

# MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION IN SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS THE EXPERIENCE OF THE SOCIALIST REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM <sup>1</sup>

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*Abstract: The world is in the process of integration towards globalization and multilateralism. It is becoming more and more common for individuals from different cultures to interact, work and exchange. Therefore, in the field of education and training, it is impossible not to pay attention to equipping future generations with basic knowledge and skills of working and living in a multicultural environment. As a dynamic developing region, Southeast Asia is also a gathering of experts, entrepreneurs and workers from many countries and cultures for working and living, which creates a diverse, multi-level and colorful cultural mixture. Therefore, multicultural education is much concerned in countries in the region including Vietnam.*

*Key words: Southeast Asia, multicultural education, integration, Hanoi University of Business and Technology.*

## **1. Overview of Southeast Asia and multicultural education in Southeast Asia**

Southeast Asia is an Asian region, made up of islands and peninsulas running from the Pacific to the Indian Ocean. This region includes 11 countries (Brunei, Myanmar, Cambodia, East Timor, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam).

Southeast Asia is considered the cradle of humanity with the early appearance of man. Accompanying with the historical development, Southeast Asia has become a unique area of the cultural diversity of the world with many groups and nations.

Southeast Asian culture today is both the inheritance and promotion of traditional indigenous cultural, and the selective acquisition of new elements from the outside, including the East and the West. In the immense cultural treasure of Southeast Asia, there are many common elements, and also many separate elements that are typical for each nation and groups creating a both united and diverse Southeast Asian culture called a unified culture in diversity.

The Association of Southeastern Nations is a political, economic, cultural and social union of nations, established in 1967. ASEAN comprises 10 member

<sup>1</sup> Presentation at Phuong Bac University - SAFU, Russia



Graduation ceremony for Lao students at HUBT.

*Photo: Nguyen Huy Thuyet*

states in Southeast Asia (except East Timor) , with a land area of 4.46 million km<sup>2</sup>, accounting for 3% of the total world land area, with a population of about 600 million people, making up 9% of the world's population. The total nominal GDP is about USD 3 trillion (2018). From an organization that prioritizes political goals, in recent years ASEAN has become a strong economic linkage with a high degree of liberalization in trade and investment, and is also a major economic entity (6th in the world and 3rd in Asia), an important trading center in the global economic map. In particular, 2015 marked a new development step of ASEAN, when the ASEAN Community (ASEAN Community) was officially established, consisting of 3 main communities of political security, economy and culture – society in which education is identified as one of the priority areas in building the

ASEAN cultural and social community.

The goal of educational development in the ASEAN common community is to coordinate the development of a multicultural education in accordance with international standards and national requirements, meeting high-quality human resources who are imbued with national identity and a global citizen spirit, as well as able to adapt to the working environment in an era of integration and development.

The main measures are to actively share and support each other to improve the quality of education in the whole block; to coordinate so as to develop and continuously improve common standards that are easier and easier for students from other countries; support the movement of labor in the block thanks to cooperation between countries, ...

In fact, ASEAN countries have made many revolutionary steps in transition to

a multicultural education system, such as building a national reference framework, nationalizing diplomas, and forming a system of ASEAN University (AUN), developing a set of quality assurance (AUN-QA). Some universities in the region whose graduates quickly find jobs with high incomes in management agencies, multinational companies and international organizations have risen to the high positions in the international rankings.

However, ASEAN education system also faces many challenges, such as uneven development, the limited number of published and recognized scientific works, inventions, the number of institutions that achieve high positions in the international rankings is few and concentrated in some countries.

Officially becoming a member of ASEAN in 1995, after nearly 25 years, Vietnam has participated deeply and comprehensively in all fields of cooperation, including education under the motto of “actively” , “positively and responsibly” and made important contributions to the growing ASEAN.

