



INTERNATIONAL AND DEVELOPMENT EDUCATION

Higher Education in Market-Oriented Socialist Vietnam

New Players, Discourses,
and Practices

Edited by
Phan Le Ha · Doan Ba Ngoc

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International and Development Education

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Deane Neubauer
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Phan Le Ha
Universiti Brunei Darussalam
Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei
Darussalam

Doan Ba Ngoc
School of Education
University of South Australia
Adelaide, SA, Australia

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SERIES EDITORS INTRODUCTION

We are pleased to introduce another volume in the Palgrave Macmillan International and Development Education book series. In conceptualizing this series we took into account the extraordinary increase in the scope and depth of research on education in a global and international context. The range of topics and issues being addressed by scholars worldwide is enormous and clearly reflects the growing expansion and quality of research being conducted on comparative, international, and development education (CIDE) topics. Our goal is to cast a wide net for the most innovative and novel manuscripts, both single-authored and edited volumes, without constraints as to the level of education, geographical region, or methodology (whether disciplinary or interdisciplinary). In the process, we have also developed two subseries as part of the main series: one is cosponsored by the East-West Center in Honolulu, Hawai'i, drawing from their distinguished programs, the Professional Development Program and the Asia Pacific Higher Education Research Partnership (APHERP); and the other is a publication partnership with the Higher Education Special Interest Group of the Comparative and International Education Society that highlights trends and themes on international higher education.

The issues that will be highlighted in this series are those focused on capacity, access, and equity, three interrelated topics that are central to

educational transformation as it appears today around the world. There are many paradoxes and asymmetries surrounding these issues, which include problems of both excess capacity and deficits, wide access to facilities as well as severe restrictions, and all the complexities that are included in the equity debate. Closely related to this critical triumvirate is the overarching concern with quality assurance, accountability, and assessment. As educational systems have expanded, so have the needs and demands for quality assessment, with implications for accreditation and accountability. Intergroup relations, multiculturalism, gender, health, and technology issues comprise another cluster of opportunities and challenges facing most educational systems in differential ways when one looks at the disruptive changes that regularly occur in educational systems in an international context. Diversified notions of the structure of knowledge and curriculum development occupy another important niche in educational change at both the pre-tertiary and tertiary levels. Finally, how systems are managed and governed are key policy issues for educational policymakers worldwide. These and other key elements of the education and social change environment have guided this series and have been reflected in the books that have already appeared and those that will appear in the future. We welcome proposals on these and other topics from as wide a range of scholars and practitioners as possible. We believe that the world of educational change is dynamic, and our goal is to reflect the very best work being done in these and other areas. This volume meets the standards and goals of this series and we are proud to add it to our list of publications.

W. James Jacob
Collaborative Brain Trust

Deane E. Neubauer
University of Hawai'i at Mānoa and East-West Center

This book is dedicated to Dr. Doan Ba Ngoc and his family.

IN MEMORY OF DR. DOAN BA NGOC

Working on this book will keep me stronger and will help me win over my cancer. My brain needs stimulation and positive energy, and this book gives my brain the very nutrients it needs. I want to divert my mind to this meaningful endeavour. I want it to absorb me and I am enjoying it. It's joyful every morning waking up knowing that I can still read and write and think. I've made a lot of notes and I want to bring my thoughts together to write the Introduction chapter with you as the book is taking a clearer shape. (Dr. Doan said to me in a Skype conversation in 2019)

When this book is published, one of its co-editors, Dr. Doan Ba Ngoc, is no longer physically here with us to hold the book in his hands as he had been wholeheartedly longing for. Dr. Doan passed away in August 2019 right before we were about to send our comments back to the contributing authors for further revisions. His departure left all of us devastated. As our tribute to Dr. Doan and in honour of his dedication to this scholarly endeavour, the contributing authors and I were all committed to bringing this book project forward. Almost all of the contributing authors never met Dr. Doan. I was very touched by the commitments from everyone and by everyone's condolences.

