FROM ENEMIES TO FRIENDS: THE IMPROVEMENT OF U.S.-VIETNAM RELATIONS THROUGH EDUCATIONAL EXCHANGES, 1992-2013

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ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to show that U.S.-Vietnam higher education exchanges aided in the transformation of their bilateral relationship, from enemies engaged in war to friends working closely together in 2013 in trade, security and development. The scope covers a twenty-year period between 1993 and 2013 while its content covers a socio-cultural aspect of the bilateral relationship. The organization is in five parts. Chapter 1, “Introduction: Background Information to 1995 – Vietnamese Higher Education, U.S.-Vietnam Tensions, and Bilateral Educational Exchanges,” sets the stage for the rest of the thesis by giving relevant background information. Chapter 2, “Developments in U.S.-Vietnam Education Exchanges during the William J. Clinton Administration, 1993-2000,” highlights reforms in Vietnamese higher education, the establishment of exchange programs, institutional partnerships between U.S. and Vietnamese universities, and the strengthening of bilateral ties during these years. Chapter 3, “Changes and Further Developments in U.S.-Vietnam Education Exchanges during the George W. Bush Administration, 2001-2008,” traces more recent reforms in Vietnamese higher education, the bourgeoning bilateral exchange programs and institutional partnerships, and an increase in economic, diplomatic and defense ties under President Bush. Chapter 4, “The Continuation of U.S.-Vietnamese Exchanges and Partnerships under President Barack H.
Obama, 2009-Present,” examines progress during recent years, noting continued Vietnamese higher education reforms, the accomplishments of the exchange programs, the persistent trend of institutional partnerships, and the strong and collaborative nature of bilateral ties. Chapter 5, “Conclusion: U.S.-Vietnamese Educational Exchanges – Motivations, Challenges, Successes, and Prospects for the Future,” stresses the motives behind exchanges, the challenges to reform in Vietnamese higher education, and the successes of the exchanges that have transformed the U.S.-Vietnam bilateral relationship by fostering collaboration among their students, industry and military leaders, and diplomats. Regarding prospects for the future, these depend on five main variables in both countries: leadership, economic ties, political-security cooperation, effective reforms in Vietnam’s higher education system, and continued willingness of Vietnamese and American students to learn from each other. Thus, there is great potential for the continued success of U.S.-Vietnam educational exchanges, which, in turn, will eventually reform higher education in Vietnam, as well as foster more cordial relations between the two nations.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION: BACKGROUND INFORMATION TO 1992 – VIETNAMESE HIGHER EDUCATION, U.S.-VIETNAM TENSIONS, AND BILATERAL EDUCATIONAL EXCHANGES

This aim of this introductory chapter is four-fold: to provide important background information on the history of higher education in Vietnam; the state of United States (U.S.) – Vietnam relations during the latter half of the 20th century; the theory of “soft power”; and the motives behind international exchanges between the two countries. The scope in years is roughly from early times until 1992. The organization is in three parts. The first part examines the history of higher education in Vietnam under four main periods: Chinese rule, French colonization, the Cold War era, which saw heavy Soviet and Eastern European influence, and the late 1980s, when doi moi (renovation) policies began to change Vietnamese society as a whole and open it up to the U.S. and other Western nations. The second section discusses key issues in the relationship between the U.S. and Vietnam between 1975 and the end of George H. W. Bush’s presidency in 1992. The third and final part explores the objectives for international exchanges by the U.S. and Vietnam and addresses Joseph Nye’s theory of “soft power” and how it can apply to international education, especially in influencing students from abroad who come to study in the U.S. This last part also points out that both the U.S. and Vietnam had, and continue to have, significant diplomatic and economic motives that drive their many international exchanges and partnerships.
I. History and Overview of Higher Education in Vietnam from Early Times Through 1992

Vietnam’s higher education system has been heavily influenced by outsiders, such as China, France, the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and the U.S. Philip G. Altbach, head of the Center for International Higher Education at Boston College, explains in his book, *Asian Universities: Historical Perspectives and Contemporary Challenges*, that this outside influence is usually the case with many developing Asian nations and that it is only recently that a nation, like Vietnam, is taking full control of its higher education system to expand research and innovation.¹ This section traces Vietnamese higher education from pre-colonial times to *doi moi* to show how outside nations had a heavy hand in shaping it and how the period of normalization of U.S.-Vietnam relations coincided with Vietnam’s need for reforms in higher education and for its own research universities and institutions to better serve its growing economy.

Prior to colonization by the French, Vietnam’s higher education system consisted of institutions modeled and influenced by the Chinese feudal system, as China ruled Vietnam for 1,000 years, from 111 BC to 939 AD and again from 1407 AD to 1428 AD.² In 1076 the *Van Mieu*, the Temple of Literature, was constructed in Hanoi to house the first royal college in Vietnam, *Quoc Tu Giam*. This school was intended to train the royal

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family and later to prepare commoners for service in the royal administration. Vietnam was a highly literate country and the main topics that were taught at early institutions were Confucianism and Chinese literature. Teachers were revered and highly valued in society, in keeping with the Confucian tradition, and examinations were challenging and tested students on ideology, classical materials and literature. The language of instruction was Vietnamese; however, the materials and exercises were in Chinese, showing the influence that the Chinese had over the education of the Vietnamese. According to Pham Lan Huong, of the Center for International Educational Research at Hong Bang University in Ho Chi Minh City, and Gerald W. Fry, of the Department of Educational Policy and Administration at The University of Minnesota, the Confucian model of teaching, although revered and respected still in Vietnam, had “inherent problems” as it did not address “practical or technological skills…looking down on manual work.” Despite this, no significant changes were made to higher education in Vietnam until the period of French colonization.

When the French colonized Vietnam in the mid-nineteenth century, the system of education changed to suit the needs of the colonizers and was influenced by the French desire to civilize what they saw as the “backward and primitive” Vietnamese culture.

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7 Ibid., 203.
Hence, Vietnamese students studied the French language and covered academic fields such as medicine and law, which would create loyal civil servants for the new French colonizers and their government.\(^8\) At the same time, the French established “technical training colleges” to “provide the workforce and medium-level technicians necessary for the colonial economy.”\(^9\) Meanwhile, in 1919, the Imperial Court of Vietnam was instructed to abolish the previous system and transitioned all institutions of higher education to the French system, changing the language of instruction to French and working to create a strong civil service that was trained according to French standards.\(^10\) Most French schools in Vietnam were “professional” schools that valued instruction in concrete skill development over the liberal arts. The first traditional “colleges” were founded in the 1924-25 academic year and the first “universities” (i.e. collections of colleges under one administration) were set up towards the end of the French colonial period between 1939 and 1945.\(^11\) During this period, many Vietnamese were sent abroad to study in France.\(^12\) It is important to note, also, that during French colonialism, the vast majority of Vietnamese received little to no formal education and were instead subjected to manual labor on colonial plantations and mines run by the French.\(^13\)

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\(^11\) Ibid.


\(^13\) Ibid.
During the First Indochina War, from 1946 to 1954, during which North and South Vietnam were divided, the Vietnamese in the North began a campaign stressing their desire for self-rule. This movement spread across the North and deeply influenced its education system. The North Vietnamese leadership immediately deposed French teachers and instructors, replacing them with Vietnamese teachers to re-impose Vietnamese as the primary language of instruction in schools and to transform the French model of training civil servants for the colony into a system that trained loyal Vietnamese. Furthermore, as a nation at war, Vietnam needed students and graduates who were loyal to its cause and willing to serve “according to the needs of a state at war.” In the South, the French maintained control over the education system.

During the Second Indochina War, or the Vietnam War, between 1956 and 1975, higher education in Vietnam diverged along the North-South divide, as the North transformed its system to follow the Communist line while the South followed the U.S. system to create an independent form of education. The aims of the curriculum at schools in the North were similar to those of the French colonizers, as schools were public and only taught topics that were viewed as valuable and necessary for the state. There were also polytechnic colleges and specialized colleges. By 1975, there were 8,400 teachers and 56,000 students in 30 institutions in the North. Meanwhile, in the South, as Hanh Thi Hong Duong, a Ph.D. candidate from St. John’s University in New York explained in

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15 Ibid., 7.
16 Ibid.
his thesis, the American presence had significant impact as English was adopted as the language of instruction at many schools and both public and private institutions were available.\textsuperscript{17} Michigan State University, in particular, was influential in providing best practice and pedagogical methods to universities in the South. Michigan State University ran the “Vietnam Advisors Group” between 1955 and 1962 to support economic development and agricultural development in rural areas of South Vietnam.\textsuperscript{18} According to Duong, “by the end of the 1970s, the structure of higher education in South Vietnam mirrored that in the United States.”\textsuperscript{19} The number of schools in the South, though, was much smaller than the North, with only seven public and seven private schools serving a population of 166,000 students.\textsuperscript{20}

After the reunification of North and South Vietnam in 1975, the North’s system of educating citizens to serve the country prevailed. Hence, private schools were abolished, and for many years the curriculums taught were adopted from the Soviet Union and other socialist states. In a report for the 1997 Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMO) Forum, Dr. Dang Ba Lam of Vietnam’s National Institute for Educational Development, explains as follows:

\textbf{Influenced by the example of the Soviet Union and other socialist countries, Vietnam established polytechnic institutes teaching industrial, construction, and...}


\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.

transportation courses. Universities were developed according to the same example, concentrating on fundamental natural and social science.\textsuperscript{21}

Degrees had a narrow focus and concentrated on practical and professional topics of study while the liberal arts, research and other valuable Western models were abandoned. In his 1996 article, “The Politics of Educational Diplomacy in Vietnam: Educational Exchanges under Doi Moi,” Zachary Abuza elaborated on the heavy hand of the Soviets by pointing out:

Until 1990 Vietnam relied solely on the Soviet Union and Eastern European states to provide most higher education resources such as books, data, equipment, facilities, and human resources. In this period, Vietnam sent annually 2,400 students and 22,000 others for vocational training in seven socialist countries.\textsuperscript{22}

This system of higher education prevented any growth in the private sector, as students were more or less guaranteed jobs in the government after successful completion of their degrees. Bribery, however, was rampant during this period, in connection with the awarding of grades, degrees and scholarships for study abroad.\textsuperscript{23}

In 1986, Vietnam’s leaders instituted \textit{doi moi}, a series of reforms that opened up the nation’s economy and society to the rest of the world, specifically the West, to reform Vietnam’s economy and hopefully begin to restore relations with the U.S. and other Western nations. Although the reforms were mostly focused on economics and creating a market-based economy, they had a significant impact on society, especially education and the options for higher education and international education for Vietnamese students.

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{23} Duong, “The Modernization of the National Higher Education of Vietnam,” 9.
*Doi moi* policies ended the automatic placement of graduates in the private sector, creating more competition among university students. These policies attempted to establish research universities and institutions for graduate and post-graduate study, to rework the undergraduate system, and to provide more autonomy for university administrators by giving them more control over curriculum and administration.\(^24\) In addition, these reforms aimed to train individuals to go into the private sector, the development of which was a main goal of the government, and become better trained in science and technology.\(^25\) *Doi moi* marked a significant shift away from the Soviet model of higher education because new topics and methods of teaching were introduced to expand curriculums and learning outcomes. In 1999, Hoa Tran, a consultant for the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), noted in an article for *International Higher Education*, that since 1986 Vietnam had made significant efforts to bring in English-speaking Western models, be they Australian, British, or American.\(^26\)

Most pertinent to this thesis, however, is the major impact that *doi moi* had on international education: the opening up of Vietnam to allow its graduate, and eventually undergraduate, students to seek degrees and short-term study opportunities abroad at Western institutions and foreign students to study in Vietnam. Previously, Vietnamese students had been permitted to attend socialist universities, in places like the Soviet


Union and East Germany. *Doi moi* made provisions for enhanced study abroad, with the specific goal of diversifying the academic disciplines that Vietnamese students studied. Abuza highlighted this point:

Among the many changes was the inclusion of Article 43 that directly states the government’s policy on educational exchanges: ‘The state shall expand its international exchanges and cooperation in various fields – cultural, information, literary, artistic, scientific, technological, educational, health, physical education, and sports.’

Besides the government, many Vietnamese, students and faculty alike, were eager to begin exchanges with the West and were keen to create academic ties outside the Soviet bloc. This has been clearly noted by Jonathan M. Moses in a 1989 article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Moses also mentioned the possibility of developing English language proficiency and of training a workforce familiar with Western ideals and cultures. To him, “University officials here say they are hopeful about enlarging Vietnam’s human-resource pool through education, thus laying the groundwork for the economy to ‘take off,’ as it has in other Southeast Asian nations.”

While some Vietnamese government officials were wary of sending students abroad, in the wake of the Tiananmen Square demonstration in China and other student demonstrations in socialist countries in East Europe, most leaders in the Vietnamese government saw this as a positive move forward for Vietnam’s economy and society.

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29 Ibid.

30 For a fuller discussion, see Abuza, "The Politics of Educational Diplomacy in Vietnam,” 621.
Moreover, the U.S. jumped at the opportunity to educate Vietnamese students because of the chance to influence the younger generations and to expose them to Western ideals and thought.31

II. A summary of U.S.-Vietnam relations post-1975 to 1992

In April 1975, Vietnam and the United States ended the Second Indochina War after years of violence and fighting. Upon America’s exit from Saigon, diplomatic relations between the U.S. and the People’s Republic of Vietnam remained largely frozen until the 1990s.32 Obstacles that impeded diplomatic relations for 20 years were the extended U.S. trade embargo to both North and South Vietnam, the withholding of economic and financial aid to Vietnam, which outraged the Vietnamese because President Richard Nixon had promised reconstruction aid to Vietnam during his time in office, the outrage on the part of Americans over their prisoners of war (POWs) and their missing in action (MIAs), humanitarian concerns over the large number of Vietnamese refugees fleeing to American shores, and the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia during the 1980s. These issues caused a stalemate between the two nations until Vietnam began to reform under doi moi to transform its economy and its involvement in world affairs, leading eventually to restored relations under President William J. Clinton in 1995.