## **2. Multicultural education in Vietnam**

### *(i). An overview of Vietnamese history*

Vietnam is a country with a long history and a diverse culture. Recent archaeological evidence proves the existence of humans in Vietnamese territory since the Paleolithic period (about 300-500 thousand years ago). From the second century BC, Vietnam was invaded, merged and colonized by the Han Dynasty (China) for nearly 1,000 years. It was not until the 10th century (AD) that after a series of rebellions, it gained independence. It then continued to struggle against the invasions of the Chinese and Mongolian empires. From the middle of the 19th century,

France invaded and colonized Vietnam for nearly a century. In 1954, France lost at Điện Biên Phủ. The peace agreement in Geneva temporarily divided the country into two regions. America invaded the South. The country has been divided for more than 20 years. It was not until 1975 that the resistance against America ended successfully, and the country was unified.

After the war, the country’s economy was increasingly in a difficult situation, rising inflation. This is partly due to the aftermath of the war, but primarily to the fact that the economic management mechanism under the central planning model is no longer appropriate. Therefore, in 1986, Vietnam carried out the economic reform (Đổi Mới), shifting from a centrally planned management mechanism to a market economy under the State’s management which was successful. The economic growth rate during the 30 years always reached 6-7%, GDP per capita increased from \$ 200 in 1986, to nearly \$ 3,000 in 2018. Export turnover from \$ 5 billion in 1986, now has reached nearly 500 billion dollars, 2 times the size of GDP. The material and spiritual life of the people increased significantly. Poverty rate plummeted, people everywhere enjoy the fruits of innovation.

With a long history of many events in the process of development, Vietnam has a unique culture, both in common with regional cultures and unique characteristics. There are four basic factors that influence the formation of Vietnamese culture.

Firstly, Vietnam is located in Southeast Asia, the cradle of wet rice civilization, Vietnamese culture also has similarities with those of other Southeast Asian countries.

Secondly, the Vietnamese culture was formed and developed in association with the long-term and long-lasting struggle for national independence and national defense, so the patriotic ideology permeates and covers every field and every activity of Vietnamese culture.

Thirdly, Vietnam, under the mixture of Chinese and Indian civilizations, was invaded by French and American; so in addition to indigenous culture, it was also influenced by three other cultural classes: Chinese culture, Indian culture (in the south) and Western culture. Thanks to its strong indigenous cultural background, Vietnam has not only been assimilated by foreign cultures, but also has Vietnamized and made use of enriching indigenous culture.

Finally, Vietnam is a multi-ethnic country, so Vietnamese culture has both a rich cultural diversity of the 54 ethnic groups, and a unified Vietnamese culture.

These characteristics have created the typical features of Vietnamese culture. It is a culture towards harmony; the life is associated with the nature and the environment; the people of the villages highly appreciate the spirit of the community, and have the will and the soul of patriotism; they then respect the spiritual value, also live with filial piety and respect for the elderly. However, they are also conservative, cautious, reserve, and comfort is better than pride. Regarding religion, Vietnam is a country with many festivals and many religions. Vietnamese people accept different types of religion, in which Buddhism is the most influential. Christianity exists and develops in many regions of the country. Besides religion, Confucianism no longer exists as a religion, but it also has a strong influence on social life.

Vietnamese people are very eager to learn and fond of studying, so they also respect the teachers and promote the role of teachers. Right from the feudal period (1070) the king built Văn Miếu, a national monument to appreciate the teacher. It is also a tradition to wish teachers the new year shown in a proverb: the First day of Tet is for visiting the 'father' site relatives; on the Second day of Tet, Vietnamese families usually gather with the 'mother' site family. On the Third day of Tet, the young Vietnamese will visit their teachers for Tet Greetings. It means that during the three New Year days on the lunar calendar (lunar calendar), one day is dedicated to the father's New Year (father's side), the other is to the mother's New Year (the mother's side) and one days to visit and wish teachers. This shows gratitude and respect for parents and teachers. It is a beautiful cultural feature of the Vietnamese. Today, the government also spends a day of the year to honor educational workers, which is Vietnamese Teachers' Day - November 20.

