

# Inheriting historical experience, developing Vietnamese education in the new era

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- **Abstract:** The history of Vietnamese education has gone through many stages with different characteristics, contexts, and models. Whether in the period of French colonial regime, the Republic of Vietnam or the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, each stage left behind practical experiences. This article analyzes the experiences of Vietnamese education in recent and modern historical periods, thereby drawing lessons and proposing some suggestions for reference for the development of Vietnamese education in the new era.
- **Keywords:** Vietnamese education; historical experience; international integration; national identity.

## 1. Introduction

Education always plays a fundamental role in the development of every country, especially in the context of the world entering the era of digital transformation and global integration. In Vietnam, a fundamental and comprehensive reform of education is taking place extensively to meet the requirements of the knowledge-based economy, innovation, and sustainable development. However, to innovate and develop successfully, Vietnam not only needs to learn from international experiences but also needs to thoroughly understand the experiences of its own past, first and foremost from Vietnamese education through historical periods, modernity, and especially revolutionary education.

Researching and analyzing experiences in different periods will help establish a theoretical and practical basis for proposing strategic orientations and specific solutions to develop Vietnamese education in the context of deep globalization today. This is also a way to promote traditional values in the process of creating the future, expressing the viewpoint of inheriting and developing past experiences for the present and future in a harmonious and scientific way.

## 2. Content

**2.1. Education during the French colonial period (1858 - 1945) and education in the South under the Republic of Vietnam (1945 - 1975)**

The colonial education system combined openness and restriction. The French colonial government established a colonial education system to serve the goals of governance, colonial exploitation, and cultural assimilation. However, it cannot be denied that in this process, a modern Western-style education system was introduced to Vietnam. According to Brocheux P. and Hemery D., colonial schools were places that “simultaneously opened a door to civilization and were also tools for social control”<sup>(1)</sup>. This education system consisted of clear levels: primary, secondary, and tertiary<sup>(2)</sup>. For the first time in Vietnam, an educational program with strict organization, management, and examination was implemented.

In addition to the colleges within the Indochina University, the colonial government also established vocational and technical schools, such as the Hai Phong Mechanical School, to train technical workers, contributing to the formation of a team of professional workers for the colonial economy. The French vocational education model focused on practice to form practical career thinking for learners. The establishment of vocational schools, although the number was not large in Vietnam during the French colonial period, created a new look for the country’s education, contributing to the goal of modernization and enhancing training efficiency through the relationship between schools and the labor market, connecting vocational schools with businesses and employers<sup>(3)</sup>.

Although it was intended to serve the ruling apparatus, colonial education was based on modern management principles, the spirit of academic discipline, and especially the technical-vocational education model. These factors were selectively inherited, notably: (i) A clearly stratified/leveled education system with specialization; (ii) Linking theoretical training with production practices and labor market needs; (iii) Building a modern vocational training school system with coordination between the state and enterprises.

#### *Education during the Republic of Vietnam (1955 - 1975)*

The 1969 National Education Law of the Republic of Vietnam stated the following goals: to develop people with ethics and morality; a spirit nationhood and patriotism; democratic consciousness and community spirit; the capacity to serve the nation, society, and humanity<sup>(4)</sup>. Regarding educational philosophy, the Law stipulates: Vietnamese education is based on three principles: Humanity, Nationality, and Liberty<sup>(5)</sup>. The educational philosophy is clearly expressed in the curriculum, teacher training content, and teaching methods. The harmonious combination of nationalism and liberalism contributes to preserving traditional values and approaching modern trends of world education.

During this period, the university education system was modernized and expanded<sup>(6)</sup>. Many universities following the Western model such as Saigon University, Dalat University, Can Tho University... were established. These schools had cooperative relations with many universities in the US, France, and Japan. In



*General Secretary To Lam attended the 80<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Vietnam Education sector and the nationwide start of the 2025-2026 school year at the National Convention Center, Hanoi*

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the book “University Education in South Vietnam under the Saigon Government (1954 - 1975)”, it is stated: Under the Saigon Government, university education in the South had robust development, both in scale and quality of administration and training content<sup>(7)</sup>.

The system of normal schools was organized from primary to university levels. Universities began to implement autonomous models in administration, finance, and academics. In the book “Education in Southern Vietnam before 1975”, it commented: Although there were many challenges, the educational policy in the South during this period laid the foundation for an autonomous, integrated, and creative university model<sup>(8)</sup>.

