

## **Lower Secondary School Curriculum Development in Vietnam**

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The increasing complexity of Vietnam's economic activities, together with a growing number of graduates, is creating substantial social demand for a better-educated workforce beyond the Vietnamese primary school. While primary education provides basic cognitive skills, lower secondary education provides a foundation for producing a flexible, productive and globally competitive workforce to sustain high economic growth. Accordingly, lower secondary school enrollments have increased significantly from 3.1 million students in 1993 to 5.3 million students in 1997 for an average annual enrollment growth rate of about 14 percent (Nguyen Dang Thin, 2000). Enrollment is projected by the Vietnamese government to reach 7.9 million students in 2005. This rapid expansion has resulted in deteriorating quality of lower secondary education, which is aggravated by double and triple scheduling of classes in schools to accommodate such rapid expansion. The poor quality of lower secondary education is caused mainly by unsuitable curriculum and shortages of physical and human resources (including textbooks, instructional materials, and qualified teachers). In 1997, almost 20 percent of lower secondary teachers remained under-qualified. The lack of adequately trained teachers to meet the demand of a modern curriculum and to deliver teaching effectively is a major cause of internal inefficiency in lower secondary education.

### **The Need for Reform**

Poor teaching quality stems from unsuitable teacher training curriculum and teaching methods, overcrowded facilities, and lack of management capacity. Classroom teaching in Vietnam seems to focus on rote memorization rather than on active learning. Teachers trained in one major subject and one minor subject do not provided for a well-rounded academic background. This results in overspecialization in subject knowledge and inefficient utilization of teaching staff across subject groups since they are generally unable to teach their minor subjects. While in-service teacher training can improve teaching performance of existing lower secondary teachers, the training of new teachers through an improved pre-service system is needed as a long-term solution to the problem of low teaching quality (ADB, 2001). This will enhance overall teacher performance and their ability to handle a new lower secondary school curriculum and in-service teacher training system being developed through the Asian Development Bank. It will also prepare a sufficiently large number of qualified new lower secondary school teachers in the near future to at least maintain or improve a student teacher ratio of almost 30:1 (UNESCO, 1999).

Another problem relating to teacher training is weak institutional capacity in management and operations due to insufficiently qualified staff and weak coordination among government agencies involved in providing teacher training (including the Ministry of Education and Training, Departments of Education and Training, and Teacher Training Colleges). Enrollment access to Teacher Training Colleges in

disadvantaged areas is extremely limited despite the nationwide doubling of annual Teacher Training College enrollments in lower secondary education programs during recent years from 7,000 to 15,000 students per year. This is indicated by a high dropout and repeat rate of 8.1 percent and 2.3 percent, respectively, in 1997 (UNESCO 2000). This dropout rate is also tied to inadequate physical space in the Teacher Training Colleges (including classrooms, libraries, laboratory space, and study areas) and to inadequate incentives to encourage a higher enrollment of disadvantaged groups, especially ethnic minorities (GOPA, 2001).

### **A Proposal for Reforming Lower Secondary Teacher Training**

The government of Vietnam requested the Asian Development Bank to continue its lead role in the development of lower secondary education through a project to improve the lower secondary, pre-service teacher education system. This project was in line with the bank's Country Operational Strategy, which emphasizes efficient economic growth with equity, poverty reduction, and environmentally sound development. This project was also in line with the government's priority in the education sector, which emphasizes teacher-training development as a key strategy for basic education reform. While the government's strategy focused on physical capacity expansion of Teacher Training Colleges to catch up with the rapid expansion of lower secondary enrollment, this project also complemented the governments efforts for focusing on quality improvements within the teacher training curriculum and institutional capacity strengthening of government agencies involved in providing teacher training. The authors of this article were selected by the project to help specifically in the development of the new lower secondary teacher-training curriculum and in the transition component supporting access to the system by ethnic minority candidates.

### **Objectives of the Project**

The overall objective of this project was to assist the Vietnam government in improving the quality and efficiency of lower secondary education students by providing sufficient numbers of qualified teachers. The specific objectives of the project are to improve the quality, access, and institutional capacity of the lower secondary, pre-service teacher training system. The project had three components to meet those objectives:

- 1) Improve the quality of lower secondary pre-service teacher training programs (redesigning the teacher training college curriculum; revising student textbooks and teacher manuals; provide these materials to libraries and to disadvantaged students; and upgrade knowledge of teacher training college teachers;
- 2) Improve facilities and access to teacher training colleges in selected disadvantaged provinces by providing facilities and a transition program to improve pre-entrance qualifications to teacher training colleges for ethnic minorities (Rambo, 1996); and
- 3) Strengthen the institutional capacity of government agencies involved in pre-service teacher training (by providing training in management and technical skills to relevant staff at the central, provincial, and college level involved in teacher training support and sustain the reforms.