I visited Dr. Doan's family in Adelaide, Australia in October 2018 while I was there to deliver a keynote at the ACTA 2018 Conference *English Language Learning in a Mobile World*. Dr. Doan, whom I referred to as “anh Ngoc—elder brother Ngoc”, was then lecturing at the University of South Australia. His wife, “chi Van—elder sister Van” welcomed me with a feast of homemade Vietnamese food. Their elder

son—Tung Anh—amazed me with his fluent, sophisticated and eloquent Vietnamese, despite the fact that Tung Anh had been schooled in Australia since he was 10 years old. Joining us for dinner that evening was his mother from Vietnam and Min’s family of three. Min was Ngoc’s best friend in Adelaide, who was also a lecturer at the same university. Our conversation that evening went on for hours. I then discovered that Ngoc’s wife’s father had learnt English from my father in the 1980s in Vietnam. One story linked to another, one account led to another; and Vietnam in our memories was vivid, complex, far and near, happy, mixed, and very dear in our hearts.

We reflected on our shared experiences going through hardship and poverty until the early 1990s when Doi Moi started to bring about economic growth in the country. In our recollections of those days, we remembered being full of hopes and optimism about our country’s future even when we had little to eat and little to wear. We recalled being cheerful, lively and full of energy. We talked about going to school with our empty bellies but ample eagerness in our hearts and minds. We all did our undergraduate in Vietnam and went overseas for further education. We all had held teaching positions in Vietnamese universities before doing our Ph.D. in Australia. As we were talking and recalling memories, we found ourselves so emotional, deeply attached to and appreciative of our education, our schools, our universities, our teachers, our students and our younger days in Vietnam.

We belong to the *golden generation*, a term my American friends have used to refer to those Vietnamese who grew up after 1975 when the Vietnam War or the anti-American War ended. We lived our childhood in the command economy and persevered extreme hardship and poverty in the 1980s; and we saw Vietnam transforming with the Doi Moi reform being introduced at the end of 1986. While our school and university curricula had taken much longer to incorporate change and images of a new Vietnam, what happened on the ground in our classrooms was constantly being altered to reflect and embrace the country’s transformations and new energy, new spirit. If, for a long time, earning extra incomes in Vietnam had been viewed as a much discouraged practice associated with “the so-called low class traders” in the society, then by the time we were at universities, it was such a great joy and delight to earn beyond our government-funded scholarship as we were doing part-time jobs working as private tutors, teachers at language centres, translators, interpreters, and news reporters. No doubt we were the beneficiaries of the emerging

market-oriented economy of our socialist Vietnam in the decade after Doi Moi. Upon graduating from universities, we were overwhelmed by a plenty of job options, as Vietnam was booming with opportunities. We also benefited from being sought after because of our fluency in English when international companies and organisations started to invest and establish offices in Vietnam in the 1990s and 2000s.

We had been witnessing and living major changes in Vietnam, as well as being subjected to many reform agendas as a result of Vietnam aspiring to embrace globalisation and international integration while being determined to maintain its distinctive national cultural identity. The reform agenda in higher education in the context of globalisation with a great emphasis on English, modern teaching methodologies, university autonomy, internationalisation, widening access and participation, and scientific research alongside teaching had contributed to shaping our student experiences and later to our own research interests in education studies, language issues, internationalisation and policy studies. ... During that dinner at Dr. Doan's house, we went on for hours reflecting on all those experiences and happenings, forgetting that the next morning I would have to give my keynote and everyone else had to go to work. ...

The many hours over dinner that we had spent together at Dr. Doan's house in October 2018 in Adelaide gave birth to this book project. Our email exchanges following that evening were filled with ideas, excitement, insights, and eagerness. Dr. Doan and I were overjoyed when all the prospective contributing authors agreed to join us. When the book proposal was accepted by Palgrave Macmillan and was recommended to be published under the *International and Development Education* book series, Dr. Doan said to me in a Skype conversation: *this book project is a highlight of my career, a major scholarly accomplishment of this decade, and a dream come true*. His eyes were tearful and filled with joys. I knew he treasured this book initiative so very much. Nothing was stronger than his determination.