## ***2.2. Education of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (1945 - 1976)***

Immediately after the August Revolution in 1945, the Government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam identified the eradication of illiteracy and the building of a new education system as urgent tasks. President Ho Chi Minh emphasized: “An ignorant nation is a weak nation” and called on the entire people to participate in “eradicating illiteracy” as a front that needed to be carried out simultaneously with the front against foreign invaders and poverty. Ho Chi Minh pointed out: “One of the tasks that must be urgently carried out at this time is to improve the people’s knowledge”<sup>(9)</sup>.

The educational policies implemented immediately after the successful August Revolution in 1945 focused on the following contents: 1) Abolishing the old education system which was dogmatic, academic, and served the colonial regime; 2) Establishing

the Ministry of National Education, responsible for reforming education according to the new spirit of “learning to serve the Fatherland and the people”; 3) Reorganizing the education system in a unified direction with three levels of education: primary, secondary and university; 4) Encouraging the study of the national language and opening popular education classes to eliminate illiteracy; 5) The policy of universalizing education.

In the conditions of scarcity and hardship, the new education system with the motto of national, scientific, and popular<sup>(10)</sup> was affirmed and approved at the National Education Conference, held in Hanoi from August 25 to 27, 1946<sup>(11)</sup>. Implementing the Party’s policy, the Government directed the reorganization of the national education system, opening popular education classes to eliminate illiteracy for the people. At the same time, an education system serving the resistance was gradually formed and consolidated in the liberated areas and bases, contributing to maintaining the knowledge foundation and improving the people’s intelligence in the particularly difficult conditions of the resistance war.

During the period of 1954 - 1975, the North carried out educational reforms to meet the requirements of the revolutionary cause, laying the foundation for the construction of a unified education system, including three levels of education. In that process, many key higher education institutions were established, such as the General University, the Polytechnic University, the Agricultural Academy..., gradually building a contingent of highly qualified intellectuals, serving the cause of building socialism in the North and contributing greatly to the struggle to liberate the South and unify the country.

The new education system was oriented towards closely linking theory and practice, promoting the principle of “learning goes hand in hand with practice” to comprehensively develop the new socialist human being.

Valuable experiences from the education system of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam include: (1) Considering education as a task for all people, mobilizing all people to work with the State to develop education; (2) Using the goals of national identity - democracy - science as the foundation for innovation, shaping the identity of Vietnamese education; (3) Effectively organizing the education system in wartime conditions, emphasizing adaptability, creativity, and linking education with practice.

### ***2.3. Orientation for the development of Vietnamese education in the new era***

*Firstly, building a modern educational philosophy, ensuring comprehensiveness, humanism, and practicality*

The history of Vietnamese education shows that each period has its own educational philosophy, reflecting the society’s vision for people and the future of the country. During the feudal period, education was closely linked to Confucianism, taking “self-cultivation - family management - national governance

- world pacification” as the core, forming a class of Confucian intellectuals such as Chu Van An, Nguyen Trai, Le Quy Don, Phan Huy Chu, and so on.

During the French colonial period, the French-Vietnamese education system introduced Western liberal ideas, expanded access to science and technology, and empirical thinking, contributing to the training of revolutionary intellectuals such as Nguyen Ai Quoc - Ho Chi Minh, Nguyen An Ninh... alongside other intellectuals such as Hoang Minh Giam, Nguyen Xien, Nguyen Khanh Toan, Luong Dinh Cua, Ton That Tung, Nguyen Canh Toan, and so on.

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After the August Revolution in 1945, education was considered by the Party and President Ho Chi Minh as the top national policy in the resistance war and national construction. The ideas of “learning goes hand in hand with practice” and “education serves the resistance war and national construction” were the foundation for the philosophy of early socialist education.

Today, in the context of the ongoing robust Industrial Revolution 4.0, Vietnam is facing an urgent need to build a new educational philosophy, in line with the trend of globalization and international integration. This philosophy needs to aim at training global citizens with independent and creative thinking, strong cultural character, and the capacity to quickly adapt to the rapid and unpredictable changes of the times. At the same time, it is necessary to preserve and promote the core values of the nation such as patriotism, self-reliance, and development aspirations, thereby proactively integrating internationally without cultural dissolution.

Thus, it is necessary to build a modern educational philosophy based on the application of Ho Chi Minh’s thought: “Learning to work, to be a human being, to be a cadre”<sup>(12)</sup>. The goal of education is to comprehensively develop people in terms of morality - intelligence - physique - aesthetics, focusing on both moral education and patriotism, and training and fostering the capacity and qualities of global citizens with Vietnamese identity.

