

INTERIM SUMMARY TRANSLATION OF THE INTERVIEW BETWEEN VEF FELLOWS AND THE MINISTER NHAN OF MOET

December 2006

First of all, on behalf of 50,000 lecturers and professors from more than 300 universities and colleges, I would like to extend our warmest greetings to you, the sons and daughters of Vietnam's motherland, away from home, studying hard in the US with the aim to attain knowledge and skills to work with technology to contribute to the development of the motherland. With the suggestion of the organizing committee, I am ready to join you for this discussion from a distance and am ready to answer any questions you might have for me.

Reporter: Dear VEF Fellows, the Minister is ready for the interview. Please raise your questions.

Question 1 by Le Tien Dung

Dear Prof. Nhan, I am Le Tien Dung, specializing in engineering and construction management at the University of Texas, Austin. I would like to ask a question. Currently, many VEF Fellows, in particular, and others studying abroad, in general, wish to have an opportunity to be visiting lecturers at universities in Vietnam while still in our degree program or upon graduation. Is there a mechanism for them to attain such wishes? Thank you very much

Answer

First of all, it must be said that there are not enough faculty members [in Vietnam] with Ph.D. degrees. Universities lack professors. On the average, out of 100 faculty members, there are about 13 Ph.D. degree holders and 5 professors and associate professors. Therefore, from the objective demands to develop higher education, as well as MOET's policies, we would like to increase significantly the number of Ph.D. degree holders in the higher education faculty in the next 10 years so that our universities have better human resources, in concordance with the general trend of world development. Therefore, MOET is designing a 10-year program to train about 20,000 Ph.D.s locally and abroad to be the key force for our universities in the next 20-30 years. Therefore, if you finish your doctoral program, and wish to come back and teach at a university, this is very much welcomed and in line with the demands of the country. Of course, there are many ways to carry this out. If you have already been in contact with local universities before you left to start your degree program, then you can take the initiative to contact that university, your former university or others so that the universities can actively recruit. Another alternative can be that if you do not know those institutions, then please contact MOET. We will be glad to assist you to find a suitable working place. This will not be applied to only VEF Fellows, but also to others who study abroad under other programs. MOET is developing in this direction. If you want

to know about the working conditions for teaching and conducting research in Vietnam, please understand that due to the wars in our country, the GDP is still low, about US\$700. Our conditions to equip the facilities cannot be as good as those of other developed countries. This is obvious and understandable. However, if we bring all of the forces together, then we can still invest to build fairly-well equipped labs for conducting research. For example, 9 universities in Vietnam are carrying out the Advanced Programs, referencing foreign [U.S.] programs and use almost all the contents of those foreign programs. To implement these programs, MOET has a plan to build labs and implement professional development for faculty. On the average, each university will be supported for 5 years, with 3 to 4 million dollars to upgrade labs and carry out professional development for the faculty.

Second, to ensure enough earnings for living, MOET is preparing a proposal to present in May 2007 to the government requesting that the salary and income of the teachers from primary school to higher education levels be increased from now until 2010. From 2010, faculty at any level can earn a salary high enough to cover living expenses. For the faculty in higher education, we know that it is important not only to teach but also to conduct research. Thus, if they participate in or conduct research, they will receive additional earnings. This will help to enhance their lives.

As for the working conditions, we know that at present all the Vietnamese universities are connected to the Internet. And many universities, like Da Lat University located in the mountainous Lam Dong [province], that we visited yesterday, has wireless Internet. Students can access the wireless Internet at any time and this has become more and more popular in Vietnam. The Internet is no longer a problem. To bring research into full capacity, MOET is preparing a proposal to link all labs and research centers of the same group of fields of study into a linked chain. For example, a group for nano research, a group to conduct research on biotechnology, or a group for robotics. Thus, our 4-5 universities that are strong in those areas, or research institutes of the central level that are strong in those fields, will form groups to exchange faculty to teach the master's and doctoral programs effectively to make good use of research labs, especially to link research labs, and develop research capacity to be able to partner with big foreign corporations or universities. One local university may not be able to partner with big corporation, but it is possible for a cluster of universities. This is all information for you to see that we have to find a way to develop education and scientific research by training/educating talented Vietnamese. By educating talented Vietnamese, we will develop the research capacity for the labs. The income, the material input for research will be brought about by corporations and other organizations that order research.

Of course, when returning to Vietnam, you do not need as much money as it takes to live abroad; you can still live better [in Vietnam] than abroad. We think you have time to work in Vietnam. You have a wish to develop our country. And with that wish, with your advanced degree, with your relationship with universities and research centers, you will be bridges to promote the process of educating new Ph.D.s as well as developing scientific research for Vietnam.