Everything had been progressing as planned, and I was very confident that Dr. Doan's cancer had been under control and that he was recovering well. Then around mid-July 2019, I received an email from his wife telling me that he had been in so much pain that he could not sit up for long and couldn't type any more. She told me that he had wanted to talk to me. And we Skyped. Very little about his pain. All was about the many thoughts he had put together that he'd want me to bring

to our Introduction chapter. He was very hopeful that his pain would lessen once the new treatment started. He felt clear and his thinking was sharp. I was crying in my heart when he told me: *I know that you've been working so hard for everyone. You hardly ever take rest, and you constantly shoulder a lot of responsibilities. I don't want to leave you carrying all the editorial tasks and leading the book on your own. Trust me, I'll survive and will fight till the last breath, but I need you to have confidence in me. I know you're going away for work soon, and I want to type our comments on the individual chapters so that we can send them back to the authors. I can type bit by bit. Don't worry and please do let me do this.* I told him that I had been so grateful to him and to our friendship.

That was our last conversation. Dr. Doan was hospitalised after that. In late July, his wife emailed me on his behalf. She said he was very sad not being able to continue this project with me, and he wanted to apologise to me for leaving me alone to handle everything. I was crying so much as I knew I was losing him. He passed away in early August.

And our book has continued. ... I've assured him that this book will be published. This book project has been special and priceless to both of us and to all the contributing authors.

This book is dedicated to you—anh Ngoc—my dear friend, brother, and colleague! We miss you so much. RIP.

Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei
January 2020

Phan Le Ha

FOREWORD

In the twenty first century, higher education in Vietnam has flourished in a dizzying cacophony of directions that are simultaneously confusing and exhilarating. There are the historic public universities that are moving from a Franco-Soviet model, heavily inflected, of course, by Vietnamese pedagogical traditions, toward more Anglo-inspired modes of higher education. Added to the mix are a myriad of initiatives spearheaded by, for instance, Vietnamese philanthropists attempting to create liberal arts colleges in the image of the Ivy League, Western-based universities establishing branches in Vietnam as part of a broader project of developing global, academic empires, and education entrepreneurs.

Given how nascent and explosive this educational transformation has been, it is understandable why scholars of higher learning have not kept pace. Over the past score, there have been just a handful of academic articles and books on higher education in Vietnam. Into this education studies void, step Phan Le Ha and Doan Ba Ngoc with their timely book, *Higher Education in Market-Oriented Socialist Vietnam*. Drawing on a breadth of scholarship, most of which generated by researchers who have been conducting research in Vietnam for decades, this volume helps to update and nuance a number of themes that have been examined to varying degrees within the existing academic literature, such as neoliberalism and the privatization of higher education. Equally important, this volume brings to light issues and analytical frameworks that have yet to be studied. Examples here include the new set of policies linked to the

notion of institutional autonomy as well as an obsession with global university rankings, which are perverting (rather than advancing) the quality higher education in Vietnam (and elsewhere).

As if the above were not enough, this volume offers a major contribution on yet another front, namely the epistemological. I believe that this influence is less obvious and so allow me to elaborate a bit more. Colonialism works on many levels. The physical occupation of a place is perhaps the most crude and certainly the most blatant form, which the Vietnamese people successfully brought to an end in 1975. Another mode is cultural. This has proven more insidious as it is built into aesthetics, habitus, social imaginaries, and symbols, and thus cannot so easily be remedied by seizing lands or expelling foreign armies. Given the different nature of this side of colonialism, it should not be surprising to learn that this epistemology was not completely uprooted with the Fall of Saigon. Complicating matters further is the fact that Western precepts and chauvinisms have been hard-baked into the sinews of the market-based global order into which Vietnamese policy makers decided it needed to enter (beginning in 1986) if their country was to survive let alone thrive.

What these colonial residues (both domestically and internationally) have meant for the academic study of Vietnam, including higher education, is that rather than assessing various aspects of Vietnam on its own terms, the country (like all of the Global South) has been juxtaposed to a Western standard, against which Vietnamese institutions and people inevitably fall short. Further, this benchmark is more idealized than real. For instance, I have often read and heard (in fact, I have probably been guilty of this myself) how students in Western institutions of formal education are taught to be more critical thinkers than Asian/Vietnamese students who tend to be instructed through a banking method of pedagogy. It is not as if there are not grains of truth to this generalization, but it largely hinges on an extremely selective image of the West as the vast majority of students in the US (where I teach) are taught via multiple choice exams based on rote memorization of facts gleaned from questionable secondary sources, namely textbooks. One could argue that this method of instruction is less common in the US than in Vietnam and then do some sort of quantitative study in an attempt to assess this distinction, but already one can see how nuanced differences get caste as reductive, binary oppositions against which many Vietnamese are told

(and believe!) that their education system comes up short. More importantly, has anyone found that graduates of higher education in Vietnam are less critical thinkers than those in the US? I would be surprised if they have.