The trade embargo and withholding of aid led to years of tension between the U.S. and Vietnam and impacted both Vietnam’s economy and progress on the recovery


of American POWs and MIAs. The U.S. ceased trade relations with Vietnam at the end of the war in 1975 and imposed stiff sanctions that lasted until the mid-1990s. A report on U.S.-Vietnam relations written by Mark E. Manyin for the Congressional Research Service in 2008 explains that in 1977 President Carter did some work to improve relations but was met with resistance from the Vietnamese people when they “responded that they would neither agree to establish relations nor furnish information on U.S. POW/MIAs until the United States pledged to provide several billion dollars in postwar reconstruction aid, which they claimed had been promised by the Nixon Administration.”

Both Houses of Congress staunchly opposed any aid to Vietnam because of its unwillingness to help the U.S. on the POW and MIA issues. In his book chapter in *Vietnam Joins the World*, Frederick Brown explained that the embargo and withholding of aid, and the conditions that would lead to the end of these, were used as a “bargaining chip” to entice Vietnam to reform. In a conference report for the Aspen Institute in 1992, Le Mai, then-General Secretary of the Vietnam-American Association, explained the frustration over this issue on the part of the Vietnamese: “The Vietnamese will never forget the past, with the United States continuing to view Vietnam as its enemy, and continuing the embargo, causing further difficulties for the Vietnamese while the consequences of war are yet to be overcome.”

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refusal of aid as negotiating tactics during the 1980s and early 1990s in attempts to move Vietnam closer to reform and to an eventual diplomatic relationship. Both sides were, however, very stubborn.

The American public was especially sensitive to the fate of its POWs and MIAs due to the far reaching effects of the war on many American families – both those who supported the war and those who rallied against it. Many felt that Vietnam was not doing enough to recover remains of many MIAs, or to release any remaining POWs. On the Vietnamese side of this issue, it is important to note that Vietnam claimed to have returned all POWs and MIAs right after the peace agreement was signed in 1973.  

36 Tran Minh Bac, then-editor of the Vietnam Veterans Association Newspaper, pointed out in a 1992 conference report for the Aspen Institute concerning POWs and MIAs:

> Just more than a week after the signing of the Paris agreements of Vietnam, we founded the Vietnamese Office of Seeking Missing Persons. From 1973 to 1986, Vietnam was conducting unilateral searches for American MIAs without asking anything in return and handed over 161 sets of remains and information of 29 MIA cases without remains.  

The Vietnamese government and its representatives accused the U.S. of “moving goalposts” regarding the POWs and MIAs as a condition for diplomatic relations. As Le Mai noted in the report for the Aspen Institute: “The United States demands that Vietnam resolve the POW/MIA question as a precondition for normalization. But the fact is that in 1977-78, when the two countries were very close to establishment of diplomatic ties, it

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36 Ibid.

37 The Paris Peace Agreement was signed on February 9, 1973.

was agreed that the POW/MIA issue would be settled during and after normalization.”³⁹

This issue remained a sticking point throughout the period prior to the reestablishment of
diplomatic ties as evident from the feelings expressed in the Aspen Institute’s reports

Between 1979 and 1999, over 550,000 Vietnamese refugees, many of whom had
been affiliated with the American government or military in South Vietnam during the
war, were resettled in the United States through the Orderly Departure Program (ODP).⁴⁰

In addition, over 300,000 refugees came to America through other programs. Because the
United States was concerned about the fate of these refugees, one stipulation for
normalization was that Vietnamese who had worked for the U.S. government in South
Vietnam and the detained by the Vietnamese government, were to be allowed to exit
Vietnam and enter the United States through the ODP.⁴¹

In the meantime, the aggressive actions of Vietnam towards Cambodia in the
1980s caused the process of normalization to stall further. As Le Mai explained, “From
1979 to 1987, the U.S.-Vietnam relationship stagnated…In its eight years in office, the
Reagan administration pursued a policy of strict isolation and trade embargo against
Vietnam, and the almost sole demand it put forth was for Vietnam to withdraw its forces


⁴¹ “U.S. Road Map for Normalization with Vietnam,” in “The Challenge of Indochina: An
Examination of the U.S. Role,” The Aspen Institute 8:4 (Congressional Staff Conference, April 30-May 2
from Cambodia.”42 On December 25, 1978, Vietnam invaded Cambodia to depose the pro-Chinese Khmer Rouge regime. The reasons behind Vietnam’s move were the following: border disputes between Vietnam and Cambodia; Vietnam’s expansionist designs towards the rest of Indochina; traditional Vietnamese-Cambodian hostilities; and the Sino-Soviet dispute, which saw Vietnam on the side of the Soviet Union and Cambodia on the side of China. With Soviet generated support, Vietnam imposed “a puppet Cambodian government backed by 200,000 Vietnamese troops.”43 The United States, under President Reagan, mandated that Vietnam withdraw its government and troops and then hold free and fair elections in Cambodia to respect Cambodian autonomy and independence.44 Finally in 1989, with support and pressure from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Vietnam officially withdrew from Cambodia and the process of normalization began.45

The normalization process began after changes on both sides. In 1986, as discussed earlier, the government implemented the policy of doi moi. In his article, Abuza explained this “opening up”: “The adoption of doi moi (renovation) represented a fundamental change in the outlook of the Vietnamese leaders, who no longer saw the world in terms of two mutually antagonistic camps.”46 Abuza added that doi moi was partially a reaction by the Vietnamese leadership to the realization that integrating

Vietnam’s population and economy with the West and the “capitalist system” could benefit Vietnam greatly.47

On the American side, Reagan’s successor President George H. W. Bush, made contact with Hanoi in 1990 to begin the process for normalization. For example, in 1991, his administration laid out a “roadmap” that detailed specific conditions that had to be met, which, among other items, “welcomed Vietnam’s willingness to host a U.S. office in Hanoi to handle POW/MIA affairs, and pledged $1 million for humanitarian aid [to Vietnam].”48 The “roadmap” also provided a time frame of four phases for establishing diplomatic relations with Vietnam while mandating freedom for Cambodia.49 As Tran Minh Bac explained in his conference report, Vietnam welcomed this process:

An early normalization of U.S.-Vietnam relations will create more favorable conditions to resolve questions of mutual concern, heal the wounds of war inflicted on both peoples and develop ties beneficial to both sides. This is the goal expressed by public opinion in the world, especially in Southeast Asia.50

Meanwhile, for the 1991-1992 school year, the U.S., under President George H. W. Bush, began hosting graduate Vietnamese students through the Fulbright Student Program. Eighteen students participated in this first exchange and their fields of study

47 Ibid.


50 Bac, “Key Issues of Normalization in U.S.-Vietnam Relations,” 27.
were the following: business, international relations, law, and public administration. A driving factor behind establishing this program was the hope that the exchanges would lead to reciprocity and opportunities for American scholars to study in Vietnam in future years. To Abuza, educational programs like the Fulbright under Presidents George H.W. Bush and Clinton helped facilitate diplomatic ties, as “it was a way of maintaining contact and also a mechanism to get to know the Vietnamese educational community.” This program served as the pilot for many future exchanges and partnerships and has positively impacted the education system and population in Vietnam.

III. Vietnamese and U.S. Motivations for Establishing Educational Exchanges

The opportunity to use students as diplomats from Vietnam to institutions in the West, to have American students visit Vietnam, and to have all these students take home degrees and cultural awareness was, and continues to be, an attractive model for both countries. This section outlines Vietnam’s and the U.S.’s motives for beginning and continuing educational exchanges. Vietnam wanted to improve the quality of higher education, especially regarding research and teaching, in its country to move away from the Soviet model and to develop a knowledge-based economy. In the case of the U.S., it wanted to normalize relations with Vietnam and to spread its influence through soft power. Together, Vietnam and the U.S. were motivated to reestablish their relations and to

51 For more information on this first group of scholars, see “Grantees of the Fulbright Vietnamese Student Program (by year),” http://photos.state.gov/libraries/vietnam/8621/pdf-forms/FB-VNStudent92-12.pdf (accessed March 27, 2013).

52 Abuza, ”The Politics of Educational Diplomacy in Vietnam,” 626.

53 Ibid.
promote educational and business partnerships. These motivations are explored continuously throughout the main body and conclusion of this thesis. However, it is important to mention them here to provide an overview of what driving factors prompted the large number of Vietnamese and American students and scholars who have studied in the U.S. and Vietnam since 1991, when America’s first Fulbright exchange program with Vietnam was launched.\textsuperscript{54}

In this connection, Joseph Nye’s theory of “soft power” can be applied to the motives behind U.S. interest in inviting Vietnamese students into its colleges and universities. Nye defines “soft power,” as opposed to “hard power,” as “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments.”\textsuperscript{55} In earlier years, the U.S. applied hard power to Vietnam, through its foreign occupation, sanctions, embargo and refusal to give foreign aid, all already discussed. Soft power, however, uses “the attractiveness of a country’s culture, political ideals, and policies”\textsuperscript{56} to entice other nations to admire its opportunities, way of life, and values. In theory, a nation could systematically encourage another nation, perhaps one with which it was at odds, to come to the bargaining table and eventually become friendly not through force but through highlighting its attractive culture and values, and having the other nation adopt some similar characteristics.

\textsuperscript{54} Education USA reports that as of November 2011 there were 14,888 Vietnamese students studying at U.S. colleges and universities. To learn more, visit “Record Number of Vietnamese Students Studying at U.S. Colleges and Universities,” \url{http://vietnam.usembassy.gov/pr111511.html} (accessed November 14, 2011).


\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.
It is important to note that Nye’s theory has been criticized by neorealist scholars who claim that hard power and military might are the major influencers in relations between nations. For example, Andrew Liaropoulos, a Senior Analyst at the Research Institute for European and American Studies, highlighted some of these criticisms by explaining that states can only exercise soft power once hard power has been effective in influencing the foreign nation’s government. He also claims that there is no logical framework to how soft power “campaigns” are carried out, as they often involve non-state actors and organizations outside the formal government.\(^{57}\) However, as this thesis attempts to show, in the case of educational exchanges with Vietnam, the theory is applicable because of the marked influence that Vietnamese students educated in the United States have had on their own society and the direct involvement that the U.S. government has played in facilitating exchanges.

Moreover, Nye says that international education is a key area where soft power can be applied and can be proven to be successful. He argues that with the onset of the shared information age and a globalizing economy, the world is shrinking and that “the ability to share information – and to be believed – becomes an important source of attraction and power.”\(^{58}\) The U.S., and U.S. universities in particular, have a wealth of knowledge that could and will benefit foreign nations if they can learn and adopt similar principles. Students, therefore, serve as vital mechanisms for spreading information and

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\(^{58}\) Ibid., 56.
influence abroad, as foreign students can come to the U.S., receive world-class degrees, and return home with both the hard tools to implement what they have learned and the soft tools of a shared culture and experience with the U.S. and its students. Nye believes that the U.S. has the potential to use its education system to influence leaders abroad. As he explains:

The ideas and values that America exports in the minds of more than half a million foreign students who study every year in American universities and then return to their home countries, or in the minds of Asian entrepreneurs who return home after succeeding in Silicon Valley, tend to reach elites with power.59

Nye calls this a “reservoir of goodwill for our country” and points out that, in 2004, when his article was written, U.S. academic exchanges in general had involved more than 200 current or former heads of state.60

Although soft power does not necessarily originate from the government, governments can be helpful in facilitating educational exchanges that ultimately lead to soft power abroad. This is the case with the U.S. exchanges with Vietnam, as will be discussed in the body of this thesis. The U.S. government saw a great opportunity to educate future leaders of government, industry, and higher education in Vietnam over the course of normalization and as doi moi opened up opportunities for international education.61 Over the course of the last 20 years, the U.S. has increased and expanded the avenues for attracting Vietnamese students to its universities, ultimately benefitting both nations. In its efforts to open up, create a market-based economy, and expand both its

59 Ibid., 42.

60 Ibid., 43.

private sector and educational curriculum, Vietnam also had motives driving international exchanges abroad, specifically in the U.S. These motives included increasing access to higher education, increasing research and teaching resources, and fostering a knowledge-based economy able to compete in the globalized world.

Altbach notes that in Third World nations in Asia since the 1980s there has been a significant expansion of demand for options in higher education, as an emerging middle class seeks advancement and more opportunities. In Vietnam, in particular, the resources for educating a significant percentage of its population were lacking at the time of doi moi (and continue to lag behind even today). Hence, a huge motivation for Vietnam sending its students abroad was the attractiveness of the U.S.’s advanced academic research system and its potential for training Vietnamese scholars who would then return to Vietnam, both to teach at its current universities and to establish new research institutions. In this period of the 1980s, Vietnam faced many problems with its higher education system. For example, as a result of following the Soviet system of education, Vietnam suffered a dearth of university-educated faculty to teach in its universities. Moreover, other problems included low pay and benefits, little institutional infrastructure or administrative support, and poor quality control across universities. By sending students abroad to leading research institutions, Vietnam saw the opportunity to


63 In 2004 Vietnam educated only an estimated 6 percent of the university-age co-hort. For more information, see Altbach, “The Past and Future of Asian Universities,” 14.

64 Ibid., 18.

65 Ibid., 29.
build up its own higher education system to meet the demand for tertiary education among its population.

Regarding Vietnam’s economy, international education exchanges opened up the possibility for educated students to return home and work in “knowledge-based” sectors, such as technology, business and engineering. Elizabeth St. George explains that a “knowledge-based economy” is one that is based not on muscle or potential to produce physical products but instead one that generates income on the minds of its people.66 She says that, “Science, technology and innovation, the cornerstones of the knowledge-based economy, are now clearly on the agenda of both developed and developing countries, as fundamental to achieving sustainable development across the globe.”67 The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) says that nations with a knowledge-based economy are where “the production, diffusion and use of technology and information are key to economic activity and sustainable growth.”68 In addition, with the fall of the Soviet Union and end of the Cold War, Vietnam was in need of economic support from the West. It can be argued that Vietnam’s “survival instincts” kicked in as it sought international partnerships and cooperation.

*Doi moi* laid the foundation for foreign investments and new industries in Vietnam. However, Vietnam’s higher education system did not produce enough well trained graduates to enter these new industries, thus furthering the demand for research

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67 Ibid., 608.

68 Ibid., 590.
universities to generate more students in these fields. At the same time, this also furthered the demand for Vietnamese graduates trained overseas to enter into these fields immediately upon their return. As the trend in the global economy began to shift to more information sharing and technology, Vietnam saw a serious gap in its own population’s research capabilities. International exchanges and partnerships also became a way for America to address its desire to influence Vietnamese society to establish an amicable bilateral relationship, and to help Vietnam to better compete economically in the global community as well as to develop a knowledge-based economy.