#### *(ii) Vietnamese education system*

##### *The feudal educational system*

Vietnam has a long-standing education. The first university was founded by the feudal government to train descendants of the royal family in 1076. During the feudal period, intellectuals were very prestigious in society. They often opened classes, right at home for students to attend the exams organized by the state to select talents as officials. There are three types of examinations. Regional tests (Huong exam), held every 3 years, those who pass, then next year to return to the capital to take a national examination (Hoi exam), also held every 3 years. Those who win national prizes continue to be tested at the higher level

(Dinh test), organized in the palace and the king personally proposed, personally scored the exam (the personal data section was removed to ensure the objectivity that the king does not know of anyone). Those who achieved the highest points, called Dr., were honored and got the banquet in the palace witnessed by the king, were then appointed mandarins and engraved names on stone steles placed at Van Mieu to save their names forever called Dr. stele. In Van Mieu, there are still 82 steles built to honor the doctors who passed the exams from 1442-1799. They were recognized by UNESCO as a world heritage site in 2010.

The regime of study and feudal examination above lasted until 1919, then changed to the modern education, which exists up to now, with three levels: primary, secondary and tertiary.

#### *Vietnam's current education system*

With a large population (97.3 million people, 2019) of low average age (31 years old), Vietnam is a country with a high proportion of school-age people (about a quarter of the population), the number of teachers and administrative staff of education and training sector is about 1 million. Vietnam's education system includes primary (5 years), lower secondary (4 years), high school (3 years), tertiary (4-5 years) and postgraduate levels.

Before the renovation, the entire system of educational institutions was invested and managed by the State, all expenses for education and training were paid by the State. Graduates are assigned jobs and paid by the state. Currently, the government allows and encourages the establishment of private schools in which students must pay 100% of tuition. The number and quality of private schools

are increasing. For public schools, the state implements the financial autonomy mechanism, which allows partial or full collection of tuition fees (except for primary education and education for children of ethnic minorities). fee). However, every year, the national budget for education and training is quite large, accounting for 20% of the total. Graduates find jobs through exams, tests from agencies, businesses, organizations of Vietnam and internationally.

#### *Multicultural education in the Vietnamese education system*

In recent decades, the world has undergone a drastic change in the direction of globalization and international integration, the 4th Industrial Revolution (Industry 4.0) is also fundamentally changing relationships, expanding the range of activities and exchanges of people between different countries and cultures. In this context, the adjustment of the education system towards multicultural education is very important. It contributes to create people with global thinking and responsibilities, who are able to adapt to the process of globalization, to accept and respect cultural diversity, and to actively participate in coordination activities. It aims to address common problems of the world, such as fighting poverty, racial conflict, and climate change. Multicultural education helps learners have a vision and understanding of society, customs and civilizations in the world, especially intercultural communication skills; thereby enabling them to develop life skills, to listen to, respect for others, live responsibly to the society and community, not to show absolute personal views. For a country with many ethnic groups, multiculturalism is also important to

maintain solidarity and to against division and ethnic minority discrimination.

Vietnam is a country involved in the process of globalization fairly early and comprehensively. So far, Vietnam has established diplomatic relations with 189 countries around the world, a member of many international and regional organizations; having trade relations with 200 countries and the same territory; attracting nearly 400 billion USD of foreign direct investment. Currently, there are about 18,000 FDI enterprises operating in Vietnam, attracting thousands of workers and managers of different nationalities; In 2018, the number of tourists from abroad to Vietnam reached 15.6 million and the number of Vietnamese tourists traveling abroad gained 10 million.

The above figures indicate that Vietnam's multicultural exchange is growing very fast with wide scope, large scale and diverse nature. It requires the development of a multicultural education model to meet the need of providing global human resources for society.

In fact, educational institutions in Vietnam, especially universities, have soon grasped the mission, so actively carried out the transition to multicultural education activities with the basic contents as follows:

- Integrating the multicultural education in the main curriculum, in compiling the curriculum, developing lesson plans; changing teaching and learning methods. The training program is built according to ASEAN's quality control criteria and UNESCO's international output standards system which is suitable to Vietnam's characteristics. In order to meet the requirements of multicultural education, training programs always

focus on imparting knowledge of global issues and requirements of international integration, such as history, traditions, and literature; educating the awareness of preserving the national cultural identity, respecting the culture of other ethnic groups, condemning social injustices, racial, gender and class discrimination; training skills, awareness and working attitude in multicultural environment.