Another common distortion that I often hear revolves around academic freedom. It is true that the Communist Party polices academic work in Vietnam to a degree that political parties do not in the West. But to then presume that this means that academic freedom reigns in the West would be naïve at best. It requires ignoring how government and big business have used funding to shape the theoretical directions of disciplines that then self-discipline themselves. A prime example of this is economics, which the US government and industry (primarily in the 1920s and 1950s) worked hard to ensure that mathematical methods and neoclassical theoretical models would prevail. The outcome has been a discipline that tolerates little heterodoxy and has become the intellectual enabler of a global plutocracy. With this brief example (and there are many others), one can readily see the spin required to define the Western academy as a bastion of academic freedom. And yet, this is the myth against which much of the world, including Vietnam, is often judged.

What is so refreshing and exciting about Phan Le-Ha and Doan Ba Ngoc's edited volume is that it moves the conversation about Vietnam's higher education system out from under this Western, neocolonial, comparative gaze. This does not mean that higher education in Vietnam is spared critique but rather that the evaluation (critical or otherwise) is no longer tethered to the standard of a largely mythical Western education system. Absent this point of comparison, the reader is able to see more clearly the strengths and shortcomings of higher education in Vietnam. As a result, the more constructive and fruitful work of assessing the state of Vietnamese higher education on its own socio-cultural terms can begin. And it is no secret that the north star for most Vietnamese people and its policymakers is economic growth and that they believe, rightfully so, that higher education should and must play an important role in this project. The most pressing question, then, that the Vietnamese public poses to education scholars is how its system of higher education can be retooled and expanded to serve this goal. Higher Education in Market-Oriented Socialist Vietnam does not provide all the answers to this and other key concerns related to higher education, but it most certainly offers the best and most comprehensive place to begin, freed

as it is from a colonial epistemology. Moreover, by shucking Vietnam's understudy status, this volume offers invaluable insights from which other societies, including the West, can and should learn. The final product is a book that is extremely useful for those working to improve higher education in Vietnam and elsewhere in the world.

Professor Jonathan Warren
Jackson School of International Studies
University of Washington
Seattle, WA, USA

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This book is not possible without the contributions from all the contributing authors. I thank all of you for your commitments and moral support throughout the process.

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I thank Chau Duong Quang for his generous help with formatting and referencing for all the chapters. You have always been helpful, despite your own busy schedules with your Ph.D. and other endeavours. Thank you, truly!

I thank Dr. Jenny Barnett from the University of South Australia, the South Australia TESOL (SATESOL), and the ACTA organising team for having invited me to deliver a keynote at the ACTA 2018 Conference *Learning English in a Mobile World* in October, 2018 in Adelaide. Without this opportunity, I would not have had the chance to visit Dr. Doan Ba Ngoc's family; and without that visit this book project could not have happened.

My gratitude goes to Dr. Doan's family for having been superbly supportive of our book idea since its conceptualisation stage. Ms. Van, Dr. Doan's wife, was our communication messenger whenever Dr. Doan was not able to email. She would write to me and deliver all what he had wanted to tell me. She continued to stay in touch after his departure. I admire her spirit and am grateful to her support and gracefulness. Thank you truly sister Van!

Min Pham, Dr. Doan's family's best friend, has also been a great support in the process. Whenever I couldn't contact Dr. Doan and his wife, I would reach out to Min. Min has also pushed through the loss and completed a chapter he had initiated with Dr. Doan for this book. Thank you so much Min!

I thank all the reviewers who have spent time reading and commenting on the book as a whole and on its individual chapters. Our work can only improve as a result of invigorating scholarly conversations and constructive critiquing from you.

I apologise in advance if there are errors or inaccurate information found in the book.

All in all, I hope you enjoy reading our work and I look forward to stimulating engagement in the days ahead.

Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei
January 2020

Thank you, truly.
Phan Le Ha

The original version of this book was revised: error in author's family name being wrongly displayed in Citation and Running head. The corrections to this book is available at https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-46912-2_22

CONTENTS

Part I Engaging Vietnam Higher Education: Stirring Up the Field

1	Introduction and Foregrounding the Work: ‘New’ Players, ‘New’ Discourses, ‘New’ Practices, and “New Flavours”	3
	Phan Le Ha and Doan Ba Ngoc	
1.1	<i>Setting the Scene</i>	3
1.2	<i>Our Book: “Higher Education in Market-Oriented Socialist Vietnam: New Players, Discourses, Practices”</i>	8
1.3	<i>‘New’ Contents, ‘New’ Approaches, ‘New’ Conceptualisations, ‘New’ Networks, ‘New’ Dialogues</i>	14
1.4	<i>‘New’ Players, ‘New’ Discourses and Values, ‘New’ Practices, and ‘New’ Flavours</i>	16
	<i>References</i>	18
2	A Review of the Reform Agenda for Higher Education in Vietnam	21
	Martin Hayden and Le-Nguyen Duc Chinh	
2.1	<i>Introduction</i>	21
2.2	<i>The Reform Agenda</i>	23

2.3	<i>Obstacles to the Reform Agenda</i>	34
2.4	<i>A New Reform Agenda</i>	36
	<i>References</i>	37
3	‘Standing Between the Flows’: Interactions Among Neoliberalism, Socialism and Confucianism in Vietnamese Higher Education	41
	Ha T. Ngo	
3.1	<i>Institutional Logics as the Theoretical Framework</i>	44
3.2	<i>Neoliberalism, Socialism and Confucianism as the Dominant Logics in Contemporary HE of VN</i>	46
3.3	<i>Interactions Among Neoliberalism, Socialism and Confucianism</i>	51
3.4	<i>Conclusion</i>	53
	<i>References</i>	55
4	A Review of University Research Development in Vietnam from 1986 to 2019	63
	Huong Thi Lan Nguyen	
4.1	<i>Introduction</i>	63
4.2	<i>Vietnam’s Historical Context for University Research Development</i>	64
4.3	<i>Vietnamese Government Policies for Developing University Research</i>	68
4.4	<i>University Research Capacity and Performance</i>	74
4.5	<i>Discussion and Recommendations</i>	78
4.6	<i>Concluding Remarks</i>	81
	<i>References</i>	82
5	What Impacts Academics’ Performance from the Learning Organisation Perspective? A Comparative Study	87
	Hong T. M. Bui	
5.1	<i>Introduction</i>	87
5.2	<i>Literature Review</i>	89
5.3	<i>Methods</i>	94
5.4	<i>Discussion and Conclusion</i>	100
	<i>References</i>	102

6	Commentary: Modernity and Reflexivity in Vietnamese Higher Education—Situating the Role of the Ideological, Capacity Building, Learning Organisation, and Policy Reform	107
	Jonathan J. Felix	
6.1	<i>Introduction</i>	107
6.2	<i>Stirring and Steering the Field</i>	108
6.3	<i>The Defining Context of Modernity</i>	109
6.4	<i>Learning Organisation and Research Development</i>	111
6.5	<i>Higher Education Reform and Ideological Flows</i>	114
6.6	<i>Conclusion</i>	117
	<i>References</i>	118
Part II	‘New Players’, ‘New Discourses’, ‘New Values’, and ‘New Practices’ in a Socialist State: Dialogical Responses from Within and Outside	
7	Critiquing the Promotion of American Biased “Liberal Arts Education” in Post- “Đổi Mới” Vietnam	125
	Ngo Tu Lap	
7.1	<i>Introduction</i>	125
7.2	<i>The Need for Model and Philosophy Change Under the Impacts of “Đổi Mới”</i>	126
7.3	<i>Differing Perspectives on Liberal Arts Education: “Khai Phóng” and “Khai Sáng”</i>	129
7.4	<i>Criticism of Vietnam’s Traditional Higher Education</i>	132
7.5	<i>Criticism of the Soviet-Style Model</i>	137
7.6	<i>The Idea of Borrowing the American Model</i>	140
7.7	<i>Conclusion</i>	142
	<i>References</i>	142
8	Fighting the Stigma of “Second-Tier” Status: The Emergence of “Semi-Elite” Private Higher Education in Vietnam	145
	Quang Chau	
8.1	<i>Introduction</i>	145
8.2	<i>Social Class and Educational Stratification</i>	146

