

# 1<sup>ST</sup> VEF ALUMNI CONFERENCE

[ OPPORTUNITIES & CHALLENGES ]

Conference Notes | Friday, December 12, 2008 | Hanoi, Vietnam

## Introduction

*"...utilizing VEF Alumni to better Vietnam education in science, math, medicine, and technology"*

- VEF Executive Director Dr. Vo Van Toi

## Past, Present, and Future

2003-2008 VEF Achievements and Activities Packet is now available.

This conference is to gather information and concerns to discuss plans for 2009-2012.

In 2008, the U.S. elected a new president and the first ever Vietnamese American to the U.S. Senate.

Vietnam continues to grow at a rapid pace.

### Resource: U.S. Embassy Alumni Group

- Website: <http://www.alumni.state.gov>
- Alumni can apply for special project funding.
- Goal of U.S. Embassy is to support Alumni.

### VEF since 2003:

#### 267 Fellows

19 Post-Doctoral Scholars

4 U.S. University Professors to Vietnam

#### 42 Alumni (16%)

- 11 PhD recipients
- 30 MS recipients
- 1 professional degree
- 27 in Vietnam
- 67% in corporate sector
- 25% in academia
- 8% in private enterprise
- 11 Visiting Scholars have returned to teach and do research in Vietnam universities

## Dr. Nguyen Quan, Vice Minister, Ministry of Science and Technology

### Opportunities

- VEF and Alumni play an important role in the development of Vietnam's economy and education.
- Vietnamese students have access to top U.S. universities.
- VEF helps to promote the relationship between the U.S. and Vietnam.
- Vietnam is gradually industrializing its economy and integrating with the world economy.
- Educational institutions are starting down the path to autonomy.

### Challenges

- Fast development, but overall the country is still poor.
- Policy of the government in providing a good environment for highly qualified people still needs improvement.
- Number of returning alumni is small.
- Number of alumni in public sector is small.
- Government must create opportunities to attract alumni to work in the public sector.

# Session 1: Opportunities and Challenges in Industry and in Entrepreneurial Endeavors

## Question & Answer Session

How can the public sector attract alumni and improve education and research opportunities in Vietnam?

- There are a lot of opportunities to lead in universities.
- The salary is not high and should be improved, but the opportunity to serve is much higher.

Do you have any advice for starting your own business?

- Set clear guidelines and have a vision.
- Ship analogy: the smallest mistake from the point of departure can lead to a big mistake and missing the goal.

## Mr. Dang Thanh Tam, Chairman of Saigon

**Investment Group** shares his experience as a student and as an entrepreneur. He acknowledges that with the knowledge and experiences gained by VEF alumni, they will be able to greatly contribute to the country.

## Highlights

- Training programs were not as good as today.
- Many things studied could not be applied in life.
- Cannot expect the government to provide a perfect environment for investment.
- Must make recommendations for change.
- Many people say that investment in southern Vietnam is easier, but that should not keep us from investing in northern Vietnam.
- Gradually, state corporations can be privatized.
- Hanoi graduates seem to prefer working with the state, then enterprise, and finally entrepreneurship. Ho Chi Minh City graduates are opposite.
- In 2007, inflation was too high and the government reacted too late.
- The economy is like the human body; must take care of the whole body.
- GDP of state-owned companies is lower than other sectors (15% for foreign owned).
- According to the Economist, opening private companies will contribute to the country as a whole.
- More opportunities in the private sector

**Mr. Nguyen Thanh Son, VEF alumna and founder of EQuest** talks about creating a start-up company.

- Looking to establish a training center/university like Phuong Dong university in China
- When creating a start-up, look for counterparts and not friends.
- Tips for how to set up a start-up can be found by viewing the slides provided in this link:

<http://www.vef.gov/news.php?id=208>.

## Session 1: Opportunities and Challenges in Industry and in Entrepreneurial Endeavors (continued)

### Mr. Tran Van Hoa, Deputy General Director of PetroVietnam

Automation and IT works for a state-owned company. He talks about the challenges facing Vietnam's development.

PetroVietnam contributes 30% to Vietnam's GDP and has 30,000+ employees.

#### Challenges for PetroVietnam

- Petroleum countries have the latest technology and are more developed, but Vietnam is not.
- Working with Vietnam, you have to take into account the conditions of the country; environment is not perfect.
- Universities still need books and computers.
- Cannot compare salaries of Vietnam to other countries; must compare work to foreign counterparts, then ask that question.
- Must learn how to find petrol to better exploit the resource.

#### Does PetroVietnam have research facilities?

- 40 researchers, 20 training organizations
- Vung Tau division for training labor, Center for Oil Exploitation, Center for Technology Transfer, Divisions of Training and Human Resources Development
- Looking to establish Petro University and develop a research center.
- Partnering with 6 universities
- Scholarships are conditional; must work for PetroVietnam after graduation.