Therefore, over the course of the 20th century, U.S.-Vietnamese relations had ebbed and flowed, leading to war, an embargo, and finally the restoration of diplomatic ties. As the relationship between Vietnam and the U.S. transformed over the years, Vietnam’s own higher education system faced challenges and growing pains by transitioning from a colonial-based system, to serve the French government, to a socialist-based system that could not meet the needs of the Vietnamese state nor enable Vietnam to compete with academic institutions abroad. Moreover, it did not produce enough educated graduates to work in a changing Vietnam. The impetus for educational exchanges that will be discussed in the remaining chapters emerged from America’s desire to influence leaders and cultures abroad through student diplomats and from Vietnam’s desire for educated researchers and practitioners who could teach and work in its evolving economy.

The next chapter of this thesis will examine the reforms in Vietnam’s system of higher education, the major developments in educational exchanges and fellowships, and
the expanding institutional partnerships during President Clinton’s eight years as president from 1993 to 2000. As a backdrop to these exciting changes and milestones, the bilateral relationship between the United States and Vietnam built off the successes of President George H.W. Bush and overcame many of the setbacks discussed earlier in this chapter.
CHAPTER 2


The aim of this chapter is threefold: to discuss the developments in the Vietnamese education system; in the exchange and fellowship programs for both Vietnamese students to come to the U.S. and for American students to study abroad in Vietnam; and in the institutional partnerships between American and Vietnamese institutions that developed during President William J. Clinton’s presidency. President Clinton’s administration saw a restoration of diplomatic relations with Vietnam and substantial growth in the bilateral relationship. The scope of this chapter is from 1993, when President Clinton’s administration began, through the end of his second term in 2000.

As for the organization, the chapter is organized in five parts. The first part identifies the changing climate and demand for higher education within Vietnam during the early 1990s that led to greater opportunities for the U.S. and Vietnam to collaborate on educational exchanges and fellowships, especially once relations were restored through normalization. The second part discusses these initial exchanges and fellowships, beginning with the Fulbright Programs, which expanded to include new study opportunities for both American and Vietnamese students and scholars, and the Vietnamese Education Foundation (VEF) Fellowship. The third part covers institutional partnerships that began during this time. The fourth part summarizes landmark developments in the U.S.-Vietnamese bilateral relationship that occurred during President
Clinton’s term. The final part, the conclusion, highlights the obstacles that were overcome and the impacts that these initial programs have had on Vietnam.

I. Reform and Changing Climate for Higher Education in Vietnam

Three main occurrences fueled the demand for international higher education opportunities in Vietnam between 1993 and 2000: the gradual “opening up” of Vietnamese universities after the fall of Communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe; a serious shortage in Vietnam of qualified human resources to meet the demands of a growing economy bolstered by foreign investment; and a desire on the part of Vietnamese students to study in the West and to increase their English language training to help facilitate the goal of studying abroad. To meet these demands, Vietnam’s leadership, particularly the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), reacted by seeking opportunities to partner with governments and institutions abroad to help transform Vietnam’s system of higher education to better prepare its people to participate in a modern and globalizing economy. The normalization of relations that occurred under President Clinton’s presidency furthered the opportunities for Vietnamese students to access information about the West, especially Western education materials, and for Vietnamese officials to collaborate with American universities and government entities to help facilitate exchanges.

Meanwhile, President Clinton was elected as U.S. president in 1992 during a tumultuous time in world affairs, as the Cold War had ended only a few years earlier and the international community was shifting to accommodate new prominent actors. In light of all that was happening, both abroad and at home, it was initially considered politically
“risky” for Clinton and his administration to broach the subject of normalization with Vietnam, despite pressure from the U.S. business community and other nations. The lingering effects of the POW and MIA issues, in addition to the other impediments to normalization, discussed in the previous chapter, created significant roadblocks for Clinton in Congress and among the American public. However, he also faced growing demands from other leading world powers in Asia and Europe to move forward with Vietnam both economically and diplomatically. In fact, Allan Goodman, former Associate Dean of the Georgetown University School of Foreign Service and current director of the Institute for International Education (IIE), noted that Vietnam’s leadership had begun to plead with Asian and European nations to lobby on their behalf: “Top-echelon representatives of the party leadership and National Assembly traveled to virtually every Asian and major European capitals to ask for help in persuading Washington that it was time to end economic sanctions against Vietnam.”

By the summer of 1993, six months into President Clinton’s first term, veterans groups and journalists had joined the business community to support normalization, as they saw it as part of a “national healing process” and an opportunity to perhaps bring democracy and Western ideas into Vietnam. Thus, On July 2, 1993, Clinton moved forward with normalization and announced that the United States would no longer oppose the actions of France and Japan (among others) to lift earlier financial restrictions in loans.

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2 Ibid., 833.
3 Ibid., 839.
to Vietnam and allow international financial institutions to work in Vietnam.  

Furthermore, although the embargo on trade remained intact, U.S. companies were eligible to bid on development projects funded by international finance institutions in Vietnam. Hence, in September 1993, the Administration approved a substantial aid package of $3.5 million USD for humanitarian aid in Vietnam funding orphans and prostheses programs. This progress in U.S.-Vietnamese relations was met by reforms within the higher education system in Vietnam to modernize the country and help it to interact with the West.

In the 1990s, Vietnam’s higher education system underwent changes in both its approach and organization. For example, in 1993, the country’s entire educational system was reformed and reorganized into four sub-systems: pre-school; general education; vocational education for training workers; and higher education for undergraduate, masters and doctoral degrees. The higher education system was changed to focus on broader academic disciplines that would educate students to help build Vietnam’s economy. Another change was that graduate degrees saw more structure and more years of study. Traditionally, MOET had maintained control of the governance of higher education institutions in Vietnam while other ministries, such as the Ministry of Home Affairs and the Ministry of Science and Technology, had heavy influence on specific

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schools to generate graduates who would then work for them. This model was the practice in many Soviet-influenced nations, and the reforms in the early 1990s sought to change this structure so as to bring all universities and colleges under the central control of MOET. The government also encouraged non-public organizations to provide higher education, leading to the development of “people-founded” universities. As a result, a 2004 World Bank Report noted that due to the reforms from 1993-1994, the total number of students from primary through higher education in Vietnam “expanded and surpassed the most successful year during pre-reform period.” Furthermore, as noted in the previous chapter regarding the impact of doi moi on higher education in Vietnam, universities were encouraged to expand their curriculums, to increase performance evaluations and testing of students, and to command more autonomy in their own governing and organization. It is important to note, however, that the MOET and the Communist Party still held final say over the curriculum at institutions throughout Vietnam, even after the reforms.

Nevertheless, some changes did take place. As noted in Dr. Lam’s report for the 1997 SEAMO Forum, the master’s degree level of education, as of 1993, was a new

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9 Ibid.

10 Ibid., 12

system. For example, the doctorate level had been strengthened to include only one category of doctorates, as opposed to the prior system of “associate” and “full” doctorates.\textsuperscript{12} Lam further explained that the goal of these new graduate degrees was to “assist graduates to be adaptable to the learning process as well as labour market needs.”\textsuperscript{13} With the onset of new graduate study programs and an innovative system, Vietnam began looking outside its national boundaries for international opportunities to strengthen its own programs at home.

In the latter half of Clinton’s first term, on July 11, 1995, the President announced that the United States would establish diplomatic relations with the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV). Accordingly, by August 6, 1995, the U.S. Embassy in Hanoi and Vietnam’s Embassy in Washington, D.C. were officially opened.\textsuperscript{14} It is significant to recognize that this move was met with great support and praise from prominent Vietnam War veterans in the U.S. Government, such as Senators John McCain and John Kerry. Brown has explained that both senators “saw normalization as a worthy foreign policy objective and as a way to heal grievous domestic wounds.”\textsuperscript{15} Clinton also received praise from U.S. business groups keen to trade with Vietnam, but at the same time was severely criticized by certain groups, such as the MIA/POW lobby. The Clinton Administration hoped that normalization would further facilitate a decrease in anti-Vietnamese feelings.

\textsuperscript{12} Lam, “Higher Education Development in Vietnam,” 7.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.


among the American people and a prosperous and friendly relationship between Americans and Vietnamese in years to come. To increase contacts between Americans and Vietnamese and to follow the goals of the original “roadmap” under the George H. W. Bush Administration over the next year, NGOs, including the Institute for International Education which currently administers the U.S. Government-sponsored Fulbright Program, were allowed to begin operating in Vietnam. Soon after, private sector companies’ involvement in Vietnam grew substantially.16

Hence, Vietnamese institutions of higher learning embraced ideas and learning from beyond the Socialist bloc, where previously they had educated their scholars as well as drawn educational resources. As Brown correctly noted in a 1995 publication, “One indicator of social change under way is the restructuring of Vietnamese higher education away from Marxist orthodoxy and in the direction of Western standards, something that would have been unthinkable only five years ago.”17 It was unthinkable earlier, as a 1989 article from the Chronicle of Higher Education had only hinted at the possibility of “opening up” education due to the challenges academics then faced. For instance, this article reported that “Scholars here noted that the lack of funds made such contacts impossible without foreign sponsorship. Efforts to create academic links outside the Socialist bloc are also being hampered by a rigid academic structure in Vietnam.”18 In addition, at the same time, Vietnam’s government was hesitant to allow guest lecturers or

16 Ibid., 221.


faculty from the West to speak at its universities for fear that students would “deviate from Socialism.” However, with normalization of U.S.-Vietnam relations, more universities were established and there were now new opportunities for international cooperation and education. For example, another article from the *Chronicle of Higher Education* noted that: “President Clinton’s restoration of full diplomatic ties with Vietnam creates new possibilities for the School of International Training and for many other U.S. institutions and organizations involved in international education.”

Vietnam’s economic growth, in large part impacted by normalization and investments from the West, specifically the U.S., was not matched with growth in the number of qualified and educated university graduates ready to fill available positions. As discussed in the previous chapter, Vietnam then faced a serious human resources void, both in the private sector and in higher education. Vietnam’s government attempted reforms in the education system to address this problem by expanding curriculums but also sought support and resources from the international community as well. As a 1997 article from *The Chronicle of Higher Education* explained:

> Most of the programs now in place for academic exchange respond very directly to the demands of Vietnamese and foreign-run businesses, which desire a stronger physical and commercial infrastructure. Thus, opportunities for Vietnamese to study law, economics, and public policy in the United States and some other countries are numerous and growing.

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19 Ibid., A40.

20 The School of International Training is an American nonprofit organization that provides study abroad opportunities for American high school and undergraduate students. For more information, see “World Learning: About Us,” [http://www.worldlearning.org/44.htm](http://www.worldlearning.org/44.htm) (accessed January 30, 2013).


There was pressure for Vietnamese students to learn and understand how the Western, capitalist economies worked and for the Vietnamese government to stipulate that students return home after receiving their U.S. education so that they could “play direct roles in business, management and law.” 23 There was also hope that these U.S.-educated Vietnamese would bolster the academic and research fields in Vietnam, as, in 1996, only 14 percent of faculty held doctorates. 24 Thus, the development of stronger research institutions was identified as a priority for the government. 25

Vietnamese students themselves welcomed these changes and the opening up of higher education in their country. They also welcomed opportunities to be coming more fluent in English. Prior to normalization, there had been a big demand for English language training by them because of the then opportunities to find employment in international companies. One observer pointed out:

The popularity of English, despite the heavy Soviet influence here, stems in part from the desire of Vietnamese students to find work with foreign companies. Few such companies outside the Socialist bloc have been doing business with Vietnam, evidently waiting for the United States to end its trade embargo. 26

Through reforms, the Vietnamese government therefore increased the allotment for English majors at universities, improved access to training, and included American

23 Ibid.


25 Ibid., 10.

26 Moses, ”Vietnam Seeks to End Its Academic Isolation from Western World," A40.
textbooks in its curriculums. The unique pairing of reform, economic development and diplomatic relations prompted great collaboration and relationship building between the U.S. and Vietnam that enabled years of successful academic partnerships and student exchanges during President Clinton’s Administration.

II. The Fulbright Programs and the Vietnam Education Foundation

In his article discussing the normalization of U.S.-Vietnam relations, Alan Goodman concluded by promoting the potential of influencing the youth of Vietnam during a time of fragile bilateral relations in the early 1990s. He explained, “No one can now estimate the impact of contact with the free world on the youth of Vietnam; the appeal of freedom is likely to be especially significant in as literate and outward-looking a society as the Vietnamese.” Goodman saw education as a tool to shape the minds of the younger Vietnamese not tainted by decades of conflict and trauma, and the necessity for Americans and Vietnamese students to understand one another. His thinking harkens to Nye’s theory of soft power and the United States’ motivations for promoting international education with its former adversary.

The Vietnamese saw much value in international education programs with the United States, particularly the Fulbright Program, because they viewed them as “serving as a quasi-official channel to the U.S.” with direct ties to the U.S. government.


Fulbright Program itself was established in 1946 in order to “increase mutual understanding between the people of the United States and the people of other countries by means of educational and cultural exchange.” It has successfully facilitated the education of thousands of international students and academics and has sent just as many American students and researchers abroad through fellowships and grants.

The Fulbright Program with Vietnam, as noted in Chapter 1, officially began with the Vietnamese Student Program in 1991 under President George H.W. Bush and was bolstered during President Clinton’s administration. By 1993, the Vietnamese Student Program had 23 students participating in it, up six from the previous year. By 1996 it was the largest Fulbright program in Asia. The program’s initial administration, on both the U.S. and Vietnamese sides, illustrates how the normalization process fostered trust and cooperation between both nations.