8.3	<i>Rationalisation and Education</i>	148
8.4	<i>Students, Institutions, and Social Mobility</i>	149
8.5	<i>Semi-Elite Private Higher Education</i>	152
8.6	<i>The Potentials for Semi-Elite Private Universities in Vietnam</i>	153
8.7	<i>Data</i>	155
8.8	<i>Avenues for Private Universities to Fight the Second-Tier Stigma: Some Anecdotal Evidence</i>	156
8.9	<i>The Emergence of Semi-Elite Private Universities: Some Statistical Evidence</i>	159
8.10	<i>Discussion and Conclusion</i>	163
	<i>References</i>	164
9	The Emergence of Mergers and Acquisitions in the Private Higher Education Sector in Vietnam	169
	Ly Thi Pham	
9.1	<i>Introduction</i>	169
9.2	<i>The Evolution of Policy for the Private Sector</i>	170
9.3	<i>The Emergence of Mergers and Acquisitions</i>	178
9.4	<i>Conclusion</i>	183
	<i>References</i>	184
10	Vietnam's Community College: The Question of Higher Education Decentralisation in Contemporary Vietnam	187
	Huy Vi Nguyen and Quang Chau	
10.1	<i>Introduction</i>	187
10.2	<i>Higher Education Decentralisation</i>	189
10.3	<i>Community College as a Model of Higher Education Decentralisation</i>	192
10.4	<i>Community Colleges in the Pre-1975 Vietnam</i>	193
10.5	<i>The Re-Emergence of Community Colleges in the Doi Moi 1986</i>	194
10.6	<i>Community Colleges and Vietnam's Higher Education Decentralisation</i>	197
10.7	<i>Conclusion</i>	201
	<i>References</i>	202

11	The Construction, Deconstruction, and Reconstruction of Academic Freedom in Vietnamese Universities	207
	Mary Beth Marklein and Mai Van Tinh	
11.1	<i>Introduction</i>	207
11.2	<i>Definitions and Background</i>	209
11.3	<i>Conclusion</i>	220
	<i>References</i>	221
12	Impact of the New Southbound Policies in International Students on Taiwan: An Exploratory Study from Vietnamese Oversea Students	227
	Thi Ngoc-Anh Nguyen, Thai Quoc Cao, and Hiep-Hung Pham	
12.1	<i>Introduction</i>	227
12.2	<i>Literature Review</i>	229
12.3	<i>Methods</i>	236
12.4	<i>Results and Discussion</i>	236
12.5	<i>Conclusion and Limitations</i>	245
	<i>References</i>	246
13	Commentary: What Lies Ahead? Considering the Future of a “New” Vietnamese Higher Education	251
	Yasmin Y. Ortega	
13.1	<i>Questions of Autonomy</i>	252
13.2	<i>The Path to Privatisation</i>	253
13.3	<i>What Is Next for Vietnamese HE?</i>	255
	<i>References</i>	257
Part III	‘Flavour of the Day’: Internationalisation and English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI)	
14	English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) in Vietnamese Universities: Policies of Encouragement and Pedagogies of Assumption	261
	Min Pham and Doan Ba Ngoc	
14.1	<i>Design of the Study</i>	263