#### **Specific Components Delivered to Increase Program Quality in Lower Secondary Teacher Training**

The following components were designed to increase program quality:

- 1) **Curriculum Redesign:** The existing teacher training college curriculum (including the syllabus for each teacher training college subject, teaching methodology, and student assessment system) was redesigned to meet the recent requirements of the new lower secondary school curriculum. A double major system was instituted at the teacher training colleges and the combination of major-minor subjects were reorganized in line with the new lower secondary school subject groups as well as with the demand for teachers in each subject group. The revised curriculum incorporated environmental topics in relevant subjects to create environmental awareness among teacher training college teachers and students. Teacher methodology was revised to focus on a student-centered approach. Special teaching methods and teaching aids for ethnic minorities were designed to make classroom instruction more relevant and interesting. Prior to the curriculum redesign, a Curriculum Steering Committee (chaired by the Ministry of Education and Training's key policy maker on teacher training and consisting of policy experts on lower secondary education) was established to determine key directions required to adjust the existing teacher training college programs, facilitate the approval process of the proposed adjustments, determine key directions of changes in the existing teacher training college curriculum, and facilitate the approval process after the curriculum has been revised as well as facilitate other approval processes needed for the remaining activities.

- 2) **Instructional Materials Development:** Under the area of instructional materials development, about 300 student textbooks for 15 teacher-training subjects (taught over a three year curriculum) have been written along with 45 teacher manuals developed in accordance with the new curriculum by local textbook writers, with the assistance of international consultants and domestic consultants. The consultants also developed teaching aids for the new curriculum using local materials with the assistance of the textbook writing team. A team of Internet specialists translated the revised curriculum, textbooks, and teacher manuals into web-based modules for inclusion on an Internet website to be used mainly by teacher training college teachers for self-study regarding the new curriculum and textbooks. After the new student textbooks and teacher manuals were written they were pilot tested prior to nationwide implementation. Revisions of this curriculum and these textbooks will be finalized prior to nationwide implementation to take into account of the results of the pilot testing.
- 3) **Provision of Instructional Materials:** Instructional materials have been provided to the libraries of some 61 teacher training colleges. About 50 sets of the student textbooks and 10 sets of the teacher manuals for all subjects taught in the three-year curriculum have been provided. A textbook loan program has been developed by an international consultant to allow the poorest 50 percent of the teacher training college students (especially in the 10 selected disadvantaged provinces) to have access to free textbooks. This will cover about 12,000 students. About 40 members of the local administrative staff have been trained to operate, monitor and sustain this program.
- 4) **Orientation to New Curriculum and Textbooks:** A series of short-term in-country workshops have been provided in order to orient educators with the new curriculum, syllabi, and, teaching methods, student assessment system, student textbooks, and teacher manuals. Periodic subject implementation reviews have been instituted including program monitoring and evaluation until the entire project is completed.
- 5) **Upgrading Teacher Training College Instructor Qualifications:** In order to upgrade teacher training college instructor qualifications a limited number on-year overseas scholarships (about 200) have to be provided for masters degree studies and English language training. Joint MA programs will be established with at least three teacher-training universities that have strong existing linkages with foreign universities. About 45 teacher training college lead subject teachers will also be sent for overseas training in short term courses on teaching methodologies for their subject areas.
- 6) **Support for Model Teacher Training Colleges:** A key strategy in accomplished quality improvement goals is the development of three model teacher training colleges in three selected cities in the North,

Central, and Southern areas of Vietnam where Teacher Training Universities are already present (Hanoi, Hue, and Ho Chi Minh City) to act as hubs in the reform process. In these model schools the new curriculum and materials will be piloted and disseminated and necessary training will be provided to staff from other provinces. In developing this model, key learning facilities will need to be provided in each of the three institutions to facilitate students learning and to be used as venues for conducting training at other institutions throughout the three regions. All teacher-training colleges have been faced with acute shortages and overcrowded classrooms the provision of key learning facilities will be based on the concept of effective utilization of limited space. This will not only reduce the problem of space shortages but will also help organized and utilize the new space effectively for the purposes of improving the learning environment and encouraging modern practices of teaching methods included in the key learning facilities to be supported by the project for each of the three model institutions. The project has also equipped the key learning facilities with furniture, Library materials, equipment, (computers software, desktop publishing materials, audio-visual and multimedia equipment).