To select the Vietnamese students who would participate in the Vietnamese Student Program, Harvard University’s Institute for International Development (HIID) subcontracted with the Institute for International Education (IIE), the administrator of the Vietnamese Student Program and other programs. This is because prior to 1995 there was no official American organization to run this program. Abuza has explained that, in the early 1990s, HIID faced significant obstacles from the two Vietnamese ministries – the

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Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and the Ministry of Education and Training (MET) – which helped administer the program in Vietnam. This was due to MFA and MET feuding over the role that each should play, as MFA argued that the Fulbright Program was an international program to build diplomatic ties while MET worried about the loss of socialist ideals by these students.33 To Ben Wilkinson, the current Associate Director of the Fulbright Economics Teaching Program in Vietnam, the MFA cooperated with HIID and seized the opportunity to send its students abroad. As a result, many of the initial Fulbrighters from Vietnam were employees of the MFA.34

Since its inception, the Vietnamese Student Program has stipulated that its graduates return home to Vietnam after completing their programs in the United States. The program is exclusive to graduate students because the Vietnamese government believes that older students have greater ties and obligations to Vietnam – to families or jobs – that would preclude their desire to stay in the United States after graduation.35 However, the burden of assuring that these students can find suitable employment in Vietnam after graduation lies on its country’s leaders to encourage sufficient private and public sector growth. As for the training that these graduate students receive, it is restricted to certain areas of study determined by the Fulbright Program’s legislation. Thus, students in the Vietnamese Student Program can only study the broad academic disciplines of economics, international affairs and human rights, which also includes

33 Ibid., 626


business administration and public policy. Limiting the academic disciplines that these students can study ensures a specific type of graduate student – one who aims to be a leader of industry and business or a leader in international affairs and government. Both the United States and Vietnam benefit from these graduates, as they have the potential to be and, indeed are, facilitators in the bilateral relationship.

Between 1993 and 2000, 175 Vietnamese graduate students came to the U.S. to study through the Vietnamese Student Program. The most popular university for students in the Vietnamese Student Program during this period of time was Harvard University. Other private schools, such as Tufts University, Columbia University, Syracuse University, and Georgetown University, and public state institutions, like Oklahoma State University and University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign, also saw multiple Fulbrighters. The Vietnamese students studied in disciplines in line with the Fulbright Program’s goals, ranging from business administration and international affairs, which would help Vietnam in developing private industries and diplomatic ties, to public administration and agriculture development, which would impact Vietnam’s domestic policies and development.

Notable graduates of the Vietnamese Student Program during this time include the current Vietnamese Ambassador to the United States, Nguyen Quoc Cuong; Minister

36 Ibid., 626.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
of Foreign Affairs, Pham Binh Minh; Ambassador to Singapore, Nguyen Trung Than; and Ambassador to the Philippines, Nguyen Vu Tu. All of these leaders attended Tufts University and received a Masters of Arts in Law and Diplomacy, with the exception of Mr. Tu, who received a Master’s in Public Administration. Ambassador Cuong graduated in 1996 and has since gone on to an impressive career in the Vietnamese government, especially in its foreign ministry.\^40 For example, he also has served as Deputy Foreign Minister and as Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs.\^41 Mr. Minh previously served in the United Nations and in the Embassy of Vietnam in the U.S.,\^42 Mr. Than served as the Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs in Vietnam prior to his Ambassadorship\^43 while Mr. Tu was a political counselor at the Vietnamese Embassy in the United States prior to his posting in the Philippines.\^44

More Fulbright programs that saw greater student exchanges between Americans and Vietnamese were launched later in the 1990s. For instance, the U.S. Student Program with Vietnam began in 1997, with five American students going to Vietnam to study disciplines ranging from economic development and trade to education reform and


\^41 Ibid.


policy. By 1998, eleven students participated in the U.S. Student Program with Vietnam and they continued to study economics and education, but other disciplines included literature, environmental policy, and urban planning and development. It is clear that normalization paved the way for a new generation of American scholars to travel to Vietnam and study topics that not only had great impact on Vietnam’s society, but also on the future of the U.S.-Vietnam bilateral relationship. Some of the research studies that these U.S. students produced have since been published as scholarly articles and books that serve as academic contributions to the scholarship on Vietnam – its heritage, culture, economy and society. Some students from the U.S. Student Program have also gone on to become academics at universities.

In 1998, the Fulbright Program launched the Vietnamese Scholar Program and the U.S. Scholar Program, both of which send faculty abroad for a short period to carry out research, to teach in a local university, or to do both. In the 1998-1999 school year, three Vietnamese scholars participated in Vietnamese Scholar Program to study economics, higher education management and geography at Johns Hopkins University, Indiana University, and Vassar College, respectively. In the 1999-2000 school year, four Vietnamese scholars participated in the same program and expanded the fields of study to include environmental policy at the University of California, Riverside, and agriculture at the University of Indiana, Bloomington, in addition to education administration at the

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Graduate School of Education at the State University of New York, Buffalo.\textsuperscript{47} By 2000, seven Vietnamese scholars were funded to study at American universities and the fields covered expanded to human resource management at the University of Houston; public policy development at George Washington University; and linguistics at the University of California, Berkeley. More Vietnamese scholars were also studying education and economics.

The U.S. Scholar Program, which is run through the Council for the International Exchange of Scholars (CIES) with a grant by the U.S. State Department’s Bureau of Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, awards U.S. faculty and scholars grants for three to ten months of study in Vietnam. Only one American participated in 1998 and he studied law in Vietnam.\textsuperscript{48} By 1999, however, there were seven participants, studying fields like business administration, economics, environmental sciences, public administration, and even American literature at Vietnam National University Hanoi and Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City, and education at University of Hue.\textsuperscript{49} Through these exchange programs, Vietnam was able to expose its academics to American universities and the U.S. was able to expose its scholars to Vietnamese universities to study topics that would, hopefully, help further Vietnam’s development and increase the mutual understanding between the two nations.

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{49} Ibid.
Towards the end of Clinton’s second term, in November 2000, the President and
his family made a historic visit to Vietnam, the first visit by an American President since
President Nixon’s visit in 1969. It was also the first ever visit by an American President
to Hanoi.\textsuperscript{50} The purpose of President Clinton’s visit was to focus on Vietnam’s economic
and political development and to continue building a bilateral partnership by meeting
with its government officials, business leaders and students.\textsuperscript{51} The Clintons were
pleasantly surprised when they were greeted with enthusiasm and cheers from the
Vietnamese people wherever they went. An Associated Press article written during the
trip noted that thousands of Vietnamese lined the streets to greet the First Family, and
that the President referred to his trip as “nothing short of amazing.”\textsuperscript{52} One exciting
opportunity that Clinton announced to a group of students in Hanoi during his trip was a
program launched by Congress, with the backing of many Vietnam War Veterans,
including Senators John McCain and John Kerry, that aimed to use the estimated $150
million USD debt owed to the United States by the former government of South Vietnam
to fund educational programs in the United States for Vietnamese students, faculty, and
visiting scholars.\textsuperscript{53}

\textsuperscript{50} David E. Sanger, “Vietnam Welcomes Clinton/First U.S. President to Visit Hanoi,” \textit{The New

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{53} US Senators and Leading Educators Favor Scholarship-for-Debt Program with Vietnam,”
This program, known as the Vietnam Education Foundation (VEF) Fellowship, was signed into law in 2000. The agreement states that of the $7.5-9 million USD transferred every year between 1997 through 2019 from Vietnam to the U.S., $5 million USD will be used to fund the VEF. At its inception, the goal of the VEF Fellowship was to fund graduate training in science, engineering and technology, fields that are necessary for the growth of a “knowledge-based economy” and thus highly desirable for Vietnam at the time. Furthermore, these fields of study would build up the breadth of academic disciplines that Vietnamese students were studying in the United States under these government exchanges, as students under the Fulbright Vietnamese Student Program could not study academic fields like science, technology and engineering.

The purpose of the VEF program is to build a new generation of leading Vietnamese scientists and engineers who will further grow and strengthen research and development activities in Vietnam. The first students participated in the VEF Fellowship program in 2003. Another purpose, to strengthen the bilateral relationship between the U.S. and Vietnam, is clearly stated in the VEF’s own publication of its history:

The Vietnam Education Foundation was established...with the purpose of establishing educational exchange activities for Vietnamese nationals to pursue

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54 Sanger, “Vietnam Welcomes Clinton/First U.S. President to Visit Hanoi,” 1.
graduate studies and professional development at U.S. universities...thus, building the bilateral relationship between the United States and Vietnam while serving the interests of both countries.\textsuperscript{58}

III. Institutional Partnerships

With the onset of normalization, some American universities and colleges began to explore the possibilities of institutional partnerships with Vietnamese institutions independent of the Fulbright programs. As relations with Vietnam were still fragile and developing throughout President Clinton’s term, the U.S. and Vietnamese governments had a heavy hand in supporting and developing these partnerships and collaborations. Zachary Abuza mentioned a few of these collaborations in his 1996 article, “The Politics of Educational Diplomacy in Vietnam: Educational Exchanges under Doi Moi.” For instance, the State University of New York (SUNY), Buffalo, offered $40,000 USD year in scholarships for the 1992-1993 academic year for English-as-a-second-language (ESL) training for Vietnamese students.\textsuperscript{59} In addition, the University of Arizona’s College of Medicine began collaborating with Hanoi Medical College to form an exchange program for doctors, students, and staff, in addition to providing medical equipment and technology.\textsuperscript{60}

Another important non-Fulbright program collaboration has been through Harvard University and the University of Economics, Ho Chi Minh City. This collaboration began


\textsuperscript{60} Ibid.
with the creation of the Fulbright Economics Teaching Program, most commonly known as the Fulbright School. The Fulbright School has been in operation since 1994 through funding from the U.S. State Department, although it is not part of the Fulbright Program. The basis of this partnership began through collaborations between Americans and Vietnamese in the early stages of normalization to address the need for education and training in market economy systems within Vietnam.61 Between 1994 and 2000, the Fulbright School was administered by the Harvard Institute for International Development (HIID) and it offered a Certificate in Applied Economics and Public Policy, taught by American professors, for students working in local and provincial governments.62 Ben Wilkinson has explained that the school’s approach is focused on these students complimenting the “top down” approach because they would have the tools to implement economic changes at the local level that would eventually seep up to the national level and become policy.63 The Fulbright School focused on basic economic courses during this time and in 2000 became affiliated with the Harvard Kennedy School. Over time, it has shifted its approach to more courses taught by Vietnamese faculty that concentrate on specific economic issues within Vietnam.

Abuza has also noted in his article, and Wilkinson reiterates this in his comments, that institutional partnerships between universities often are met with less interference from the Vietnamese government and are thus able to enjoy more academic freedom as well as diversity in their curriculum. In fact, Wilkinson notes that to this day the

62 Ibid.
63 Ibid.
Fulbright School is one of the few independent research institutions operating in Vietnam.\textsuperscript{64} In the period from 1993 to 2000, this status was very unique. In the years since 2000, as the diplomatic relationship between the United States and Vietnam continued to prosper, institutional partnerships involving not only universities but also private sector companies have blossomed and are more numerous than those sponsored by the Fulbright Program or the VEF.

IV. Other Developments in U.S.-Vietnam Relations During the Clinton Administration

The bilateral relationship between the United States and Vietnam increased significantly during President Clinton’s eight years in office. As discussed earlier, the gradual easing of tensions between 1993 and 1995 led to full diplomatic relations between the two nations by July 1995. From 1995 through the end of 2000, American economic involvement in Vietnam grew substantially, as did trade, and a collaborative dialogue about humanitarian issues, especially about the MIAs and POWs and the victims of Agent Orange, further strengthened the relationship.

Regarding trade and commerce, the embargo against Vietnam officially ended in February 1994, almost 47 years after it first began.\textsuperscript{65} However, Clinton left two sanctions\textsuperscript{66} in place that significantly impeded Vietnam’s ability to trade on an equal playing field with other nations: the denial of most favored nation (MFN) status and

\textsuperscript{64} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{66} For more information, see Brown, "U.S.-Vietnam Normalization -- Past, Present, Future," 212.
Vietnam’s ineligibility for the U.S. generalized system of preferences (GSP).\textsuperscript{67} Despite these sanctions, the U.S. made large strides during this period, as its Senate officially declared in April 1994 that it supported normalization.\textsuperscript{68} The economic relationship between the U.S. and Vietnam continued to prosper in Clinton’s second term. For example, in March 1998, Clinton waived the Jackson-Vanik Amendment\textsuperscript{69} for Vietnam, which allowed for the Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC) and the Export-Import Bank (Ex-Im Bank), in addition to other U.S. institutions, to become involved in U.S. business ventures in Vietnam.\textsuperscript{70} By late 1999, OPIC had “signed its first financing agreement—a $2.3 million [USD] loan to Caterpillar Inc.’s authorized dealership in Vietnam.”\textsuperscript{71} The Ex-Im Bank also signed agreements with the State Bank of Vietnam in 1999, which facilitated financial cooperation.\textsuperscript{72} In addition, in July 2000, the U.S. and Vietnam negotiated a Bilateral Trade Agreement (BTA). The BTA was only implemented after President George W. Bush took office in 2001.\textsuperscript{73}

\textsuperscript{67} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{69} The Jackson-Vanik Amendment denies Most Favored Nation (MFN) status to specific nations with non-market economies and restrictive emigration policies.

\textsuperscript{70} Manyin, “CRS Issue Brief for Congress: The Vietnam-U.S. Normalization Process,” 5.

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid.

Although America’s economic relationship with Vietnam was progressing for the first time in years, improvement on the POW and MIA issues, as well as the fate of Vietnamese refugees, moved more slowly during Clinton’s first term but eventually ceased to be a major impediment in bilateral relations. In 1993, at the beginning of his term, Clinton sent a delegation to Hanoi to press for more information and cooperation on the fate of the POWs and MIAs still supposedly held by the Vietnamese government.\textsuperscript{74} However, as Goodman has noted in his 1993 article, it was beginning to become obvious to those involved that perhaps the Vietnamese were being as helpful and as cooperative as they could be, and that further progress “will be accelerated by taking actions that would allow Vietnam’s leaders to point to the economic benefits that such cooperation is bringing.”\textsuperscript{75} As for the fate of the refugees and “boat people,” Michael Manyin reported in a brief on U.S.-Vietnam relations for the Congressional Research Service that the House passed a bill in 1995 (that was first vetoed by President Clinton then eventually passed by the House in 1996) that would “admit additional boat people from campuses in Hong Kong and elsewhere in the United States.”\textsuperscript{76} Brown further pointed out that with the promise of normalization, the Vietnamese were willing to work with the Clinton Administration on human rights issues and the continuing refugee concerns.\textsuperscript{77}

Clinton’s second term as president began in January of 1997 and shortly thereafter, on April 10, 1997, the Senate officially approved Congressman Pete Peterson,

\textsuperscript{74} Manyin, “CRS Issue Brief for Congress: The Vietnam-U.S. Normalization Process,” 4.