#### Addressing Globalization

- Increased work with foreign partners
- Must privatize to further develop economy; private ownership would help the company to manage itself better.

#### Addressing the Human Resources Issue

- Machines can be purchased, but the lack of a skilled labor force to operate the machines make them useless.
- Many training programs with UK, US, and Russian universities and institutions.
- PetroVietnam has over 100 students abroad to pursue their MS or PhD degrees. All fees are paid for.
- Must train Vietnamese staff in management skills.

#### In state-owned companies like PetroVietnam, what is the policy for salary and filling management positions?

- Guidelines provided by the state and determined by working time and position, however, must change to attract talent.
- only when people quit do companies realize the value of a person.

#### How is Vietnam working to help entrepreneurial businesses?

- IT companies are subsidized by the government
- Training programs are subsidized by the government

#### Is PetroVietnam considering biofuels?

- Currently in the planning stages to produce biofuels and experiment with PetroTaxi
- Looking to set up a company in Dung Quoc; needing capital and human resources.
- Looking into many technologies, including nano-technology.

# Session 2: Funding Opportunities from Government and Non-Government Organizations

## Dr. Phan Hong Son, Executive Director for Vietnam

**National Science Foundation (VNSF)** talks about research in Vietnam. Currently, it is difficult to determine the [successful] outcome of research activities in Vietnam, and of products made in Vietnam.

- Looking to support research for the humanities
- New funding programs will be available in 2009
- Looking to cooperate with VEF

## Is there a process of evaluating research when looking at results?

- The Ministry of Science and Technology is looking at the effectiveness of research and return on investment.
- Looking to increase the quality of Vietnamese research by [encouraging researchers to publish] in scientific journals.
- Trying to promote research activities at universities and in higher education.

## Difficulties and Barriers to Research

- Language. Most research is published in English.
- VNSF encourages research proposals to be submitted in Vietnamese and English.
- VNSF wants to build a database of international reviewers to help with research papers (It was recommended to tap VEF alumni and connect with their advisors.)
- The outcome of peer-reviewed research in Vietnam is not good.
- Some research is not worth funding, but still gets funding.

## Comments

- To gauge success of research, **look at results and how it affects Vietnam**, not the number of published papers.
- Research **training** is needed.
- **Integrate research** into teaching universities.
- Add a course on the **OpenCourseWare** system on how to properly conduct research.

## Comments

- Change rules from only supporting equipment and materials [to supporting a lifestyle (family) as well].
- Establish a research center in public health [to focus on women researchers].

**Mr. Eren Zink, International Foundation of Science (IFS)** presents information and statistics about IFS, particularly, that relating to Vietnam.

Website: <http://www.ifs.se> Slides: <http://www.vef.gov/news.php?id=208>.

- Reviewers review papers and advise on research for free.
- Maximum grant = US\$12,000
- Number of women researchers in Vietnam has decreased.
- Deadline for applications: June 30<sup>th</sup> and December 31<sup>st</sup>
- Infrastructure for conducting research in Vietnam is inadequate.
  - Incentives/Salary for research career is not sufficient to support a family- a big concern in Vietnam.

# Session 3: Challenges and Opportunities in Research and Academia

**Prof. Dr. Pham Trong Quat, Vice President of Vietnam National University (VNU) – Hanoi** speaks about VNU and what is being done to support the research of returning VEF Fellows including the availability of **common libraries and departmental libraries**, as well as **connections to universities throughout the world to access research data**.

**Dr. Nguyen Van Toan, President of Hue University** discusses thoughts about research in Vietnam.

- VEF Board should visit universities in Vietnam, including disadvantaged areas.
- Without international cooperation and support of advanced universities in the world, development of education in Vietnam will be slow.
- Must change from self-reliance to a socially-oriented approach.
- Many Vietnam universities think highly of themselves, but the world community evaluates them differently.
- Must focus on human resources and a high caliber faculty.
- Very few professors want to work in central Vietnam; difficulty in finding staff and international collaboration.
- Salary is low and needs improvement.
- Autonomy in public education is not good.
- The revenue of a university is subject to state regulations, making it difficult to pay for high-quality staff.
- Universities should collaborate with VEF; set up funds to help with research.
- Hue University and central Vietnam must improve competitiveness in order to attract high-quality staff and research.

**Dr. Nguyen Quoc Vong, Director for the Center for International Development at Hanoi University of Agriculture** shares data about agriculture, research, and graduates entering the workforce.

## Agriculture in Vietnam

- 21.8% of GDP in 2004
- 60% of employment
- Accounted for 30% of exports in 2005
- World's top 5 exporter of rice, coffee, rubber, cashews, pepper, and tea

## Report on Vietnamese Graduates by VTV1 on December 8, 2008

- 19% have no working skills
- 32% have no English skills
- 50% needs retraining
- The traditional education system needs to be changed; curriculum, teacher, student.