- Organizing multicultural education in scientific research, in extracurricular learning programs, practical experience in exchanges, festivals, contests, community activities; carrying out exchanges with experts, educators, politicians, scientists, economists, ... Many universities have implemented research activities, scientific seminars and invited national and international experts to present on multicultural education and professional issues to complement and update knowledge for teachers and students.

Thanks to the timely and flexible transformation, the Vietnamese education system has soon gained sufficient capacity and conditions to equip working knowledge and skills in a multicultural environment for learners. Students and graduates who have graduated over the years have basically adapted and integrated well with the multicultural environment in every recruited position, including at international organizations and multinational companies.

### **3. Training activities of Hanoi University of Business and Technology (HUBT) in a multicultural educational environment**

#### *(i) Overview of HUBT*

HUBT established in 1996, is a multi-disciplinary institution (27 majors), multi-level (College, university, masters,

doctorate), multi-form (full-time education, continuing education, vocational education and online education). The university defines its mission as training practical economists, technicians – technologists, highly qualified doctors, pharmacists, nursing bachelor under the non-profit private university model.

The university's management and teaching team consists of 1,116 full-time lecturers, including 79 professors and associate professors; 105 doctors and 675 masters.

The school has 3 campuses, built on an area of 22 hectares. The classroom area is over 83,000 m<sup>2</sup>, which can accommodate 30,000 students and are equipped with 4,000 computers connected to the internet to ensure that each student has one to learn and practice. There are 274 projectors for teaching with electronic lesson plans; the dormitory provides accommodation for 2,000 students, currently available to international students; Outdoor stadiums and covered gyms ensure students' physical development. The total value of the university's fixed assets is over VND 1,000 billion (about \$ 500 million).

After more than 20 years of operation, the university has enrolled about 130,000 students, whose graduates are over 100,000 bachelors and 1600 masters. Most of them get jobs right after graduation, many of which have become successful entrepreneurs, reputable managers in high positions.

*(ii) Changing training orientation in a multicultural environment at HUBT*

Like other training institutions, HUBT is a training institution that brings together students and learners from many ethnic groups in the country and from several countries around the world. At the same time, graduates also serve in many different

national and international organizations and businesses. Therefore, in the context of globalization and international economic integration, HUBT always focuses on redirecting training to meet the requirements of multicultural education. Activities that the university has done recently to implement the policy include:

- Training new majors, new industry codes, new subjects (environment, tourism, international economics, economic law, international finance, international payment, green architecture, renewable energy); adding supplementary curricula for an appropriate amount of time, such as foreign languages, information technology, communication skills.

- Redesigning the training program in the direction of increasing the training time in integration, exchange, self-study, self-research.

- Rewriting the curriculum, lectures, innovating teaching methods, creating habits of independence, enhancing thinking and teamwork skills.

- Promoting scientific research activities and public scientific research results, expanding scientific exchanges with topics related to the content and requirements of multicultural education.

- Boosting up the international cooperation, establishing an international cooperation institute to expand international exchanges and ones between students and foreign businesses in Vietnam; linking training with practice, with businesses and employers; connecting with foreign businesses for students to practice and become familiar with the multicultural environment.

- Strengthening support for students, especially disadvantaged students, students from ethnic minorities, international

students, organizing student citizenship weeks, calling for funding and establishing funds scholarships for students.

- Promoting community-based activities (open health clinics, organizing free medical examinations for people, donating blood donation groups, volunteer activities with Vietnamese and Vietnamese students international park)

(iii) *International cooperation in multicultural education activities of HUBT*

Being aware of the development of the multicultural education, HUBT always focuses on international cooperation activities. The university has signed cooperation agreements on training and relationship development with many universities in countries, such as the Netherlands, Belgium, the United Kingdom, the United States, China, Japan, Taiwan, Korea, Singapore... particularly for Russia, the school had meetings, exchanges and cooperation agreements with a number of its universities, including SAFU.