\textsuperscript{75} Goodman, “Vietnam’s Post-Cold War Diplomacy and the U.S. Response,” 839.


a Vietnam War veteran and former POW, as Ambassador to Vietnam. The Vietnamese government followed suit and named Le Van Bang as its Ambassador to the United States on May 8, 1997. Madeline Albright, then-Secretary of State, continued to work on humanitarian and human rights efforts during Clinton’s second term, as these were still hot button issues for the American public. Another issue that surfaced late in President Clinton’s second term was concern and outrage, on the part of the Vietnamese, over the harmful side-effects of the herbicide Agent Orange with its poisonous dioxin. Agent Orange was used during the Vietnam War by Americans in both South and North Vietnam to deprive tree and brush cover for the North Vietnamese troops. In a report for the Congressional Research Service on the impact of Agent Orange through 2012, Michael F. Martin explained that the Vietnamese are still angry because the U.S. has provided money and support to American victims of Agent Orange and its dioxin, but have offered no such aid for Vietnamese victims. In fact, the U.S. has denied any responsibility for Vietnamese victims of Agent Orange. In the final year of Clinton’s Administration, however, his cabinet members and some leaders in Congress expressed


81 Dioxin is the byproduct produced when manufacturing Agent Orange. It remained in the soil and water in Vietnam years after the war and is estimated to have adversely impacted millions of Vietnamese across three generations. For more information, see Martin, “Vietnamese Victims of Agent Orange and U.S.-Vietnam Relations,” 5.


83 Ibid., 5.
some willingness to work with Vietnam concerning Agent Orange and its harmful side effects on the Vietnamese people. This issue continued to be an irritant in U.S.-Vietnamese relations during the George W. Bush and Barack H. Obama administrations.

A growing theory among American analysts in the early 1990s concerning normalization of U.S.-Vietnam relations was the role and actions of China in East Asia. Goodman theorized in 1993 that, “The end of the Cold War has not made Pacific Asia a necessarily less dangerous place; the region contains two nuclear powers (China and North Korea)…The Socialist Republic of Vietnam is situated in an area of continued strategic importance and volatility.”\textsuperscript{84} As Vietnam mended relationships with both the United States and its neighbors in Southeast Asia, it joined the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1995. Brown noted that China’s aggressive claims concerning the South China Sea were a growing concern for the U.S. and ASEAN in 1995, and the strategic importance of relations with Vietnam gained “resonance” in Congress at this time.\textsuperscript{85} Since then, the role of China in Southeast Asian regional affairs continues to be important, and later chapters in this thesis will note how the U.S. has proceeded to cooperate militarily with Vietnam in the region to protect its own strategic agenda and to build a strong ally in the region.

With Clinton’s trip to Vietnam in November 2000, it was clear that the American and Vietnamese people were committed to overcoming their troubled past and were now keen to further build up their bilateral relationship. Clinton saw no Vietnamese bitterness

\textsuperscript{84} Goodman, “Vietnam’s Post-Cold War Diplomacy and the U.S. Response,” 841.

or anti-U.S. sentiments over the Vietnam war during this trip, and he walked away from the trip with a sense that the years he had spent working towards normalization and economic partnership had created “a new foundation for friendship.”\footnote{Ibid.} This landmark trip marked the end of President Clinton’s concerted efforts on Vietnam and strengthened a growing and collegial partnership for his successor, President George W. Bush, to build upon.

V. Conclusion

In conclusion, the developments that occurred during President Clinton’s two terms greatly furthered the relationship between the United States and Vietnam, from adversarial and non-collaborative to one that fostered cooperation, development and friendship between the two nations. By solidifying diplomatic ties in 1995, Clinton and his Administration not only brought an end to years of bitterness and animosity between Americans and Vietnamese and fostered a period of economic ties, but also solidified the foundations that President George H.W. Bush had initiated to promote international education and student exchanges between the two countries. The academic reforms that occurred in 1993 saw an innovative system of higher education in Vietnam that needed input from the West, especially America, to raise Vietnam’s academic standards and educate its population to meet the human resource demands of its growing economy. Through channels sanctioned by the U.S. Government, such as the different Fulbright Programs with Vietnam and the VEF Fellowship, both Vietnamese and American students had opportunities to study abroad and to develop skills and research to aid
Vietnam’s development. In the process, they also formed collegial relationships with their American or Vietnamese counterparts. Furthermore, institutional partnerships independent of the Fulbright or VEF programs, such as the Fulbright School, seized the opportunity to educate and teach Vietnamese students at home in subjects that would benefit Vietnam’s economic and political development.

As the next chapter will show, President George W. Bush’s two terms in office saw further growth in the bilateral relationship and in educational collaboration. Despite some challenges, through more reforms and changes in the higher education system, there was an increase in the number of students participating in exchanges through the Fulbright Program, the VEF Fellowship, and other programs. There was also a marked increase in institutional partnerships in the educational field between Vietnam and the U.S.
CHAPTER 3

CHANGES AND FURTHER DEVELOPMENTS IN U.S.-VIETNAM EDUCATION EXCHANGES DURING THE GEORGE W. BUSH ADMINISTRATION, 2001-2008

When George W. Bush became president in January 2001, he and his administration built off the positive relationship with Vietnam that President Clinton had cultivated over his eight years in office. The aim of this chapter is to discuss the new developments and the changes in Vietnam’s higher education system; the continuation of existing bilateral exchanges and fellowships and the establishment of new programs; and the gradual buildup of institutional partnerships among American and Vietnamese schools and companies during President Bush’s two terms as president. The scope of this chapter is from 2001 through January 2009, a period that, on the whole, saw marked improvements in the bilateral relationship between the two nations, especially in trade, security collaborations and educational exchanges. The organization of the chapter is in five parts, with the first continuing the narrative of the progress of higher education reform in Vietnam and discussing challenges that students and universities faced during this time. The second part covers exchange programs and fellowships supported by the Vietnamese and American governments, including new ones and those by the Fulbright program and the VEF. The third part traces prospering institutional partnerships between American and Vietnamese institutions of higher learning in this period and the developing commitment by American ones to educate the Vietnamese in Vietnam. The fourth part provides a summary of the bilateral relationship between Vietnam and the United States during the Bush Administration to illustrate the partnership and friendship.
that evolved alongside education programs and partnerships. The final part, the
conclusion, shows that this bilateral relationship was moving along in a positive
direction, and that educational programs had become an integral part of the collaborative
relationship between the two nations by the end of President Bush’s two terms in office.

I. The Higher Education Climate and Reforms in Vietnam: Continuing Challenges

The reforms implemented in the 1990s to modernize Vietnam’s higher education
system and to build programs that could help the nation to compete on the international
level with other leading nations significantly changed the state of higher education in
Vietnam between 2001 and 2008. For example, enrollment at higher education
institutions increased substantially; by 2005 there were 1.3 million college or university
students in Vietnam, up from only 162,000 in the 1992 school year.¹ Moreover, the
number of universities had grown in order to meet the demand and in 2007 there were 14
“key universities” that enrolled close to one-third of all college students. There were also
many smaller colleges in Vietnam.² During this time, young people, around 65 percent of
Vietnam’s population, were receptive to Western ideas and thought, embracing new
technologies amidst the steady increase of foreign investments in Vietnam.³

However, despite these reforms, The higher education system still had pitfalls and
challenges to overcome. For instance, only about ten percent of the total student-age

¹ Martin Hayden and Lam Quant Thiep, “Institutional Autonomy for Higher Education in

² Ibid.

³ Ngoc Minh Le and Mark A. Ashwill, “A Look at Nonpublic Higher Education in Vietnam,”
International Higher Education 36 (Summer 2004): 16.
population was able to enroll in college or university, due to lack of opportunity for those from rural or poor backgrounds and due to a shortage in the number of institutions of higher learning available.  

Although *doi moi* had ushered in reforms in the 1980s and the 1990s, Vietnams still struggled to confront ongoing problems in its higher education system, such as weak governance and limited autonomy at institutions; resistance on the part of the government to reform the curriculums; continued shortage of Vietnamese scholars with Ph.D.’s at universities; and the ongoing dearth of trained personnel as growing companies still struggled to find qualified employees.

Concerning governance and autonomy, Martin Hayden, a professor of higher education at Southern Cross University in Australia, and Lam Quang Thiep, a professor of education at Vietnam National University in Hanoi, defined “institutional autonomy” in a 2007 article for *Higher Education Research & Development* as follows:

Freedom to be self-governing; freedom to exercise corporate financial control; freedom to make their own staffing decisions; freedom to select their own students; freedom to decide on their own curriculum; and freedom to assess and certify the academic performance of their own students.

In light of the reforms from the 1990s, governance and autonomy at universities shifted so that the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) and the Communist Party had the most control. While this centralization was positive in some ways, as it gave more transparency and organization to the system, it continued to stifle the autonomy of schools to control their own programs, their own employees and their own finances. Thus, public universities had virtually no control over their administration and even the

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5 Ibid., 80.
growing number of private, or “non-public” universities, had little autonomy over their administrative matters.⁶ The two minor exceptions to major oversight from MOET were the two Vietnam National Universities, in Hanoi and in Ho Chi Minh City, as they are controlled directly by the Cabinet and can depart from some MOET regulations. This, though, is in theory and does not happen in practice.⁷

A major component of the struggle for autonomy at universities was control over curriculum and subjects taught. MOET and the Cabinet controlled all curriculums at public schools and set strict guidelines for non-public schools. In a 2006 article in *The Chronicle for Higher Education*, Martha Overland explained that Vietnamese students whom she interviewed complained to her about outdated subjects and training that seemed more in line with Cold War era concerns than with the challenges that Vietnam currently faced. For example, Nguyen Phuong Thao, a student at Vietnam National University in Hanoi, described textbooks from the 1950s that referred to the United States as “the enemy.” She also complained to Overland about mandatory history and political philosophy courses about the virtues of Communism and Ho Chi Minh and required military training exercises for students.⁸ Overland went on to explain, as Hayden and Thiep had done, that the Party and MOET have total control over the subjects covered

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 75.

and “have final say over who is hired and who is fired, even at private universities.”9 All three authors have noted that the oversight and the restrictive practices created academics and administrators who were fearful of deviating from the system in place and, therefore, unwilling to be innovative or to welcome change.

Concerns over the qualifications of instructors, better research facilities and an educated workforce carried over from the previous decade, as the higher education system still struggled to generate enough graduates to meet Vietnam’s growing economy. To Overland, by 2006 there was still not one university in Vietnam of “international quality” and, therefore, the nation still lacked a “credible research environment.”10 The student-faculty ratio continued to hover at around 30:1, which is significantly higher than in nations like the United States.11 Moreover, universities were not graduating enough Ph.D. holders to fill teaching positions or to help Vietnamese universities to grow academic departments.12 Outside the universities, the human resource shortage continued to adversely impact Vietnam’s economic development. As David Dapice, an associate professor at Tufts University and an economist with the Vietnam Program at Harvard University, noted in 2007: “Vietnam’s universities were not producing enough trained workers to satisfy the demand created by the country’s rapid economic growth. To

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.


12 Ibid.
sustain economic development…the nation must improve both the quantity and quality of its graduates.”\textsuperscript{13}

Meanwhile, the increase in American private sector involvement in Vietnam had led to numerous job opportunities for Vietnamese individuals, especially in the technology and engineering fields. But these jobs remained unfilled due to the poor quality of higher education. In the case of American defense contractor Lockheed Martin, it secured a contract with the Vietnamese government in 2006 to build and launch the nation’s first commercial satellite, a project that American leaders recognized as a huge display of bilateral trust and collaboration.\textsuperscript{14} Also, in 2006, the American company Intel announced its plan to build a multi-million dollar chip plant and testing facility in Ho Chi Minh City, allowing Vietnam to seize an opportunity in an area beyond textile production.\textsuperscript{15} However, the shortage of quality education programs to prepare Vietnamese employees for careers in these industries led to challenges and, inevitably, increased the need to send students abroad for graduate studies in science and technology. As a result, as explained by Overland, several foreign investors, including American ones, and private companies in Vietnam began to scale back production and investment.


\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 2.
in the country because of the continued lack of skilled labor, despite the reforms implemented in the 1990s.\(^\text{16}\)

In 2005, to overcome this problem, the Vietnamese government introduced aggressive new reforms, collectively known as the Higher Education Reform Agenda (HERA), to further Vietnam’s higher education development and to address the challenges that the country still faced. The goal of HERA was to “bring about a transformation of the higher education system by 2020” and its stated objectives were poignant and comprehensive.\(^\text{17}\) HERA envisioned a very ambitious system:

[One that] is three to four times larger than present, better managed and better integrated, more flexible in providing opportunities for course transfer, more equitable, more financially self-reliant, more research-oriented, more focused on the commercialization of research and training opportunities, more attuned to international benchmarks of quality, and more open to international engagement.\(^\text{18}\)

Vietnam’s leadership adopted this reform agenda, culled from higher education plans of other developing nations, to further their intellectual capital and to build knowledge-based economies. Implementing the reforms, however, turned out to be a slow and complicated process.

In light of the reforms and challenges faced by public universities and colleges, non-public institutions of higher learning began to increase enrollment and output. Initially, significant problems at these non-public universities were poor administrative

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\(^\text{18}\) Ibid.
oversight, lack of regulatory framework and quality control measures, and a tendency to orient towards more “market-based” and “for-profit” structures, rather than the traditional not-for-profit structure found in the West.  

Nevertheless, as pointed out by Mark Ashwill and Ngoc Minh Le, both of the State University of New York at Buffalo, “Nonpublic institutions have proven to be an effective alternative means of increasing access to higher education. They account for more than 20 percent of the total number of higher education institutions.”

These schools were encouraged by the international community to learn from international partners about best practices in non-public education.

As these reforms were developed and implemented, Vietnam continued to open up its leaders to the West and increase contact, showing its commitment to develop its diplomatic relationships abroad alongside reforms at home. In 2005, Vietnamese Prime Minister Phan Van Khai made a historic trip to the United States, marking the first time that a Vietnamese prime minister visited the United States since the end of the Vietnam War.

During his visit, he met with President Bush and leaders in the U.S. government to discuss commerce and trade developments. He also met with leaders in the private sector, including top executives from Boeing, Microsoft and Nike. In addition, the

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19 Ibid., 76.