14.2	<i>Results of the Study</i>	264
14.3	<i>Institutional Objectives for EMI: ‘EMI Can Help Our University’</i>	265
14.4	<i>Institutional Guidelines for EMI: ‘No Official Policy Document’</i>	266
14.5	<i>Lecturers’ Readiness for EMI: ‘I Am Not Sure’</i>	267
14.6	<i>Willingness to Engage in EMI: ‘Do We Have Choices?’</i>	269
14.7	<i>Enacting EMI in Coursework: Making Adjustments</i>	271
14.8	<i>Conclusion</i>	276
	<i>References</i>	279
15	Training English-Medium Teachers: Theoretical and Implementational Issues	283
	Thi Thanh Nha Vu	
15.1	<i>Introduction</i>	283
15.2	<i>The Evolution of Content and Language Integrated Learning Pedagogy</i>	285
15.3	<i>EMI Teacher Development</i>	289
15.4	<i>The Study</i>	292
15.5	<i>Findings</i>	294
15.6	<i>Discussion and Conclusion</i>	300
	<i>References</i>	303
16	Assessment Practices in Local and International EMI Programmes: Perspectives of Vietnamese Students	307
	Liem Thi Tu Truong, Phuong Le Hoang Ngo, and Mai Xuan Nhat Chi Nguyen	
16.1	<i>Introduction</i>	307
16.2	<i>EMI in Vietnam</i>	309
16.3	<i>Assessment Practices in EMI Settings</i>	310
16.4	<i>Our Study</i>	312
16.5	<i>Findings</i>	314
16.6	<i>Discussion</i>	320
16.7	<i>Conclusion: Implications for Assessment Practices in EMI Programmes</i>	323
	<i>References</i>	325

17	Commentary: Who Is EMI for? From Vietnam, Thinking About a Clash of Realities Behind the Policy, Practice, and Pedagogy in Japan	331
	Chisato Nonaka	
	<i>References</i>	338
18	‘Expectations vs. Practicalities’: Key Issues of EMI Policy and Pedagogical Implementation in Higher Education in Vietnam, with Reference from Brunei Darussalam	341
	Najib Noorashid	
	18.1 <i>Introduction</i>	341
	18.2 <i>‘Expectations vs. Practicalities’ of EMI in HE</i>	342
	18.3 <i>The Importance of EMI Pedagogical Knowledge and Practices</i>	344
	18.4 <i>Diversity as a Factor Influencing the Efficacy of EMI</i>	347
	18.5 <i>Pedagogical Development as a Key to EMI Success</i>	349
	18.6 <i>Conclusion</i>	351
	<i>References</i>	352
 Part IV What’s Next?		
19	Commentary: Postcards from Vietnam—Lessons for New Players in Higher Education	357
	Catherine Gomes	
	19.1 <i>A Changing Higher Education Landscape</i>	358
	19.2 <i>Challenges</i>	360
	19.3 <i>Conclusion</i>	361
	<i>References</i>	362
20	Engaging (with) New Insights: Where to Start to Move Scholarship and the Current Debate Forward	363
	Phan Le Ha and Dang Van Huan	
	20.1 <i>The Revised Higher Education Law 2018 and Institutional Autonomy/University Autonomy</i>	363
	20.2 <i>Institutional Autonomy: Nuances, Disparities, and Hierarchies</i>	370

20.3	<i>'New Players' in Vietnam Higher Education: Private HE and Institutional Autonomy</i>	372
20.4	<i>The Continuing Battle Between the Soviet Tradition and the US-Styled Model in Vietnam Higher Education</i>	374
20.5	<i>From Here: Engagement and Reflexivity in Practice, Policy, and Scholarship</i>	376
	<i>References</i>	377
21	Afterword: Challenges Facing Vietnamese Higher Education	379
	Fazal Rizvi	
	Correction to: Higher Education in Market-Oriented Socialist Vietnam	C1
	Phan Le Ha and Doan Ba Ngoc	
	Index	389

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Doan Ba Ngoc, Ph.D. (passed away in August 2019) was a lecturer in TESOL at the School of Education, University of South Australia (UniSA). He held a similar position for over 10 years at Hanoi National University of Education, Vietnam. Ngoc researched and published in English as an International Language (EIL), World Englishes (WE), English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI), Mobility and Pedagogy for Language Education, and Internationalisation of Higher Education. Ngoc was a member of the Multiliteracies and Global Englishes and Educational Communities for Justice Wellbeing groups at the University of South Australia.

Hong T. M. Bui, Ph.D. is an Associate Professor in Higher Education Management at the School of Management, University of Bath, UK, and a Visiting Professor at IPAG Business School, France. She earned her Ph.D. and its funding at the University of East Anglia, UK. She has background in Communication, Economics, Education and Management. Her research covers a wide range of learning organisation-related organisational behaviour, particularly in the context of higher education. Her research has been published in various peer-reviewed journals, such as *Public Administrative Review*, *Management Learning*, *Group and Organization Management*, *Journal of Business Ethics*, *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, *Asia Pacific Journal of Management*, *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, or *Applied Psychology: An International Review*.

