

Panel of “Leading American Experts”
Advises Vietnamese Government
on Higher Education

by Neal Koblitz

At a long discussion on December 27, 2007 with two officials of the Ministry of Education and Training — a meeting set up at the urging of Ngô Việt Trung, Director of the Hanoi Math Institute — Ann and I tried unsuccessfully to convince them that it would not be cost-effective to use Vietnamese government money to pay for American professors to come to Vietnam to teach at the undergraduate level in pilot programs for improvement of university education. (We emphasized that such visits would be fine if American funding paid for them — for example, through the Fulbright program.) We argued that Vietnamese money should be spent instead to improve salaries and working conditions for Vietnamese professors.

A large number of Vietnamese officials seem to believe that the American system of education at all levels is a great success story, and that Vietnam should try to imitate it. In addition, since the normalization of relations with the United States in 1995, many of the Americans who have visited Vietnam have been enthusiastic advocates of exporting the American way of doing things to other countries. (This was not the viewpoint of most Americans who visited Vietnam in earlier years.)

During our meeting at the education ministry we were given a copy of a report by “leading American experts” (the phrase used in the Executive Summary to describe the authors) titled “Observations on Undergraduate Education in Computer Science, Electrical Engineering, and Physics at Select Universities in Vietnam.” Most of the report, written under the auspices of the U.S. National Academies, is devoted to making a long list of recommendations for overhauling the administration of higher education in Vietnam. (Only a small part is devoted to the specific fields of science mentioned in the title.) The observations are based on a 13-day visit to Vietnam in May 2006 by three of the report’s authors and a 6-day visit by the other two.

Only two of the five authors are actually professors of scientific subjects. Of the “leading American experts” two others are university administrators, and one is an Associate Professor Emeritus of Education at Syracuse University. And all five are male.

Some of the report’s recommendations are sensible — for example, that scientists at Vietnam’s research institutes should do much more undergraduate teaching. I made a similar recommendation a quarter-century ago. In 1983 after Ann and I returned from a month-long stay in Vietnam, I wrote a “Confidential Report” that Ed Cooperman (chair of the U.S. Committee for Scientific Cooperation with Vietnam) distributed to mathematicians, scientists, and government officials in Vietnam. In that report I commented:

Math Institute members should be encouraged to take a larger part in the system of higher education.... In the U.S., we believe in a close connection between basic research and teaching. In Vietnam the organizational structure has created divisions between these two aspects. Special efforts are needed to re-integrate research and teaching.

At present the members of the Hanoi Math Institute are much more involved in undergraduate teaching than in 1983, but many other science institutes still have little or no connection with undergraduate education. So this recommendation in the National Academies' report makes sense.

On the other hand, some of the recommendations of the "leading American experts" are simply foolish. On page 4 of the Executive Summary they urge every Vietnamese university to create offices of the administration called "Centers of Teaching and Learning Excellence" and "University Assessment Centers" to deal with pedagogy and also "offices of institutional research" to encourage faculty research. In addition, they recommend establishing much more elaborate institutional accreditation procedures, "as well as developing and implementing a system for course evaluation and annual review of faculty." In other words, they are calling for Vietnam to imitate the current system in American universities, even though this will necessitate a vast expansion in the amount of paperwork at Vietnamese universities and a major increase in the number of bureaucrats (without a corresponding increase in the number of professors).

In my recently-published book *Random Curves: Journeys of a Mathematician*, I comment on the damage to higher education in America caused by the cancerous growth of university bureaucracies in recent years:

[One] reason why college costs in the U.S. have outpaced inflation ... is that university budgets have to pay for a mushrooming bureaucracy that includes an army of deans, associate deans, assistant deans, associate provosts, assistant provosts, and so on, all of whom demand high salaries, nicely furnished offices, and secretarial support.

In America, excessive bureaucracy is like a huge dead weight around the neck of higher education. In Vietnam, which is a much poorer country than the U.S., the negative effects of an increase in bureaucracy will be even greater. Only people who are ignorant of Vietnam and who lack critical judgment about their own university system could make these recommendations for increased bureaucratization of higher education in Vietnam.

As mentioned before, the five authors of the National Academies' report are all male. Not a word in the report is devoted to gender equality, although, as Ann and I have long known, underrepresentation of women in science and technology is a crucially important issue in higher education in Vietnam. In my 1983 "Confidential Report" I commented on this and criticized the Polytechnic University for having only 8% female students. The proportion of women studying technical subjects seems to be higher now, although at our lunch with the President and Vice-President of the Vietnam Women's Union they said that the percent is still low at the Polytechnic University (they did not know the exact figure). The new Law on Gender Equality calls upon the country to correct the imbalance between men and women in all areas of society. Many Vietnamese are well aware that concrete measures to increase women's participation in science and technology are needed in order for Vietnam to reach its full potential in these areas. Yet the report commissioned by the U.S. National Academies has nothing to say about this, and none of the recommendations in it concern gender equality.

Thus, as Americans with a longstanding interest in Vietnam, Ann and I found the report by "leading American experts" to be a big disappointment.