Prime Minister visited Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) to meet with academic administrators to discuss the role of higher education development in Vietnam’s economic growth.23

In 2007, three other Vietnamese leaders came to the United States on an official visit to meet with American leaders and education administrators at universities. They were the new Prime Minister of Vietnam, Nguyen Tan Dung, President Nguyen Minh Triet and Education Minister Nguyen Thien Nahn. At a meeting at The New School in New York City, these Vietnamese leaders explained their desire to learn from the experiences of their American colleagues and to receive assistance and support for their reforms in higher education.24 The main goal of the meeting was to obtain support for scientific, engineering, and research activities in Vietnam, which they saw as the “key to Vietnam’s economic development effort.”25 This meeting was a landmark occasion, as it was a huge step forward towards Vietnam’s initiative in higher education and also a significant development in its government’s willingness to look outside Vietnam for support and guidance. Vietnam’s interest in science, engineering and research was the driving force too for many of the international exchanges and fellowships backed by the United States and the Vietnamese governments during these years.


25 Ibid.
II. The Continuation of Bilateral Fellowships and Exchanges and Their Success

In 2006, former American Ambassador to Vietnam Raymond Burghardt wrote that America’s role in influencing Vietnamese youth and encouraging international education programs was indeed an example of “soft power.” In his 2006 essay for the Brookings Institution, Burghardt said, “While America’s ‘soft power’ may be eroding elsewhere in Asia, young Vietnamese idolize Bill Gates and aspire to study at our universities.”26 He also noted that as of 2006 the United States was investing more in educational programs, such as the Fulbright and the VEF, in Vietnam than in any other country.27 This commitment to invest in the future of Vietnam and to promote educational exchanges, which brought Vietnamese students to study in America and allowed Americans to gain exposure to Vietnam’s history and culture, continued throughout President Bush’s Administration. The emphasis on developing science, engineering and research foundations in Vietnam is noteworthy, as is the new priority placed on military education and collaboration.

During the Bush Administration, the Fulbright programs with Vietnam continued to foster exchange and collaboration between American and Vietnamese participants. The Vietnamese Student Program remained steady with between 20 and 25 students per year. Besides the traditional fields of business, law, and public administration, students took advantage of newly approved subjects like journalism, public health, social work,


27 Ibid.
computer science, education administration, and TESOL, which stands for “Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages.” These new fields of study suggest that Vietnamese students sought to broaden their expertise abroad and to bring new marketable skills home for the further development in Vietnam. The increase in TESOL degrees was an important development because, as Overland pointed out in her article for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, the demand for English teachers in Vietnam was growing quickly, due to the United States becoming Vietnam’s largest trading partner. Furthermore, English was increasingly seen as a requirement to obtain gainful employment in the growing Vietnamese economy.

This trade relationship between Vietnam and the United States bourgeoned under President Bush’s leadership, as the Bilateral Trade Agreement (BTA) went into effect in December 2001 and the U.S. extended conditional normal trade relations (NTR) to Vietnam, allowing it to import and export at lower costs and to compete with America’s other trade partners. The United States then extended permanent NTR to Vietnam in 2006, as America had strong business interests in the country and Vietnam’s economic reforms made it a more attractive business partner. In 2007, supported by America, Vietnam became the 150th member of the World Trade Organization (WTO), meaning

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31 Ibid.
that Vietnam would “benefit from the removal of quotas that limit textile exports to Europe and the United States,” effectively increasing its international trade power.\textsuperscript{32} In the years between the Bilateral Trade Agreement and Vietnam’s entry into the WTO, overall trade between the U.S. and Vietnam had expanded by roughly 400 percent to reach almost $8 billion per year.\textsuperscript{33} This remarkable increase in trade between Vietnam and the United States under President Bush’s administration furthered the momentum for bilateral educational exchanges.

Meanwhile, the Vietnamese Scholar Program had seven participants in 2001 and maintained between six to ten participants per year from 2002 through 2008.\textsuperscript{34} These scholars continued to research academic disciplines that were vital to Vietnam’s development, such as economics, engineering, law, education and agriculture. However, by 2006, there were Vietnamese scholars also studying new fields – like special education, “Teaching English as a Foreign Language” (TEFL), and education management. Their research projects focused on how to implement American practices and how to increase English language curriculum in Vietnam.\textsuperscript{35} This trend of more scholars studying education was in line with the reforms in Vietnam’s higher education system and the initiative of the government to seek greater assistance and understanding from Western colleagues. In addition to education, more scholars were participating in


\textsuperscript{33} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.
the fields of engineering, mathematics and science research under the Vietnamese Scholar Program. This change also indicates Vietnam’s desire to increase research and the number of scholars in these fields.

As for the U.S. Student Program, it had between seven to ten participants every year between 2001 and 2007 and a record eighteen students in 2008. This program’s list of participants shows that the fields these American students studied expanded to include the following: public health; women’s studies; and artistic topics like creative writing, photography and film. These American students also continued to study economic development, Southeast Asian history, and environmental studies, which were popular when the program was launched in 1997. Likewise, American scholars taught and researched in Vietnam through the U.S. Scholar Program and they followed the trend of expanding their research to include art, literature and creative writing, on top of education, economics and business. These Fulbright exchanges that had begun with such modest numbers and specific topics saw remarkable growth during the years of President Bush’s administration and are illustrative of an enduring partnership of mutual willingness to collaborate and share knowledge.

The VEF, which was initiated during the tail end of President Clinton’s administration, took off during Bush’s years as president. The VEF currently operates three distinct programs: the Fellowship Program which brings Vietnamese students to U.S. institutions to study and receive graduate degrees; the Visiting Scholar Program


which funds Vietnamese faculty members who already have Ph.D.’s to conduct research in the United States; and the U.S. Faculty Scholar Program, which allows American professors to teach and research in Vietnam. The VEF Fellowship Program brings students to the United States to study for graduate-level degrees in the physical sciences, natural sciences, environmental sciences, mathematics, medicine and technology, including information technology, prior to returning to Vietnam to work for a minimum of two years. Their degrees directly align with Vietnam’s demand for graduates and Ph.D.’s in the sciences and technology fields -- a stated goal of the VEF is to “produce young scientists and university faculties.” The selection board for the VEF fellows screens for candidates who “demonstrate a strong commitment to the development of Vietnam through their academic and research pursuits.”

In 2003, nineteen students from Vietnam came to the United States as VEF fellows, while in 2004 their number jumped to 82 fellows. Mark Ashwill reported in his article “Moving Vietnam Forward” that in 2005 the majority of the fellows had been university instructors in Vietnam prior to participating and that their major fields of study were “divided between engineering (42 percent) and natural sciences (58 percent),” with

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39 Ibid., 49.


41 Ibid., 15.
computer and information topics as the most popular within these broad groupings.\textsuperscript{42} By 2008, a total of 275 Vietnamese and American students and scholars had participated, or were actively pursuing degrees and research through the VEF exchanges including the Fellowship Program, the Visiting Scholar Program and the U.S. Faculty Scholar Program.\textsuperscript{43} The initial nineteen Vietnamese fellows received master’s and doctorate degrees in fields ranging from computer science, geography, environmental management and electrical and computer engineering to the traditional hard science fields of chemistry, physics and medicine.\textsuperscript{44} Vietnamese scholars studied at leading American universities in their fields, including Brown University, Johns Hopkins University, Stanford University, The University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign and The University of Pennsylvania.\textsuperscript{45}

Almost all of these initial scholars have returned home to Vietnam after graduation, with the exception of a few who have continued their education in the United States. These graduates include researchers and faculty members at Vietnamese universities, such as Viet Quoc Nguyen, a lecturer in economics at Vietnam National University, Hanoi (VNU Hanoi); Chanh Quoc Kieu, a lecturer in science at VNU Hanoi; and Lam Kim Huynh, a lecturer in chemistry at Vietnam National University, Ho Chi

\textsuperscript{42} Ashwill, "Moving Vietnam Forward," 50.


\textsuperscript{44} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid.
Other graduates have gone on to work in Vietnam as engineers in the private sector and in the research sector; as business leaders; and as public servants assisting the government in policy and development. It is worth noting, however, that some of these graduates with only master’s degrees are currently listed as teaching in universities in Vietnam, which is problematic as there is still a demand for Ph.D.’s to fill university teaching slots. Since the VEF Fellowship is still relatively new and there are many who have yet to graduate from their lengthy degree programs, it is anticipated that more Ph.D. graduates will return home eventually to fill these positions.

In 2007, the VEF launched the Vietnamese Visiting Scholar Program, which sent twelve Vietnamese scholars that year to American institutions to develop research and professional skills. Many of these scholars, like their colleagues in the Fulbright Vietnamese Scholar Program, had already received doctorate degrees, both in Vietnam and abroad, and were faculty at Vietnamese universities. Through the VEF, they came to the United States to research engineering, molecular biology, medical sciences and technology at the post-doctoral level. Seven more Vietnamese visiting scholars participated in 2008. Also in 2008, the VEF launched a sister program, the U.S. Faculty Scholar Program, to send American scholars abroad to teach and research at Vietnamese universities. Four American scholars participated in the inaugural year, and taught courses in medicine, earth science, biomedical engineering and statistics at Vietnamese

46 Ibid.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid.
universities. These scholar exchanges promoted collaboration among professional academics and researchers, allowing both Vietnamese and American scholars to learn about the higher education system in each other’s country.

The VEF’s history shows great cooperation between the American and Vietnamese governments to promote the exchanges and to further help Vietnam’s development. It has directly collaborated with the Vietnamese government, especially MOET, to establish a representative office in Vietnam and to organize “study tours” for MOET officials to observe international universities to fuel the ministry’s ambition to establish top research universities in Vietnam. By the end of 2008, the VEF was hosting conferences to highlight the research accomplishments of its fellows who had returned home and to encourage networking both among Vietnamese scholars and fellows and between them and U.S. scholars. In 2007, VEF leadership also met with Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung for the first time, demonstrating the strength of the relationship between the VEF and the Vietnamese Government.

In keeping with its mission to increase the number of educated citizens at home and build up its capacities in science, technology and research, Vietnam’s MOET initiated “The Vietnamese Government Overseas Scholarship Program,” known as Project 322, in 2000. This Project 322 planned for 400 scholarships each year between

49 Ibid.


51 Ibid., 8.
2000 to 2007 and for 680 scholarships in 2008, to cover primarily Ph.D. and master’s level degree programs, but also to fund undergraduate programs and scientific internships abroad. This program stated its objective as follows: “to train staff towards master and Ph.D. levels overseas or in collaboration with international institutions for the cause of national industrialisation (sic) and modernisation (sic).”52 The government’s ultimate goal was to have 10,000 Vietnamese Ph.D.’s trained abroad at leading institutions to teach at Vietnamese universities and colleges by 2020.53 Project 322 was not exclusive to U.S. schools, as only nine percent of students attended American schools between 2000 and 2008, with greater percentages studying in China, Russia, France and Germany.54 It is significant that the Vietnamese government funded scholarships to send its students to nations that had earlier played an important role in Vietnam’s history. This innovative initiative on the part of Vietnam’s government to train its students abroad was successful in bringing these students back to Vietnam after they completed their studies. Hence, it had the potential to be a positive investment in human resource development in Vietnam. At the end of 2008, however, the percentage of Ph.D.’s in Vietnam remained low compared to the percentage in Western countries.55

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54 Ibid.

The strategic interests of both the United States and Vietnam were important drivers in their developing bilateral relationship. As a result, educational exchanges and educational collaborations involving both nations’ militaries began in 2005. In the wake of September 11th and the “rise of China,” by the latter half of 2003 “both governments were doing some strategic reassessment…Vietnam, with its long history of troubled relations with its huge neighbor was seen by some Washington policy makers – especially in the Pentagon – as an obvious partner.”56 Not surprisingly, between 2003 and 2005, military leaders from both countries met and transformed what had once been an adversarial relationship between foes into a partnership between friends. In 2003, a U.S. Navy ship docked at Saigon Port for the first time since 1975.57

To promote further military ties, Vietnam became a candidate for a U.S. program known as International Military Education and Training (IMET), which would allow the training of Vietnamese military officers, either in the United States or in Vietnam by American military officers stationed there. The stated goal of the IMET program, which is in operation in many nations, is to “further the goal of regional stability through effective, mutually beneficial military-to-military relations that culminate in increased understanding and defense cooperation between the U.S. and foreign countries.”58 The training, strictly professional, is designed to expose foreign military officers to the


57 Ibid.

procedures and structure of the U.S. military organizations, including justice systems and civilian-military relations. In 2005, U.S. Army Colonel Al Swanda published a strategic research project calling for the establishment of an IMET program with Vietnam, explaining that, “Implementing closer military-to-military relations with Vietnam will help educate their military and civilian leaders on our democratic system, strengthen our relations, and provide another avenue to champion the causes of human rights in Vietnam.”59 He added that not establishing the program could be detrimental to U.S.-Vietnam relations.

The U.S. Congress fiercely debated approving IMET funds for Vietnam, given Vietnam’s poor and criticized human rights record.60 Ultimately, it approved the program in 2005.61 Since its approval, a number of Vietnamese military officials have participated in training programs in the United States.62 Hanoi seized this opportunity to send its officers for professional development programs and to have their English language skills honed. This base level of cooperation between militaries to promote education exchanges led to U.S. delegations touring Vietnamese military academies in 2006,63 leading to greater defense collaborations in recent years. The milestone educational exchanges that


62 Ibid.
prospered during President Bush’s administration were coupled by greater institutional collaborations between American universities and companies and Vietnamese universities.

III. Growing Institutional Partnerships

On the whole, both the U.S. and Vietnam welcomed the bilateral educational exchanges. There was suspicion on both sides regarding the increasing presence of U.S. institutions in Vietnam, as some felt that there were U.S. universities seeking institutional partnerships with Vietnamese universities and colleges solely for their own profit and not to benefit Vietnam through the education of its youth. Mark Ashwill countered this in a 2006 article by saying that “most of these institutions are well intentioned; their primary goal is to meet an urgent need and provide a quality education at the lowest possible cost.” 64 Ashwill also noted that some Vietnamese students were more attracted by the “brand name” of a degree from top American universities offering programs in Vietnam than the degree itself. 65 To try and counter these negatives, the Vietnamese government encouraged universities to seek partnerships for “more tangible (e.g., quality academic programs, additional revenue, training future professors and researchers for the university) and intangible benefits (e.g., prestige, improved academic discourse) that


65 Ibid.
MOET, as the governance body for Vietnamese universities, cautioned (and continues to caution) universities to ensure that new programs benefit students, not just institutional pockets, and has cooperated with American organizations, like the Institute for International Education (IIE) to help in this process.