Thai Quoc Cao is a junior researcher in psychology, education, and policy. He is currently a graduate student in the Behavioural Science Research Master Program at Radboud University. He also works as a research assistant in the Centre for Research and Practice on Education, Phu Xuan University, Vietnam. Cao graduates as the top student in the Honour Bachelor's programme in Psychology (2014–2018) from Vietnam National University.

Quang Chau is a Ph.D. Candidate at the Department of Educational Policy and Leadership, State University of New York at Albany, concurrently a research assistant at The Program for Research on Private Higher Education. He completed his master programme in Higher & Professional Education at the Institute of Education, University College London in 2016. Quang's primary research interests include higher education privatisation, and the making of Vietnam's higher education policies.

Le-Nguyen Duc Chinh, Ph.D. is a researcher at the School of Medicine, Vietnam National University—Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. He received a Ph.D. in Education from Southern Cross University, Australia. His research focuses on disciplinary culture, research university development, and flagship universities. From 2011 to 2012, he joined a group of international higher education experts led by Professor Martin Hayden to conduct a major research project supported by the World Bank to propose a master plan for the Vietnamese higher education system.

Jonathan J. Felix is a transdisciplinary educator and practitioner at the intersection of Design, Media, and Cultural Studies. He is an associate Fellow with the Higher Education Academy in the UK, and a member of Media, Communications & Cultural Studies Association, with research interests including Higher Education, Alternative Media, and Digital Cultures. At present, he serves at RMIT University Vietnam, coordinating the delivery of communication literacies and research skills, for courses in media and communication and design studies. With over 12 years' experience in transnational higher education, his work has included, e-learning, curriculum development, and quality assurance.

Catherine Gomes, Ph.D. is an Associate Professor in the School of Media and Communication at RMIT University, Melbourne. Her work contributes to the understanding of the evolving migration, mobility

and digital media nexus. As a migration and mobility scholar, Catherine specialises on the social, cultural and communication spaces of transient migrants, especially international students, their wellbeing and their digital engagement. Catherine's work covers the themes of identity, ethnicity, race, memory, and gender. Catherine has also written about gender and audience reception in Chinese cinemas, and multiculturalism in Singapore.

Martin Hayden, Ph.D. is a Professor of Higher Education at Southern Cross University in Australia. He has published extensively on topics related to higher education policy in Australia and Asia. Since 2005, he has been intensively engaged in research and consultancies in the Southeast Asian region. In 2011–2012, he led a major project supported by the World Bank to develop a master plan for the higher education system in Vietnam. Over the past few years, he has also produced reports on higher education in Southeast Asia for the ADB, the ASEAN Secretariat, the OECD, the World Bank and the Australian Government.

Dang Van Huan, Ph.D. is a higher education special assistant to the Minister of Education and Training in Vietnam, after having worked since 2003 at several departments in the Ministry of Education and Training. In addition, he undertook several academic positions—including Vietnam Program Coordinator & Adjunct Instructor at the Center for Public Service, Mark O. Hatfield School of Government, Portland State University (PSU), and lecturer at the Academy for Policy and Development, and National University of Economics. Dr. Dang completed his Ph.D. in Public Affairs and Policy at Portland State University (in 2013), Master of Public Administration at Roger Williams University, in Rhode Island (in 2007), and Bachelor in International Relations at the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam. Dr. Dang's research interests include Vietnam contemporary politics and policy changes; policy process theories; policy change models; higher education policy of Vietnam, South Korea, and China; public leadership training for Vietnam; and democratisation process in Asia.

Ngô Tu Lap (born in 1962) earned his first university degree in navigation (ex-USSR, 1986) before becoming a ship captain in the Vietnamese Navy. He later earned his Bachelor of Law (Vietnam, 1993), Master's Degree in Literature (France, 1996) and Ph.D. in English Studies (USA, 2006). Ngô Tự Lập is the author of over 20 books and hundreds of