- 7) **Establishment of External Assessment Mechanisms.** An external assessment system earlier abolished in Vietnam is now reestablished. The project provided operational support and training for the design, development, piloting and implementation of a fully computerized quality assurance system to standardized teacher training college performance and certification through employing external examinations. Staff has been provided with short-term overseas study visits for orientation to modern quality assurance systems. This has also led to in-country training in test construction, grading and quality assurance system implementation.
- 8) **Improve Facilities and Access to Teacher Training Colleges in Disadvantaged Provinces:** Ten provinces were selected on the basis of poverty (in terms of provincial income and shortage of facilities) and geographical spread so that all of the selected provinces captured different disadvantages characteristics (large proportions of ethnic minorities in the North, flood-prone nature in the Central and South, and new separated provinces in need of basic facilities in the Central and South. Key learning facilities will be constructed in each of these disadvantaged provinces. These will be similar to those constructed at the three model teacher training colleges. They will, however, also include civil works construction, laboratory equipment training, short-term overseas study for staff and in-country training on language, technology and science laboratories.
- 9) **Improved Teacher Training College Pre-entrance Qualifications of Ethnic Minorities:** A special transition program to enhance the pre-entrance qualifications of prospective ethnic minority teachers

(about 4000 students) has been designed and implemented. Ethnic minority students who performed well in the transition program have been admitted to the teacher training colleges under the governments scholarship program. This program consists of conducting campaigns to show the advantage of having ethnic minority communities send their children to school and well as establishing coordination mechanisms between provincial education offices in meeting teacher training college enrollment targets. Preparatory courses aimed at consolidating foundation knowledge at the secondary level have been developed supported by an intensive tuition program. Special remedial courses have been provided to ethnic minority students. These courses have smaller class sizes than normal classes to allow special attention to be given to the students. Orientation programs have been delivered for newly enrolled ethnic minority students to allow teacher-training colleges to learn about their new students and their particular needs. A new student mentor support program has also been established to partner ethnic minority students with urban students willing to assist their peers in study.

#### **Comparison of the Lower Secondary Curriculum (1996 vs. 2002)**

The author's involvement in this project led to two trips to Vietnam in 2002. The first was to set up the curriculum development aspects of the project. During the second trip the authors returned to Vietnam for a three-month tour to finalize the rewritten curriculum and facilitate the transition program for ethnic minority students. What follows are the results of that work (Baker, 2002).

#### **Lower Secondary Curriculum Comparison**

No	Curriculum Component	1996 Curriculum		Proposed Curriculum Framework	
		Credits	Proportion of the total credits (%)	Credits	Proportion of the total credits (%)
<b>1</b>	<b>Total credits</b>	<b>170</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>170</b>	
<b>2</b>	<b>General Education</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>41.7</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>32.4</b>
	Marxism-Leninism, Ho Chi Minh's Ideology	18		21	
	Foreign Language	20		10	
	Physical Education	3		4	
	National Defense Education	4		4	
	Basic General Education-	19		10	

	Compulsory				
	Basic General Education-Optional	6		6	
<b>3</b>	<b>Professional Education</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>58.8</b>	<b>115</b>	<b>67.6</b>
	* Pedagogy	38	22.3	40	
	Psychology	8		7	
	Education	11		8	
	HCM Young Pioneers' Union	0		1	
	School Visit	2		3	
	Practicum	6		6	
	Training Professional Skills at TTC	0		3	
	Major 1 Methodology	7		7	
	Major 2 Methodology	4		5	
	* Major 1	45	26.5	45	26.5
	* Major 2	17	10	30	17.6

### **The Curricular Process and Rationale for Instituting the Above Model**

1. Maintain the number of 170 credits in the total of the curriculum as the same as the 1996 curriculum. Do not use the 180 credits as stipulated in the new regulations by the Higher Education Department. The rationale is because of the fact that each week of the 30-week academic year consists of two credits equivalent to 30 periods of theoretical learning. If practice time makes up one third, there will be 20 periods for practice plus 20 periods for theoretical learning (1 period of theoretical learning equivalent to 2 periods of practice). With 5 days of study a week, there will be 8 periods per day. This will lead to insufficient time for self-study.

However, depending on the needs and conditions of specific universities, from 1 to 10 credits will be added to the fixed 170-credit total. These 1-10 credits will be allocated for optional subjects of specialized knowledge and professional skills. This addition to the curriculum framework will make it easier for universities when training costs exceeds 170 credits.