Implementing the above agreements, up to now, over 1500 bachelors and masters have been sent to training schools. They are now working well in management agencies, domestic and foreign enterprises. Over 100 HUBT officials and lecturers visited and exchanged training experience with other countries. Every year, the university also receives many foreign students (mainly Laos and Cambodia) to study and welcome a lot of officials and lecturers from universities of other countries to exchange experience and discuss plans to co-operate. Many delegates of lecturers and students from Japan, Korea, Thailand, Australia... come to study thematic subjects, visit and study at the university. It also organizes exchanges between its students with a number of embassies,

foreign representatives, foreign business associations in Vietnam, thereby helping teachers and students learn more about international economic as well as political events and expand exchanges. Recently (on March 3, 2019), the Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Federal Republic of Russia visited and talked with HUBT officials, lecturers and students about Russian foreign policy and Vietnam-Russia relations.

Training cooperation between Vietnam and Russia is the successor of training cooperation between Vietnam and the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union helped Vietnam in personnel training beginning in the early 20s of the twentieth century, within the framework of the international communist training program for Eastern peoples.

For the next decades, the Soviet Union has always been the leading country in training human resources for Vietnam. The help of the Soviet Union contributed to the formation of Vietnam's intellectuals and officials, helping the Vietnamese people in the process of national liberation, national construction and defense. The cooperation and assistance in the training field of the former Soviet Union and today's Russia for Vietnam is reflected in three stages:

The period of 1923-1950, when the two countries did not have diplomatic relations. In the name of communist international, the Soviet Union helped Vietnam train 67 officials. The first person to come to the Soviet Union to study was Nguyen Ai Quoc (1923) with a passport named Tran Vuong.

In the period 1950-1991, the Soviet Union's assistance in training Vietnamese officials was carried out on the basis of agreements signed between the two governments. For 41 years, the Soviet Union

has received and trained nearly 50,000 Vietnamese citizens of whom about 30,000 people are at university level, nearly 3,000 associate doctors, about 200 doctorates in science and thousands of technical workers, vocational teachers and trainees.

Since 1991, the training of Vietnamese officials has been maintained by the federal government on a new basis. In the first phase, under the agreement on cooperation in the field of education and training between Vietnam and Russia, Russia annually provides Vietnam with more than 250 undergraduate and graduate training scholarships. After that, the number of scholarships increased, in 2019, it was 965 and from the following years will increase to 1,000 (HUBT students have also been granted 10 scholarships).

In addition, the number of Vietnamese students studying abroad independently in Russia is up to more than 5,000 people

To expand international cooperation, the university has established friendship associations with other countries, such as Vietnam - Russia, Vietnam - Laos, Vietnam - America, Vietnam - UK Friendship Association.

The University also focuses on establishing and expanding cooperation with international organizations and foreign companies to create conditions for students to have an opportunities to practice and find work. Japan's KAWAI Scholarship for students with high academic achievements, classroom management, entrepreneurship and scientific research has now maintained for 17 years with 34 awards. In 2014, the school signed a document joining the Asian Professional Education Network (Asia Professional Education-APEN). This organization has held a series of seminars on human resources training, shared small and

medium enterprise management experience, research collaboration, etc. It also works with the Institute of Certified Public Accountants (ICAEW) for training talented students in accounting, auditing, etc.

*(iv) Experience in training foreign students at HUBT*

Since 2012, HUBT has begun enrolling foreign students, so far trained about 1,000 students from Laos, Cambodia, Japan, China, Russia, the majority of them are students from Laos. Most international students have successfully completed their study program and have good academic results. When the graduates return home, they can find jobs that are suitable for a stable salary.

Through years of training, the majority of foreign students have adapted to the school's training and living environment. The students study hard and voluntarily. However, there are also some difficulties:

- Language difficulties. With students living and studying in Vietnam, especially in a multicultural environment (including Vietnamese, Lao, Cambodians, Chinese, Russians, Japanese), language is an extremely important issue, in which Vietnamese must be considered a common language, a bridge between students of different countries in a common living and studying environment in Vietnam. Most international students face language problems, especially in the first 2 years. Limitations of Vietnamese language of students will lead to limitations on the reception of information and the quality of training, thereby affecting the development of knowledge (including professional knowledge and social knowledge) and skills (study skills and life skills) of learners.