At times, we have been asked, what will MOET and the government do to persuade those who are studying abroad to come back to Vietnam? Perhaps, I think we should not use the term “persuade”. We are Vietnamese. Like you, I am a son of Vietnam’s motherland. Then Mother has encountered difficulties to raise us, to facilitate for us to get a higher education. We should not ask what type of accommodation Mother has prepared for us or how she will feed us before we decide to return or not. If we are sons and daughters, we will always return to our mother, together with colleagues to build and develop the country.

If we are sons and daughters, we should fight, labor, and learn with the desire that we cannot let Vietnam be poor or backward. For the past 20 years, we have had an annual increase of 7.5% and we are one of the world’s fastest growing countries. However, it is not enough for the future.

For the further future development of Vietnam, we must grow more, and increase rapidly, keeping in mind the context in which the world is in the age of the knowledge economy. Thus, we cannot increase by labor. We cannot increase by getting loans from other countries, but by increased capabilities to create new values in Vietnam with Vietnamese intellect and Vietnamese labor. The fact that you are in master’s and doctoral programs and will become good masters and doctorates is very important, and will be an important asset for our country in the process of development in the future.

Question 2 by Trinh Quy Bon

My name is Trinh Quy Bon, VEF Fellow in Medical Biology at the University of Texas in Houston. I am glad to know that the Minister will have an interview session with all VEF Fellows at the VEF Fellows’ Annual Conference 2006 and I would like to ask the Minister 2 questions.

When you and the delegation were visiting Houston recently, I know that you were very impressed by the socialization of education in the U.S. Could you please tell us about MOET’s plan in the future to mobilize the resources of volunteer organizations and individuals from overseas and in Vietnam in order to develop Vietnamese higher education, in terms of infrastructure and training programs?

Answer:

In Vietnam, the GDP calculated as based on the PPP is very low, and the state budget for education is also very limited. Therefore, to improve the quality of education, we cannot just rely on the state budget, and [as a result] in the last 10 years, we have carried out the socialization of education strategy. This means that we have mobilized the resources from people and enterprises for education. So, now we have more private universities and we have 15% of 1.4 million students studying at private universities. In order to have the right orientation for socializing education, we have carried out some research work and study tours overseas including the U.S. I must say that the quality of private education providers

in the U.S. is very good. However, the model that is applied in the U.S. context is not ideal even for developed countries in Europe. The reason is that the private universities in the U.S. are run with funds mainly from big donors and enterprises. As an example, 3 weeks ago when I visited Rice University in Texas, I found out that this university was founded by a very big donor and after nearly 80 years of operation, this university has increased its endowment to US\$ 4.2 billion. So, at the moment they are using part of the US\$ 4.2 billion to invest in other businesses, i.e. to buy shares and stocks, etc., so that they can use the interest for their education programs. The university has 4000 students, in calculation, each student has more than US\$1 million which is used to invest to support their studies. In fact, it is difficult for a university in Europe to receive the sponsorship of billions of USD, let alone those in Vietnam. We learnt that after 100 years, the university has the accumulated fund up to US\$4.2 billion, and apart from 500 lecturers, they still have about 100 staff who are not lecturers and are just taking care of fund raising for their university. So, this model is very good, but is not suitable for Vietnam. However, what we could learn from this is that fund-raising is very important, and it requires professional people for this work, not the deans and vice deans of the universities. It also requires plans with specific aims, policies and people who could manage and monitor the fund-raising work. I also realized that the donors are recognized by their country and universities; and in Vietnam, we do not have much experience in this area. Therefore, we need to have a policy to recognize the donors/sponsors' contributions to education; and MOET already has a plan for this work, which will be announced in early January 2007. Specifically, we will have some levels of awards for sponsors/donors depending on the level of their contribution, i.e. if the fund is more than 1 billion dong, the sponsors will be awarded a decoration from the Prime Minister, etc. and we will organize an annual meeting for donors of education at which universities and education providers could present their project plans to the donors and they could meet with each other to discuss long-term cooperation. We expect to have the first meeting in January 2007 and this is the first step that MOET will take to socialize the education process ("socialize": to allow society to participate).

Another thing that we could do to mobilize resources for education is to attract overseas investment in education, i.e. to encourage international universities to open their training centers in Vietnam. However, it is a fact that when international universities open their education establishments in Vietnam, they face many obstacles, i.e. utilizing the land to build education centers. We reported this issue to the government and the Prime Minister in November 2006 in order to finalize the policy to utilize land for international universities when they come to invest in Vietnam. One recommendation is that they can use our land freely based on their fame and on negotiated terms. This recommendation will be integrated into the major university planning and allocation from now to 2020.