*Secondly, modernizing and internationalizing education, primarily university education*

As early as the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Dong Du (Heading East) movement initiated by Phan Boi Chau opened a new path for enlightening the people, sending hundreds of talented youth to Japan to absorb reformist spirit and aspirations for national renewal.

In the 1920s and 1930s, many Vietnamese intellectuals were educated in France, where they had the opportunity to access

democratic and progressive Western ideas. The exchange of Eastern and Western ideas during this period contributed to the formation of a patriotic intellectual class, laying the foundation for later revolutionary movements, such as Phan Van Truong, Nguyen Ai Quoc, Nguyen An Ninh, Tran Duc Thao, Pham Quang Le (Tran Dai Nghia), and so on.

During the period 1950 - 1980, Vietnam sent tens of thousands of students to study in the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, Germany, Poland, etc.. Many later became scientists, leaders, leading engineers,... making important contributions to the country's post-war reconstruction and socio-economic development during the renovation period.

Since the implementation of the national renewal (1986) through to today, Vietnam's international educational cooperation has been continuously expanded and deepened. Many joint training, research, and academic exchange programs have been established with developed countries such as the US, Japan, Korea, Australia, and multilateral organizations such as AUN, Erasmus+, Fulbright... In addition, the Vietnamese Government has implemented many important scholarship programs to train high-quality human resources to serve the country's development, such as: Project 322 (2000 - 2005), Project 911 (2010 - 2020), VEF (Vietnam Education Foundation) Scholarship Program sponsored by the US for the period 2003 - 2016, along with many scholarship programs according to the annual state budget, and so on.

In the new era of development, Vietnam needs to further promote the spirit of integration to build universities according to international standards, form an international research ecosystem, and connect Vietnamese intellectuals globally<sup>(13)</sup> to improve the quality and reputation of higher education.

Vietnam can refer to the American research university model - where training, research, and community service are combined, represented by institutions such as Stanford University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)<sup>(14)</sup>. These schools focus on creativity, innovation, and links with businesses, contributing to the formation of global startup centers. Finland's experience with the autonomous university model with the participation of society and businesses, also shows the importance of building a modern governance system in universities<sup>(15)</sup>.

*Thirdly, developing a diverse, flexible, and effective education system*

Implement a model that combines formal and non-formal training, education that is aligned with lifelong learning goals, and flexible labor market needs. Empowerment of localities and educational institutions is needed.

*Fourthly, developing the teaching staff - the pillar of all educational reforms*

Right from the early days of the country's independence, President Ho Chi Minh paid great attention to the role of education and training in people's learning. In his letter to students on the first opening day of school in the

Democratic Republic of Vietnam (September 1945), he wrote: “Whether Vietnam become beautiful or not, whether the Vietnamese nation can step up to the stage of glory to stand on par with the great powers of the five continents or not, depends largely on your studies”<sup>(16)</sup>.

To develop national education, the Party and President Ho Chi Minh paid special attention to the contingent of teachers. After 1945, thousands of teachers volunteered to go to mountainous, remote, and isolated areas to open literacy classes, contributing to a sharp increase in literacy rates in just one decade. Today, in the digital age, teachers need to be equipped with digital thinking, creativity, and adaptability to change, instead of just imparting one-way knowledge. Along with this is the need for a generation of professional education managers with strategic thinking and comprehensive understanding to lead the country’s educational renovation. It is necessary to develop the contingent of teachers - the pillar of every educational reform and modernization.

In the new context of the digital era, instead of just imparting knowledge in one direction as before, teachers need to be equipped with digital thinking, creativity, and adaptability to change. Along with that is the need for a generation of professional education managers with strategic vision and comprehensive understanding to promote innovation in education.

Domestic and international practical experience clearly shows that it is necessary to focus on regular training, improving the quality, character, and capacity of the contingent of teachers. Besides, appropriate policies on remuneration and career development should be carried out in accordance with the new requirements of an education cause.

### 3. Conclusion

Vietnamese education is entering a period of robust transformation in a new era of development. However, renovation does not mean breaking with the past. From the history of Vietnamese education, we can also find experiences for today’s educational reform and development. From the formation of the school system during the French colonial period, each stage has left its mark and experience which, if seriously studied and properly applied, will provide useful insights for the cause of national industrialization, modernization, and international integration of the country’s education.

It is the open academic spirit, effective organizational model and humanistic - national - creative philosophy that will help Vietnamese education both preserve traditional values and adapt to the changes of the

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times. This is the inevitable path to building a sustainable education system, deeply integrating internationally and opening up human potential in the 21<sup>st</sup> century ■

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● **Endnotes:**

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