2. The ratio between general education and professional education is 55/115 credits or 32.4/67% of the total credits in the training course, which is more sensible in comparison with the 1996 curriculum.

There will be the following changes in the general education curriculum:

- 2.1. Add 3 more credits for Marxist-Leninist study in order to complete Ho Chi Minh's ideology component in accordance with the guidance of higher authorities.
- 2.2. Add 1 more credit to physical education (5 credits- compulsory for the higher education).
- 2.3. Reduce 9 credits in Basic General Education. In the 1996 curriculum, there were many basic general components that seemed inappropriate for teachers and constrained the curriculum to satisfy general regulations. According to the new regulations by the Higher Education Department, the volume of general education knowledge is still large in providing for students and thus making for a solid foundation for teaching integrated subjects. However in the TTCs curriculum, subjects of professional education contain a significant amount of general knowledge so that there could be a reduction in credits of basic general education. In the general education component, there should be 2 credits for basic instructional technology/computers compulsory for every student in teacher training, showing no change for the six credits in optional general education (for example population education, environment, HIV/AIDS prevention and control, drug abuse, household economics) for each department to select.
- 2.4. Reduce the credits in foreign language to 10 in accordance with the new regulation by the MOET. According to 1999-2000 statistics, the proportion of pupils who study a foreign language in the country as a whole is 9,8% at elementary schools, 74% at lower secondary schools, and 95% at upper secondary schools. English accounts for 97,9%, French accounts for 1,69%, Russian: 0,32% and Chinese: 0,03%. The 3 year-foreign language component at upper secondary schools consists of 297 periods, and the 4 year-component at lower secondary schools consists of 399 periods. A pupil, who continuously studies a foreign language from his class 6<sup>th</sup> grade to 12<sup>th</sup> grade, has a total of 696 periods. Therefore, the foreign language level of students being enrolled in the TTCs should be improved instead of previously being at the beginner level. The situation will be better if all students before enrolling in the TTCs have learned sufficient foreign language at lower secondary schools and upper secondary schools. TTCs, who wish to raise credits for foreign languages, may choose the range between 170 and 180 credits in the whole course of study.
3. The ratio between professional pedagogical education and training will be 75/40 credits or 65.2/34.8% (compared with 115 credits of professional education).



There will be the following changes in teaching/pedagogy education:

- Reduce one credit in psychology
- Reduce three credits in pedagogy (similar to the new curriculum of the Teacher Training Universities), in order to reduce repeated theories, and transfer the practice component to professional training.
- Restore one credit in the Ho Chi Minh Young Pioneers' Union (equivalent to 60 periods of practice), to two periods per week per semester (or allocated in a concentrated fashion in a full-time week).
- Increase one credit (equivalent to one week) for practice teaching.
- Restore 3 credits in regular professional training (2 periods a week during the whole three-year course).
- Add one credit for teaching methodologies (due to the increased time for Major 2).

4. In the field of professional education, Major 1 consists of 45 credits, assuring the required level of the curriculum framework for colleges and universities. Credits for Major 2 increase from 17 to 30, facilitating a better teaching of Major 2 as well as a good foundation for teachers who teach 2 subjects in order to be able to take on integrated subjects later. The ratio between Major 1 to Major 2 is adjusted from 70/30 to 60/40.

The professional education of each field of study consists of a compulsory component for every pre-service teacher and an Elective component for pre-service teachers. The Elective component accounts for 3 to 5% of the whole professional education program. Practicum (experiments, discussion, exercises, professional practice, extracurricular visits, and research) makes up 30 to 40% of the 75 credits of professional education. According to the teaching staff, equipment, and facilities of each university and field of study, there should be a group of pre-service teachers encouraged to do scientific research. The volume of research, (thesis) is 1 – 2 credits (equivalent to 60 – 120 periods) taken out of the 10 credit-reserve that has been added to the fixed 170-credits.

## **Summary**

This article goes from the theoretical background and description of a proposed curriculum development project in Vietnam to its specifics and delivery. Although the infrastructure for a new lower secondary teacher-training curriculum has been built, the entire process has a long way to go. A great deal of training, educational delivery and evaluation will have to be done before results will be apparent. It is hoped that through a great number of people working closely together, (Vietnamese, Germans, British and Americans) that a long lasting, systemic process of change will occur, insuring a sound, academic, person centered approach to teacher education in this very exciting country.

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