Question 3 by Trinh Quy Bon

In the developed countries, in general, and in the U.S., in particular, there is a close linkage between research and education in higher education. Post-doc students make an active contribution to scientific research. Will MOET have any policy to cooperate with the

research centers that are not directly managed by MOET to improve higher education in Vietnam? Thank you and I wish you health and success for the New Year.

Answer

Another issue that you are concerned about is how to mobilize the in-country education providers, who are not directly managed by MOET, to contribute to research. This is the issue that we have been discussing, and we are proposing to the Ministry of Science and Technology to integrate the research institutes that do not belong to universities. This will facilitate the research institutes with legal status to cooperate more easily with the international counterparts, and to mobilize professors, doctoral degree holders and lecturers and outstanding students for research work. So, by integrating the research institutes, we will have more researchers who can deliver training and instruction for research work. After 3 years, and 5 years, we predict that we will have to reorganize the structure within universities and research centers in order to achieve the best quality for research work.

Another idea that I would like to mention is to establish a range of research laboratories specialized in specific subjects to meet research demands of international enterprises or international universities.

Question 4 by Nguyen Duc Dung

My name is Nguyen Duc Dung, VEF fellow of Energy and Controls at Northeastern University in Boston. I would like to express my special thanks to you and VEF Hanoi for providing us-VEF Fellows, an opportunity to raise our voice. I have 2 small questions for you. Regarding the OpenCourseWare, I have learnt that in December 2005, the MOU between MOET, MIT, VEF, and VASC was about establishing the OpenCourseWare program in Vietnam. As the technical assistant for the program, MIT will send a group of experts including experienced lectures of OCW to train the trainers, MOET will launch a national OCW program and select universities for attendance. VEF will support its Fellows to teach OCW in Vietnam based on their studying fields. According to the MIT statistics, there are millions of hits from Vietnam surfing onto the website ocw.mit.edu every year. It reveals that the Vietnamese youths have a high demand for learning. Now, it is December 2006 and in spite of the great efforts of all sides involved, at present the OpenCourseWare is not used as popularly as expected. We would like to request that the Minister provide support in terms of budget and human resources so that this project could be implemented.

Answer

We have seen the MOU between MOET, MIT, VEF and VASC [for OpenCourseWare]. We see that this MOU has a very good objective. However, the implementation of the project is rather slow. I think, the problem is that this is quite a new project and we need to coordinate well among the 4 parties. I have heard that the MIT OpenCourseWare allows learners to

read the materials, but it is not flexible and cannot be adjusted. Fortunately, Rice University runs the Connexions system which allows authors to cut and paste the content to make it suitable for specific learners. I know that Mr. Hung, a VEF staff, is studying Connexions at Rice University and he will facilitate the cooperation between MOET with MIT and also with Rice. Besides, MOET has implemented several projects such as introducing e-learning to higher education, but it has not yet applied e-learning to all institutions. We have a program to introduce, select, standardize, and update e-learning materials then upload to the Internet to set up a bank of e-learning materials and e-books. We expect to launch this bank in March next year. Universities can download the materials from the bank for reference or for usage with additional graphics and designs.

And for high schools, at some schools at the provincial level, but especially at schools for the gifted, e-lessons for some subjects have been introduced. Thus, we are also running the e-lesson bank for high school students. To help students to be more creative, we should renew the examination and testing system. The Ministry provides instructions to schools for setting up exam questions. Questions which stimulate the creativeness will be posted on the Internet. So, in March 2007, the bank of e-lessons for high schools will also be launched.

We visited the University of Business Management and Technology in Hanoi 3 months ago. This university is using multiple choice questions for all exams. Each subject includes 500 questions that are posted on the Internet. Students who can answer correctly all 500 questions are able to pass the exam for sure. Student cards are scanned for testing and the computer will display the status of the students' attendance and submitted exercises. If the students have met all conditions to take the exam, they just come and do multiple choice questions. Then 3 days later they can check the results online. It is very good that a private school, founded 10 years ago, can apply information technology into their testing system. Students can study anytime without being in the classroom.

Question 5 by Nguyen Duc Dung

My second question is that, as I know, we have some schools that achieved many international awards such as Le Hong Phong High School in Ho Chi Minh City or Amsterdam High School in Ha Noi, and we also have many excellent teachers. We, however, have not multiplied these figures. I would like to suggest that MOET might consider video taping exemplary courses taught by excellent and leading professors. What is your thought regarding this suggestion?