The Fulbright School, Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government’s certificate program in Applied Economics and Public Policy, that partnered with the University of Economics Ho Chi Minh City in the 1990s further developed between 2000 and 2008. It continued to successfully prepare its students to participate in the transforming world economy. Martha Overland has explained, in a 2006 article for the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, that students and faculty praised Harvard’s commitment to teaching topics on market economy and international finance, referring to it as “an academic island,” with Western instruction style that encouraged students to challenge both the teachers and the government. Graduates of the program during this time went on to be leaders in finance, such as Vu Bao Quoc, the first Vietnamese Vice President of Citibank.

In 2008, the Fulbright Program successfully upgraded its Certificate in Applied Economics and Public Policy into a full Master’s in Public Policy (MPP) program. An article from October 2008 on The Harvard Kennedy School’s website reported: “The

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66 Ibid.


68 Ibid.
program offers an intensive and research-driven curriculum in public policy, market economics, and public sector leadership within Vietnam’s specific socio-economic context. MPP graduates earn a degree from the University of Economics Ho Chi Minh City.”69 In addition to this new program, the Fulbright School concurrently established an executive education program, the Vietnam Leaders in Development Program with funding provided by British Petroleum (BP).70 Ben Wilkinson, Associate Director of The Fulbright School, explained that over the last ten years, more instructors and faculty in the program were Vietnamese academics who had received their Ph.D.’s abroad.71 The Fulbright School continued to educate industry leaders in Vietnam during this time by bringing instruction to Vietnamese at home through a successful institutional partnership.

Between 2005 and 2008, other American universities established partnerships with institutions in Vietnam to promote education there. For instance, the University of Missouri first began exploring involvement in Vietnam in 2005 and then established “The Vietnam Institute” in 2008 to “develop a wide range of scientific and cultural interactions with institutions and individuals in Vietnam.” This U.S. university also aimed to create learning and research opportunities for Vietnamese and University of Missouri

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students.\textsuperscript{72} Also in 2008, The University of Missouri became the first American university to sign an official Memorandum of Understanding with MOET. This Memorandum would serve as the foundation for 322 Project scholars to study in Missouri and for a “1+1” joint Master’s program with Hanoi University of Education.\textsuperscript{73}

In addition to the University of Missouri, Loyola University Chicago, Arizona State University and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign began partnerships around this period. Loyola University Chicago began its relationship with Vietnam in 2007, when a delegation from MOET visited the university to discuss educational development and when members of Loyola University’s faculty visited Vietnam. In recent years, many programs have flourished through Loyola’s Vietnam Center in Ho Chi Minh City. Arizona State University, through a partnership with Intel, established a “Microelectronics Packaging” curriculum in 2008 for faculty from technology and science universities in Ho Chi Minh City, Hanoi and Da Nang.\textsuperscript{74} This program was part of Intel Vietnam’s new Higher Education Program. The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign started a joint degree program and exchange program in engineering with Ho


\textsuperscript{73} Ibid.

Chi Minh City University of Technology. The program used video conferencing and online forums to promote interaction between American and Vietnamese students.  

The trend of international partnerships across American and Vietnamese universities during President Bush’s term in office culminated with an official conference, “American Support for Education in Vietnam: A Brainstorming Conference for American Stakeholders,” in January of 2008 in Hanoi. The conference was convened and organized by the then-U.S. Ambassador to Vietnam Michael Michalak. Almost 200 “American stakeholders,” including those representing U.S. companies, U.S. universities, U.S. NGOs and U.S. government education programs were in attendance. Education leaders from Vietnam also attended this conference. According to the official conference report, the conference successfully facilitated conversations between all those involved in education in Vietnam to help all understand “the activities of other organizations, and [the] opportunities for cooperation with them.” The report also mentioned that Ambassador Michalak planned to continue working with MOET and the Vietnamese government to promote and foster American involvement in educational programs in Vietnam.

Thus, over the course of eight years, education collaboration between Vietnam and the United States grew dramatically. As the bilateral relationship developed and

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77 Ibid.
prospered, it opened more opportunities for cooperation between the U.S. and Vietnamese governments to promote their own educational exchanges and fellowships. And, towards the end of Bush’s term, this encouraged American universities to seek partnerships in Vietnam.

IV. Summary of Other Developments in U.S.-Vietnam Relations Under President Bush

As discussed earlier, the Bilateral Trade Agreement (BTA) signed by President Bush created a prosperous trade relationship between Vietnam and the United States that further paved the way for developments in the bilateral relationship between the two nations for the remainder of President Bush’s term in office. In addition to the expansion of educational exchanges, institutional partnerships and military ties, improvements included diplomatic trips by the Prime Minister of Vietnam to the United States and a visit by President Bush to Vietnam and American assistance on humanitarian issues in Vietnam, including providing support for HIV/AIDS treatment and cooperation on assistance for victims of Agent Orange.

The visits by heads of state indicated that Vietnam was willing to collaborate with the United States and was seeking assistance and advice as their economy continued to grow, in large part because of the increase in trade with the United States. Following the Prime Minister’s visit, President Bush made a visit to Vietnam in 2006. The main goal of his visit was to attend the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Leaders’ Meeting, but he also had a chance to visit with Vietnam’s leaders in government and business. While in Vietnam, he said:
Vietnamese students have great opportunities here at home and abroad. The Vietnamese people are travelling around the world and sharing this ancient culture with peoples of the world. And the United States, as well as other APEC partners, look forward to strengthening our ties.78

In 2007, the new Vietnamese Prime Minister, Nguyen Tan Dung, also made a visit to the United States, as discussed in Part I of this chapter. These diplomatic visits by the leaders of the United States and Vietnam are important signs of the strong relationship developing between them and of their willingness to cooperate despite their troubled past.

President Bush’s administration made large strides in helping Vietnam through humanitarian assistance. Then-Ambassador Burghardt explained that the U.S. was willing to look beyond the past and focus on the present issues at hand in Vietnam, many of them humanitarian issues that the U.S. could help address.79 In 2004, it provided Vietnam with special funds to treat HIV/AIDS, while in 2005 and the State Department worked with Vietnamese leadership to promote religious freedom because it had been deemed a “country of particular concern” in the State Department’s September 2004 International Religious Freedom Report.80

The issue of Agent Orange, which as discussed previously was a significant hurdle in the normalization progress, also saw progress under President Bush. Michael Martin’s report on Agent Orange for the Congressional Research Service in 2012 notes that, “According to one Vietnamese estimate, there are up to 5 million Vietnamese


spanning three generations who have medical conditions that are purported to be related to exposure to Agent Orange and similar herbicides."\textsuperscript{81} This report adds that this issue took a back seat to the trade embargo and the POW/MIA fight, however, and that the U.S. gave preference to U.S. veterans exposed to the poison but did not extend assistance to Vietnamese veterans or civilians.\textsuperscript{82} In 2006, the U.S. agreed to address the issue with Vietnamese leaders and offered support for cleaning up the areas still believed to be contaminated and dangerous.\textsuperscript{83} In addition, in 2007 the 110\textsuperscript{th} Congress appropriated $3 million to the State Department for further cleaning up. In 2008, Senator John McCain acknowledged that the issue was a remaining irritant in relations between Vietnam and the United States that needed more attention.\textsuperscript{84}

V. Conclusion

Due to trade development, humanitarian assistance, and the continued willingness to cooperate on educational exchanges, the eight years President Bush was in office saw great progress in the bilateral relationship between the United States and Vietnam. Although Vietnam still struggled with higher education reform at home, its willingness to seek assistance and advice abroad, and its persistence in developing the capacity for science, technology and research capabilities indicated that it was committed to a stronger relationship with the West and to the further development of Vietnam’s

\textsuperscript{81} Martin, “Vietnamese Victims of Agent Orange and U.S.-Vietnam Relations,” 1.

\textsuperscript{82} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., 2.

\textsuperscript{84} Ibid., 2-3.
economy. The well received educational exchanges overseen by the American and Vietnamese governments greatly increased the number of students studying abroad and created the potential for many highly-educated Vietnamese students and scholars to return to Vietnam in later years with world-class degrees and to influence Vietnam’s educational system, public sector, and growing private sector. The institutional partnerships that began to grow further point to success of the bilateral relationship and to the growing commitment from American universities to assist Vietnam at home, not just from abroad. As President Bush left office in January 2009, the relationship between Vietnam and the United States was stronger than before. As Chapter 4 will show, President Obama has continued the tradition of cooperation with the Vietnamese in higher education exchanges and partnerships, in addition to building on the strong bilateral relationships to expand trade and collaboration in diplomacy.
CHAPTER 4
THE CONTINUATION OF U.S.-VIETNAMESE EXCHANGES AND PARTNERSHIPS UNDER PRESIDENT BARACK H. OBAMA, 2009-2013

This chapter aims to explore recent developments, including similarities and differences, in education exchanges and partnerships between the United States and Vietnam under President Barack Obama’s administration. The scope is period of four years from 2009. The chapter is organized in five parts. The first discusses the on-going challenges and reforms in higher education in Vietnam, the state of which fuels demand for international exchanges, while the second addresses the continuation of the successful exchanges and fellowships discussed in earlier chapters and provides updates on participation and outcomes. The third part covers the growing number of institutional partnerships between American universities and companies and Vietnamese universities, many of which have helped improve private sector development in Vietnam by training personnel for Vietnam’s workforce. The fourth part then provides an overview of the bilateral relationship between the United States and Vietnam under President Obama, highlighting the increasing cooperation and collaboration in security matters and in investment in industry. The fifth part, the conclusion, notes that after about twenty years of higher education exchanges and cooperation between Vietnam and the United States, the bilateral relationship has improved substantially, although Vietnam’s system of higher education has not kept pace with that in other leading nations.
I. Higher Education Reforms in Vietnam

By 2009, Vietnam had experienced almost twenty years of substantial economic development, averaging a 7.4 percent growth increase per year.\(^1\) The onset of the global recession at this time, however, threatened Vietnam’s progress, as exports decreased between 2009 and 2011.\(^2\) This dip posed challenges for higher education in Vietnam, as the government’s reforms in recent years relied on “inward investment” from within Vietnam to improve quality and output at universities around the country.\(^3\) So far, Vietnam has confronted the economic recession alongside other challenges such as corruption, leadership, and the higher education goals. Regarding higher education in Vietnam, the old problems persist: poor quality control, insufficient human resources at universities, and governance issues.

A 2009 report from the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) entitled “Report on the Development of Higher Education System, the Solutions to Ensure Quality Assurance and Improve of Education Quality,” provides an overview of the growth in size of the higher education system in Vietnam since 1987 when the reforms began. By May 2009, there were 376 universities and colleges within Vietnam, a striking...
increase from only 101 universities and colleges in 1987. The new universities included a large number of non-public universities, which amounted to roughly a quarter of all universities and colleges in Vietnam. Furthermore, a growing number of colleges were being upgraded to universities, providing for an increase in postgraduate degrees in Vietnam, a goal that had long motivated Vietnam’s reforms, as the country’s leaders recognized the need for professors at universities with postgraduate degrees and for a workforce in technology and the science industry with doctorate and master’s degrees to fill the number of skilled positions that continued to increase with foreign investment. By 2009, there were 121 Vietnamese institutes of higher learning equipped to offer Ph.D. programs and another 100 offering master’s degrees. In addition, the number of students had grown, as about two-thirds of the total population in Vietnam was under the age of 30.

Despite this impressive growth in the number of universities and students, the challenge of poor quality education and a dearth in adequate human resources continues to plague Vietnam. Even with the reforms from the 1990s and 2000s, Vietnam is unable to produce the quality graduates required to fill positions within its economy. It also has insufficient professors and instructors at universities with postgraduate degrees. Scholars

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5 Ibid.

6 Ibid., 3.

studying the higher education system in Vietnam reiterate that in order to compete on the international scale, the universities and colleges must make improvements in teaching and research to produce better-qualified graduates, especially in the science and technology fields. For instance, P.D. Hein of the Vietnam Atomic Energy Agency notes in an article in *Higher Education*, “If Vietnam is to move up the value-added ladder and integrate into global supply chains it will need a much larger corps of skilled workers…than its university system is currently capable of producing.”8 His concern echoes similar critiques from previous years, showing that despite reforms and policies aimed at improving quality to meet human resource demands, Vietnam still struggles to succeed in this area. Regarding the worrisome faculty shortage at universities, Dennis McComb, a professor of economics in the Baltimore, Maryland area, notes in a 2009 article for *International Higher Education*, that their numbers are small and that most do not have postgraduate degrees. They also have to teach far more hours than is reasonable, resulting in their not having time for research or for other professional development activities.9

Unfortunately, the 2009 MOET Report largely ignores existing problems in Vietnam’s higher education system and does not address all the root causes. The root causes can be reduced to five main points. First, the complicated bureaucracy in Vietnam’s government makes it difficult to enforce reforms. Second, corruption among leaders gives some students and administrators an unfair advantage while studying at

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home and abroad. Third, leaders lack a clear vision for the future on how reforms should be implemented. Fourth, the poor infrastructure and support at universities holds up new policies and ideas from being put in place. Fifth, little coordination between universities has led to the low quality of all degrees in Vietnam.

One problem the 2009 MOET Report did acknowledge was the challenge of bureaucracy, saying that reforms in Vietnam have so far been hindered by “slow transitions” within the government that have restricted innovation or creativity on the part of administrators, professors and students. 10 It also emphasized that quality control is currently a major initiative in Vietnam. However, for over thirty years there has been no infrastructure in Vietnam to provide quality control at universities. Thus, the output (graduates) and input (teachers, course materials, curriculum) were not held to any one standard. 11 It provided a timeframe for quality control measures in which universities and colleges must make commitments to quality training, and to using public resources for training and public finance reform, or else face restrictions to their ability to recruit new students. 12 It did not address the other root causes and did not offer concrete action steps to fix them.