# Session 4: Mentors and Research Advisors – Alumni Ties

**Dr. Hasan Davulcu from Arizona State University** discusses how globalization will expand into education for collaborative efforts that include research.

**Dr. R. Sue Day from the University of Texas School of Public Health** discusses nutritional research in Vietnam. Currently, there is research in Vietnam to find a relationship between physical activities and body weight among the Vietnamese. The slides for this presentation can be found at <http://www.vef.gov/news.php?id=208>.

**Dean Van Gundy from the University of California - Riverside** presents information about the university and the opportunities available to prospective VEF Fellows.

## Session 5: Training of Trainers

In this session, panel members (*all returning VEF Visiting Scholars*) shared the various ways they trained other instructors and researchers upon returning to Vietnam from studying abroad.

### Participants

- Dr. Ngo Thi Phuong Dung, Deputy Director of BiRDI (Biotechnology Research and Development Institute) at Can Tho University (CTU)  
Slides: <http://www.vef.gov/news.php?id=208>.
- Dr. Dinh Thanh Viet from the University of Da Nang  
Slides: <http://www.vef.gov/news.php?id=208>.
- Dr. Ngo Thi Xuyen, Advisor for the Advanced Training Program in Crop Science between Hanoi Agricultural University and UC Davis
- Dr. Nguyen Linh Trung from Vietnam National University – Hanoi  
Slides: <http://www.vef.gov/news.php?id=208>.

### Highlights

- CTU has a beer and distilled spirits research center.
- Maintain contact with trainers, colleagues, and researchers through Google Groups.
- New curriculum development in Vietnam is a matter of copying a previously made curriculum due to the lack of knowledge and experience with curriculum development.
- Vietnam needs to consider professional ethics and seek accreditation for higher education.

# Roundtable and Wrap-Up

**Focus: How to involve alumni, build infrastructure for research and involve the government.**

**Dr. Nguyen Xuan Vang, Director General of Vietnam International Education Development (VIED)**  
E-mail: [vang@vied.vn](mailto:vang@vied.vn)

- VIED plans to send 500 VN students abroad each year.
- In 2008, 864 applicants were approved for sponsorship to study abroad.
- VIED was set up 6 months ago and is looking to hire.
- VIED was created in response to produce 20,000 PhDs by 2020.
- The Task Force for Education will present its findings at the U.S. Ambassador's Education Conference in Ho Chi Minh City in January.
- Training of Trainers is a priority for the Ministry of Education and Training.
- The Prime Minister of Vietnam has issued a foreign language strategy for Vietnam
  - English as a competitive advantage (2<sup>nd</sup> language) by 2020
  - Implement English-taught courses at Vietnamese universities
- VIED gives aid to disadvantaged families.
- Must return to Vietnam and serve three years for each year abroad.
- Research funds available at the Ministry; 200,000 billion VND a year
  - Send research proposals to the universities; universities will submit to Ministry.
  - If you are not in the university, look for a partner working at a university.
  - Look for avenues on how to commercialize the research topic.

**HE Former Ambassador Nguyen Tam Chien**

- Higher education in Vietnam is a top priority.
- Research infrastructure for returning Fellows needs development.

**Mr. Thai Van Men, President and CEO of ITA Group – Tan Tao Investment & Industry Corporation**

- Suggests using modern technology to have VEF alumni work full or part-time (telecommuting).
- VEF has contributed to the development of human resources in Vietnam.

**Dr. Do Van Xe, Vice-Rector of Can Tho University**

- Vietnam will soon transfer to the credit system
- VEF alumni can help with this transition

## **Roundtable and Wrap-Up (continued)**

### **Dr. Steve Maxner, Member of the VEF Board of Directors**

#### **Challenges**

- A large number of returning Fellows go into the private sector; must find a way to encourage Fellows to go into education.
- Vietnam needs better [research] facilities.
- VEF can help prioritize areas for science research.
- Vietnam must find a way to provide opportunities and make academic positions more attractive.
- Further training or retraining required for university graduates is a problem.

#### **Opportunities**

- Vietnam National Science Foundation
- The Ministry of Education and Training holds VEF alumni in high regard and sees them as being instrumental in developing science and technology in Vietnam.

#### **Concerns**

- High expectations come along with the accomplishment of becoming a VEF Fellow.
- How do we provide incentives for alumni to return to academic programs in Vietnam?
- Researchers need to emphasize relevancy in the research being done, and granting institutions must insist on relevancy of the research proposal.
- Vietnam must marry research in the academic and business setting; search for a way to work together to solve problems.

### **Dr. Vo Van Toi, VEF Executive Director**

- Currently, VEF Fellows are on their own when they return to Vietnam.
  - There is no further support from VEF or from the Vietnamese government.
- Government and businesses should form an advisory board for VEF alumni.
- The panel members strongly support the idea.