Answer

Innovation in teaching methodology is very important. We are a poor country, so we need to modernize education at an affordable cost. First of all, we improve the teaching and learning methods while the teaching staff, materials, and equipment remain the same. With new effective teaching methods, our education will be of better quality. So, changing to new teaching methods is the leading issue in modernizing education at an affordable cost.

Secondly, as for applying information technology, we visited a school of education and observed a geography lesson. The teacher gave an assignment for students to study the social economic condition of a country. Students could just log onto the Internet, search for the information, and do the assignment.

Thirdly, a database system for students for self-study should be set up. This means that we will reduce the time spent in a classroom to allow for more self-study time at home. Students can be evaluated by a final assignment without examination. I, myself, have been a faculty member of the University of Technology from 1993 and I have never given a final exam except for a final project.

Now, you suggest that we should film some lessons of exemplary professors in Vietnam and abroad to post on the Internet. In fact, the Ministry is doing this. The Ministry has a program for school teachers to develop a set of materials in the subjects of Math, Physics, and Chemistry. We plan to finish this by the end of 2007 and it will be available online with instructions and tutorials. That is for the high school level.

For higher education, when you become a good professor, or you can introduce some foreign professor, you can run this kind of project. This is called multiplying good exemplary methods. The initiative of one person can be used by millions of people at a low cost. At the moment, we have 1 million school teachers, so the best way is to post the instructions online for everyone to study and develop.

Question 6 by Nguyen Chinh Thien

My name is Nguyen Chinh Thien, third-year doctoral Fellow of Public Health, the University of Texas. What has MOET learned from the study tours and how is the information gained related to MOET's future agenda and long-term plan for higher education in Vietnam?

Answer

As you know, we are developing our economy by focusing on the depth development, i.e. How to increase the value of one product. In order to do that, the workers need to be better educated and trained, thus developing education in general and higher education in particular is essential. After the study tours abroad, we understood that they are different from us, and that we have to think first and foremost about the quality of the faculty. In the past 5 years alone, the number of higher education students [in Vietnam] has increased 60%. Perhaps not many countries in the world have encountered as big a hit as Vietnam. Higher education faculty has increased 40%; however, the percentage of Ph.D. degree holders (only 13%) has remained unchanged. Our education sector is on the increase quantitatively but not much qualitatively. While in other countries, it is required that a lecturer be a doctorate, we have not been able to meet this condition in our country. We should have been doing this (require faculty to be a doctorate) for the last 10 to 20 years. Now we have to make this a strict requirement. We have to train about 20,000 doctors for the next 10 years. We hope to

send about 1,000 people for doctoral programs in the US or some in each field of study in need. We need to have a synchronous educational plan. We should pay attention to some specific fields such as: nano, biotechnology, etc. Besides the U.S. we need to have students to study in other countries in Europe, in Japan, etc. Therefore, we need to train more doctorates to ensure the three phases [of development]: basic scientific research, technology transfer, and technology to introduce commodities into the market. Some universities have technology centers, intellectual prosperity center, and special center to help scientists to commercialize the products.

Question 7 by Nguyen Van Thang

My name is Nguyen Van Thang, VEF Fellow studying nuclear biology. I am working for the Research Center of the University of Texas at Houston. Today, I am very honored to discuss with you about our education, especially higher education. The question is how to build up national education and the answer, very simply, is human resources, especially those of high quality. To achieve this, we need to call for good Vietnamese professors who are working for leading world research institutes and universities in the U.S., France, Japan, and in other countries. My question is, “What is the plan of the Ministry to call for those high-quality human resources. Thank you.”

Answer

I appreciate your opinion. We were thinking about how to develop the economy of Vietnam using various human resources, and education plays a key role. The important thing is how to use the human resources effectively and how to invest the limited amount of money for training. We have major resources of overseas Vietnamese who hold Ph.D. degrees. We are working with the Association of Overseas Vietnamese to develop a database of Vietnamese scientists working in Vietnam and overseas.

Secondly, we need to set up a research program based on 3 principles: coordinated research, science-based research, and market-driven research. The outcome of this program should be national products. In other words, in our country, we will focus on 3 groups of products. Companies should identify which products are best for export. Then, biologists and agriculturists should make it a national product of high economic value.

The second group should research the market to foresee which product has the best potential as a national product. We think that with a good scientific basis and skillful Vietnamese people, we can invest to design and produce biomedical equipment which will be a key national product. Out of 1,000 overseas Ph.D.s, some will come back to do this.