- Experience Vietnamese culture. Understanding the culture of host countries is an indispensable need of

foreigners living and studying in Vietnam. This learning must not be limited to the listening and reading tools, but must be done through practical experiences, the fieldwork process with specific activity programs. This job also raises many problems regarding the organization, funding and management for foreigners.

- Personality characteristics of students. Besides some active, hard-working students, some students are passive, shy and afraid to interact with Vietnamese and have the habit of clustering together. After school, they only stay in dormitories, do not participate in outside language and cultural experiences. Even during class time with Vietnamese students, foreign students still cluster into groups and separate from Vietnamese students. This greatly affects the language development and the understanding improvement of Vietnamese culture and people.

- Characteristics of living habits and psychological life also cause certain obstacles to the training for international students. Since childhood, they have lived with their families and are well cared for. Now studying abroad, they must be independent that affected them mentally and consciously. If they do not have a stable bravery, no self-awareness, are not monitored and reminded by the school, friends, then it is easy for them to fall into a free, arbitrary and unprofessional practice.

- Limited language practice environment. This difficulty arises mainly because the residential areas are far away from the dormitories; international students do not have the opportunity to live with Vietnamese students, lack of transportation and are less active in exchanging and interacting directly with Vietnamese people to develop their language skills.

The above difficulties of the students have been reflected at HUBT during the training process. The management board also directed the relevant departments to coordinate the research and proposed solutions to gradually overcome. So far, many difficulties and problems have been solved; the care for overseas students has gradually been put in order; they are assured to study and integrate into the indigenous community.

The above-mentioned difficulties often occur to all international students, including foreign students studying in Vietnam and Vietnamese students studying abroad. Experience of HUBT shows that, to overcome, training institutions for foreign students can study and apply the following measures:

- Pay special attention to language development, in which special attention should be paid to building a direct interaction environment for learners with the native language, by arranging international students to stay with the host or third-country students, equipped with audio-visual, reading, reading facilities in the dorm room and community activities, organizing exchanges and activities with native students and community.

- Bring indigenous culture into the training program for foreigners, thereby meeting the needs of learning and adapting to the native culture of foreigners, contributing to introduce indigenous literature to international friends. In order to implement, there should be various and diversified forms, such as designing and integrating cultural introductory lessons into language teaching programs, organizing practical programs, such as practical experience programs at historical sites, famous landscapes and trade villages. In addition, it is also necessary to

create a cultural and linguistic exchange environment in the condition that there are many students from many different cultures (such as organizing big holidays in the country, exchange programs about food, music, setting up language clubs and cultural exchanges, ... among students nationwide).

- Pay attention to understanding the specific characteristics of culture, national character, as well as the customs and practices of international students in order to have appropriate behaviors for them.

- Innovate teaching methods; make the best use of technological achievements in teaching; combine teaching under the curriculum with other tools to create excitement and interest for learners.

- Pay attention to the spiritual, emotional life of international students; be ready to support the difficulties of students in the process of living and studying in Vietnam. To achieve it, there should be a specialized unit in charge of overseas students (if there are a large number of international students, a room or department, or at least one full-time official), to be able to regularly monitor and assist foreign students.

It can be said that, in the past time, despite some difficulties, HUBT has always focused on training international students. University leaders, units and staff, teachers directly working with

international students are always aware of the propaganda of national cultural identity, as well as receiving new elements in the current multi-cultural environment. We are introducing Vietnamese culture to international friends, also researching and understanding the other country's culture and updating new global cultural values, thereby building and constantly improving effective and appropriate training programs, creating conditions for sustainable development in the future. As a result, the training of international students has achieved important results, which are recognized and highly appreciated by students, parents and embassies of countries where students attend.

Researching the practice of multicultural education of ASEAN countries and Vietnam shows that, in the environment of globalization, integration and development cooperation is an objective trend. This requires each country to equip its own human resources to meet the requirements of cultural integration, language integration and professional integration. To achieve this goal, building and constantly improving, then raising the foundations of the multicultural education system are absolutely indispensable. The educational systems of ASEAN countries in general and Vietnam in particular are moving in this flow and initially reaping positive results.

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