year tuition fee. We hope that Dutch institutes will lower their tuition fee so that we can send more students to the Netherlands. In 2009, the Mekong 1000 project will seek further cooperation with international partners to support candidates and the Dutch institutes are kindly requested to assist us so that our staff and provincial officials may reap the benefits from Dutch education.

Apart from this opportunity, more than 100 of our lecturers have worked with, studied and researched under Dutch professors so it will be easy for two universities [Can Tho

and a Dutch institute] to discuss future cooperation quite specifically. But there are some barriers such as the current administrative procedures. All such projects are required to go through the Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI). This seriously slows down most plans. It may even be the case that the two sides have agreed upon a project but that the MPI does not and then we cannot proceed.

***What about the legal side of such forms of cooperation? Do you have to work with the MoET?***

Yes, we have to follow the regulations. There are no complications there.

***If we limit ourselves here to your curricula, does the university have curricula in place of sufficient standards content wise and taught in a foreign language to cooperate with Dutch institutes?***

Yes, but only in some fields because the twelve faculties at the CTU are not all of the same level. Some faculties are staffed with 50% PhD lecturers and some faculties only have a percentage of 10% PhDs. Many lecturers are capable of teaching in English, for example in the fields of bio-tech, environment and technology.

***Do you see any obstacles or opportunities to international cooperation related to the culture of the partners?***

Although we have over 100 people who understand the Dutch and have worked with the Dutch it is still complicated. We have to understand each other. Of course working with the Dutch is different from working with the Japanese, but the CTU has the advantage of a long-lasting relationship with the Dutch so we are ready to cooperate with Dutch partners in some disciplines.

***Could you tell us something about the infrastructure at the CTU with regards to for example student exchange?***

Because we have had several large investments in infrastructure through the ADB and the World Bank, our equipment is of international standards in some faculties, for example in the field of biotechnology, mechanics and environmental studies. It is not of the same standard as in the Netherlands, but close enough to international standards. Japanese professors often come over and even experts from Ho Chi Minh City come to our institute to make use of our facilities. In the strategic plan the university aims to invest millions of dollars in facilities [in order to provide facilities that enable us to] reach a certain status [become a research university].

***Could you tell us something about the makeup of your staff?***

We have a limited number of professors and associated professors: less than 30. We have 148 PhDs teaching at the CTU. Currently we have 145 people studying for PhDs of which 90% have gone overseas and 10% have stayed in Vietnam because they are a little older. We have approximately 600 Masters working here comprising 60% of our lecturers.

***Could you tell us something about the students at CTU?***

We have a total of around 25.000 students, including 900 PhD students, 1100 master students, 7000 BA students and 3000 students who are professionals working during the day and studying in the evenings. On top of that we have approximately 13000 part time students. This year the MoET granted us permission to attract 1100 Masters Students. Our strategy is to limit the influx of students to 25.000 by 2020 but to increase the number of MA students. Only when we achieve that will we be able to become a research university.

***Many Dutch higher education institutes do not accept Vietnamese BA holders when they apply for MA courses in NL. What has the CTU done to evaluate and prove the quality of its students in order to assist them to follow MA courses in the Netherlands?***

We are evaluating and accrediting as we speak. At CTU, we have annual internal accreditations biannual external accreditations. As I said earlier, MoET is using Dutch accreditation criteria to evaluate Vietnamese universities. The CTU has two organizations that evaluates and ranks the university. The CTU ranks 39 in the 100 top of ASEAN universities. In addition according to Australian Education Institute's standards of the AEI, the CTU belongs to the first group [of three groups]. For example, CTU's website is evaluated every three months and the content is updated by each faculty and department. If there are no timely updates an evaluation will be sent to all in the University.