Vietnam now is the 7th biggest ship builder in the world. We receive orders from Japan, England, and Korea, and the turnover is very big. However, we import steel, machines, and equipment from foreign countries. We just have to cut, weld, and assemble the ship. I mean when we select one product to be the national one, we should do the design not just the

labor. I know that the capital income of India is not higher than Vietnam, but 30 years ago they started the engine and now they produce spaceships and satellites. With talented people like you who are studying on the other side of the world, in 5 to 10 years we will be able to have national products.

As we mentioned earlier in the past 6 years, we established 117 more universities and colleges while the ratio of Ph.D holders did not increase much. We have yet to achieve the standard of quality to assess the new universities as well as to encourage the existing ones to upgrade themselves. This will change in 2007. The Ministry is developing quality standards for higher education institutions. Of course, we cannot say that the ratio of Ph.D holders will increase from 13% to 20% next year but we should announce that after a certain number of years, if the ratio of instructors and lecturers with Ph.D.s in one university has not increased, that university will have to reduce its scale. That means that a university who wishes to keep its large scale needs to attract more Ph.D. instructors and lecturers or encourage Bachelor's and Master's degree holders to continue pursuing Ph.D. degrees. So, when we apply the quality standard, universities will be pressured to upgrade themselves. It is impossible to remain in the current situation when over 50% of university instructors/lecturers are Bachelor's degree holders and only 13% hold a doctorate. This will be one of the standards for the universities.

At present, the private universities have autonomy to set the tuition fees so they have the capital to build up their institutions. Soon the public universities will enjoy a new policy of higher tuition fees which will become the income for the universities. Students who are poor will be given a loan for study. Universities will have to compete to select good students. To do so, universities need to have good professors and good equipment. Competitiveness will help develop higher education. This will be a driving force for universities to continue to enhance the qualifications of the teaching staff and to attract foreigners or foreign professors. I would like to give an example in HCMC. A center for bio-tech has been in development for the past few years. Though just started this year, the center has invited some overseas Vietnamese to come to work there with a salary 5 times higher than the salary of an in-country Vietnamese. We met with some overseas Vietnamese. Many of them said that they did not need much money from Vietnam. What they need is for their work to be contributive and effective. At the moment, the Center of Computational Science and Engineering in HCMC is under development. Many professors from the U.S, Australia, Austria, France, and Poland were invited to be involved. By the time a project is born, we have already been working together online and our target is to develop this center by end of this year. We expect that the Director of this center will not be an in – country professor but an overseas Vietnamese professor. This person can work in Vietnam partially for a few weeks per year. Most of the time, he will still work overseas in order to continue to attract good foreign professors. For those who come from overseas to work in Vietnam, they will have a preferable salary to ensure their good living in Vietnam. I think, in the course of development, we will have a common voice between in-country and overseas Vietnamese.

Before this meeting, I received a letter from VEF Fellows stating what they are doing and indicating their wish to contribute to the nation. We really appreciate that. The Ministry has a web page discussion with people, students' parents, scientists, etc. We will invest to make

it a more insightful forum. As promised a few days ago, the issue raised in the forum which is of a good-hearted contribution will be answered online by the Minister and Vice Ministers. The other day, one student of grade 5 posted questions to me and I have replied. I think this forum is very essential for also the overseas Vietnamese when they think of the country. We believe that many people will have more new initiatives. More than ever, as we enter the 21st century, each Vietnamese student studying overseas will be an ambassador to that foreign country, helping foreigners to understand Vietnam, to love, and to have a desire to help Vietnam. And of course, you should study well so that when you return home, people will remember you and wish to cooperate with you and then you can encourage more people to go and pursue Ph.D. programs.

On the occasion of the New Year, coming Lunar New Year, and on behalf of the Ministry, we wish you and your families good health and excellent results in your studies. Importantly, when you think you have acquired enough knowledge and come back home to make contributions, be sure to maintain a good relationship [with your U.S. universities] so that you can continue to have scientific collaborations. I, myself, finished my study in 1995 and returned to Vietnam. I later returned [to the U.S.] several times. Every time I returned to Harvard, I received a scholarship to study. Thus, you should maintain a good relationship in order to return [to the U.S.] to improve your knowledge and skills when necessary.

Could you please send our thanks and regards to your U.S. professors and wish them a Merry Christmas and Happy New Year? If any of them wish to visit Vietnam, could you inform the Ministry in advance so that we can arrange for them to work with the Ministry and related institutes and universities?

Once again, we wish you all the best and see you again either in the U.S. or in Vietnam.