Instead, the 2009 Report lauds the successes of the Vietnamese postgraduate education system. For example, it states in its English version of its report: “The post-

10 Ibid.


12 Ibid.
graduate institutions national [sic] wide have provided important labor force with skills and qualification to teaching and scientific research, socio-economic and industrial development, strengthening national security and stability.”\(^{13}\) This report also praises the developments in higher education, particularly postgraduate education, claiming that they have “better met the learning needs of the people and human resources for socio-economic development.”\(^{14}\)

However, McCornac has a different opinion, for he argues that the data indicates that the quality of these graduates is poor, as “many Vietnamese doctorate holders, particularly if educated domestically, are actually educated only on the bachelor’s level on the international scale.”\(^{15}\) This discrepancy in the quality of education poses a serious problem for Vietnam’s higher education goals, as the MOET Report states that Vietnam aims to increase postgraduate enrollment at home to generate a teaching force in which 35 percent of academic staff will have a doctorate degree by 2020.\(^{16}\) Therefore, there continues to be serious need for improved quality in education to meet teaching needs of Vietnamese universities and to meet output goals for graduates. Hein and McCornac both note that in order to compete with other Southeast Asian countries and with leading


\(^{14}\) Ibid.


nations around the world, Vietnam must address quality more aggressively than they have in past years.  

Although brief and lofty, the 2009 MOET Report does reveal some steps the government put in place to address the challenges in the higher education system. One step was to introduce entrance and placement exams for university enrollment. Another step was to standardize the student/teacher ratio across all universities in Vietnam. A third step was to increase English language courses to improve fluency. A fourth step was the standardization of curriculum so that the government would control roughly half of course content, while the universities and colleges are responsible for the remaining half. Despite the ineffectiveness of reforms in the past, Vietnam’s government shows that it is committed to reform and improvement. Accordingly, the 2009 MOET Report was followed by an important directive from the Prime Minister’s Office in 2010, aimed at transforming university management within two years, by 2012.

This directive included a twelve-point “Action Plan” for MOET and also initiatives for other ministries and government offices to support MOET. While it noted the “successes” of the higher education system, including the impressive growth in size and the “high-level human resources for the national industrialization and

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18 Ibid.
modernization,”19 it focused mainly on the challenges perceived in the system, as listed below:

Training quality in general remains low and fails to keep pace with the socio-economic development of the country; State management mechanism towards higher education system and the management of universities and colleges remains persistently inadequate, impossible to create sufficient driving force to bring into full play creativity and self-responsibility of the lecturers, managers and students to renovate higher education strongly and basically. [sic]20

This “Action Plan” for MOET included the following important directives: enhancing quality across universities; reassessing the guidelines for administration management; increasing tuition so that the funds could go towards developing the quality of training and teaching; promoting “self-management” at universities based on State regulations; improving State oversight of universities to ensure quality; and introducing a quality assessment program for all universities to complete. Perhaps most impressive, the directive proposed a three-year time frame for all schools to meet “criteria and conditions” for quality control measures.21

The 2009 MOET Report and the Prime Minister’s Directive show that leadership in Vietnam is committed to higher education reform. This commitment has been acknowledged by Professor Gerard Postiglione of the University of Hong Kong: “Vietnam is an example of a country determined to develop higher education throughout the global economic crisis, even though it still has a way to go for basic education

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20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.
Clearly, Vietnam’s government is attempting to face the ongoing challenges and shortcomings in its system to compete on the international stage. Another goal of these reforms is to have at least two Vietnamese universities ranked among the top 200 universities in the world by 2020. Through the agendas and directives discussed earlier and the policies supported by the government, Vietnam will attempt to meet its ambitious goals in the coming years. According to the author of this thesis, these goals may be too ambitious. In any case, international exchanges and partnerships continue to be a major part of Vietnam’s plans, as sending students abroad to gain postgraduate education ensures better quality degrees for these students and provides a greater human resources pool in Vietnam than the system is currently able to produce. The bilateral cooperation also promotes international collaboration between Vietnam and foreign nations, which can only improve their bilateral relationships. The exchange and fellowship programs between Vietnam and the United States, in particular, have continued to expand to support higher educational development in Vietnam.

II. The Success of Bilateral Educational Exchanges and Fellowships

The U.S. Government under the Obama administration has also recognized the challenges of higher education in Vietnam and the benefits of continuing to support academic exchange and fellowship programs with this country. For instance, under Former-Ambassador Michael Michalak, who served from 2007 to 2011, the U.S. Embassy in Hanoi made “the development of education in Vietnam a top priority,” by

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22 Postiglione, “Global Recession and Higher Education in Eastern Asia,” 800.

increasing Vietnamese students studying in the U.S. and by “encouraging greater educational exchange between the U.S. and Vietnam.” This commitment can be seen through the continuation of the Fulbright and the VEF programs, and in the growth of U.S.-Vietnam military education collaboration. Unfortunately, as of 2012, due to insufficient funding Vietnam suspended its own international study scholarship, the 322 Program, aimed at increasing the number of foreign-educated undergraduate and graduate students. This development is in light of MOET’s goals to develop a new scholarship program with greater financial support. However, no plans have been released and students initially awarded scholarships for future study have been told that they must wait until the new program is developed to study abroad. Nevertheless, the continuation of these exchanges and fellowships on the part of the U.S. is a positive sign that Vietnamese students will continue to study in the United States in the coming years and that Vietnam will benefit from this U.S. training.

Meanwhile, in 2012, the Fulbright Vietnamese Program celebrated its twentieth anniversary. To mark this occasion, then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton gave a speech praising the successes of the various Fulbright programs in Vietnam and their graduates. Citing the importance of continued contact between Vietnamese and American students and scholars, Clinton said:


26 Ibid.
What is important...are the daily contacts between our people, so many Vietnamese and so many American people who get to know one another, who have a chance to work together or study together or even live together creating those bonds that really do bring us closer together.²⁷

She went on to say that the Fulbright programs around the world have done a great deal to “break down the walls of misunderstanding and mistrust,” and that with over 1,000 Americans and Vietnamese participating since its inception in 1992, the Vietnamese Fulbright Program was a “wonderful example” of this.²⁸

The Vietnamese Student Program has continued to sponsor 20 and 25 participants each year from 2009 through 2012. Consistent with past years, students have completed degrees in the fields of business, foreign affairs, economics and public policy programs. Moreover, some are in TESOL programs, while others are in international development, public health and even literature and advertising programs.²⁹ The Vietnamese Scholar Program has also maintained steady participation over the last few years, with Vietnamese scholars coming to the U.S. to study economics, agriculture, education and public health, as in previous years.³⁰ At the same time, the Vietnamese Scholar Program has seen growing numbers of scholars studying fields like literature, linguistics, and liberal arts, similar to the Vietnamese Student Program. In 2010, one Vietnamese in the

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²⁸ Ibid.


Scholar Program came to America to study philosophy, claiming that Vietnam has no solid philosophy program in the higher education system and that the country could benefit from learning about democratization and Western thought models.\footnote{Ibid.}

As for the number of American students participating in the U.S. Student Program, this has increased in recent years, with 19 students in 2012.\footnote{Fulbright, “Fulbright U.S. Student Program: U.S. Fellows Directory,” http://us.fulbrightonline.org/component/filter/?view=filter (accessed January 30, 2013).} A growing number of these students have gone on “English Teaching Assistantships,” a change from previous years when they went to participate in field research and to study specific topics, like education or economics. The number of Americans participating in the U.S. Scholar Program over the last four years has increased as well, with 22 professors and researchers travelling to Vietnam to study since 2009.\footnote{Fulbright Scholar Program, “1999-2000 Director of U.S. Fulbright Scholars,” http://www.cies.org/us_scholars/1999-2000/usdir99.pdf (accessed January 30, 2013).} In addition to these programs, the Fulbright Program launched a new program in 2012, the International Fulbright Science and Technology Ph.D. Program. This program was developed by the U.S. Embassy in Hanoi and the Vietnamese government to send students to American universities to study science, technology or engineering, similar to the goals of the VEF.\footnote{Embassy of the United States Hanoi, “2012 International Fulbright Science and Technology Ph.D. Program,” http://vietnam.usembassy.gov/fulbright_stphd.html (accessed February 5, 2013).}

The first students began their studies in the 2012-2013 academic year.

The VEF fellowship program has also continued to educate Vietnam’s future leaders in science and technology. It published a progress report in 2010 to highlight successes and to report on the new initiatives that the VEF administration and fellows are
currently undertaking. With new leadership since 2009 and with new members on its Board of Directors, including leaders in the American science and technology fields appointed by President Obama,\textsuperscript{35} the VEF has developed partnerships with Vietnamese institutions, held international conferences to highlight participant research, and committed itself to educational development within Vietnam.\textsuperscript{36}

In the 2012-2013 academic year, 47 new Fellows joined the VEF cohort at American universities.\textsuperscript{37} Over the years, VEF has successfully placed a total of 424 fellows at 84 different leading universities across the U.S.\textsuperscript{38} Current VEF Fellows have maintained the program’s tradition of degrees in the science and technology, and are studying fields ranging from biomedical and food science to mechanical engineering and environmental engineering.\textsuperscript{39} From the data in the VEF’s Alumni Database, there is an

\textsuperscript{35} The American leaders in science and technology appointed by President Obama include the following: Dr. Lynne A. McNamara, Director of the VEF since 2009; Dr. Isaac Silvera of the Department of Energy, National Science Foundation, NASA, and University of Amsterdam; Ms. Anhlan P. Nguyen of University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center; and Ms. Quyen N. Vuong of the International Children Assistance Network. For more information, see “Vietnam Education Foundation Announces New Chairman of the Board and New Board Members Appointed by President Obama,” \textit{PR Newswire}, August 1, 2012, \url{http://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/vietnam-education-foundation-announces-new-chairman-of-the-board-and-new-board-members-appointed-by-president-obama-164569896.html} (accessed January 28, 2013).


increasing number of women participating in the Fellowship. The VEF Visiting Scholar and U.S. Faculty Scholars Programs have seen consistent numbers over the last few years, and Visiting Scholars are currently studying Biomedical Sciences, Mathematics, “Green Computing,” and developing new research techniques for labs and schools at home. 40 U.S. Faculty Scholars are currently teaching topics like Public Health and Computer Science at Vietnamese universities. 41

In 2011, roughly half of all VEF Fellows had returned to Vietnam, while the remainder were still completing academic research or postdoctoral training. 42 The Fellowship requires its Fellows to work in Vietnam for a minimum of two years after completing their degrees and VEF’s report shows that most graduates, upon their return to Vietnam, have entered the private sector, working in engineering or computer science. 43 The next most popular destination for VEF graduates is academia, with about 38 percent of Fellows returning to teach in universities and colleges in Vietnam. 44 A smaller number have entered into the development field and work for international organizations, such as the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) or UNICEF. 45 Of those who have participated in the VEF Visiting Scholar Program, most have studied

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40 Ibid.
41 Ibid.
43 Vietnam Education Foundation, *VEF Achievements and Activities: 24*.
44 Ibid.
45 Ibid.
Agricultural Sciences, Biology, Computer Engineering, and Physics, all essential fields for Vietnam’s continued development.46

In its 2010 report, the VEF administrators reiterated their goal to “build a spirit of community, solidarity and professional and personal support systems while in the United States and when they return to Vietnam.”47 To achieve this, it has begun fostering a growing alumni network among VEF Fellows; hosting job fairs highlighting jobs in universities, the Vietnamese government, research organizations and in the private sector; and putting together annual research conferences where VEF fellows can showcase their work and get to know one another.48 VEF has also collaborated with MOET and the Ministry of Science and Technology (MOST) to ensure graduates’ professional success when they return to Vietnam. In addition, VEF has committed itself to further education development in Vietnam by organizing “book drives” for local universities and establishing the “Millennium Science Initiative,” a project to build “Centers of Excellence” in Vietnam through institutional partnerships with the Science Initiative Group (SIG)/Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey,49 both of which are noteworthy because of the potential impact they will have on Vietnam’s higher education system at home.

Outside of traditional academics, the exchange and collaboration between the American and Vietnamese militaries has continued to develop and grow under President

46 Ibid., 32.
48 Ibid.
Obama’s administration. As both nations continue to be wary of China and its role in the South China Sea and in Asian security as a whole, the strategic partnership between the U.S. and Vietnam has expanded significantly. As an article from Fox News notes, “The U.S. has said it has a national interest in ensuring freedom of navigation in the sea, and analysts say Washington is expanding its military presence in Asia to counter China’s rising influence.”\(^{50}\) In 2012, American naval vessels have participated in joint exercises with Vietnam’s military involving non-combat training. The two nations have even begun formal exchanges in which leaders share tactics and best practices about medicine, navigation, firefighting, and other matters that will benefit Vietnam’s military development.\(^{51}\)

Building off the initial approval of IMET funding in 2005, the American and Vietnamese defense communities have expanded military education exchanges in recent years. They signed an official Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) in 2011, citing specific goals for the bilateral defense relationship and outlining how further educational programs fit into the relationship. As an example, Article III, Section C of the MOU states its goal is as follows:

Formalize the relationship between defense research institutions, which is a step in advancing the overall defense relationship. This should include increasing military student exchanges, inviting Vietnamese officers to the United States to attend military academic institutions, and expanding military medicine


cooperation - all of which are valuable efforts to facilitate the expansion of overall bilateral defense cooperation.\textsuperscript{52}

The MOU goes on to call for visits between the U.S. National Defense University and the Vietnam National Defense Academy; academic conferences between military leaders at the Defense Strategic Institute and the Institute of Defense International Relations; scholarly collaboration on research pertaining to defense; and continued faculty and student exchanges, specifically through IMET programs, with American military officers learning Vietnamese and Vietnamese officers attending U.S. military academies.\textsuperscript{53} These collaborations between militaries that were bitter enemies show the development of an amicable and collaborative relationship.

\section*{III. Growth and Potential in Institutional Partnerships}

Institutional partnerships between American and Vietnamese universities and their governments have grown substantially over the last few years and will likely continue to grow due to the commitment of both Vietnamese and American leaders towards the continuation of educational partnerships and cooperation. In addition to the U.S. Embassy’s commitment, mentioned previously, the Vietnamese government is encouraging Vietnamese universities to form relationships with counterparts abroad. As Martha Overland has explained in a 2009 article in \textit{The Chronicle for Higher Education}:

“Vietnam, acknowledging that its education system is broken, has hung out the welcome


\textsuperscript{53}Ibid, 3-4.
sign, particularly for engineering and computer science programs, which teach skills most in demand here.”\textsuperscript{54} Furthermore, Le Quang Minh of the Vietnam National University in Ho Chi Minh City, cites the struggling higher education system in Vietnam as a large impetus for partnerships.\textsuperscript{55} In recent years, American universities and companies have entered Vietnam’s higher education system through MOUs, joint degree programs, student exchanges, and faculty exchanges, all of which have the potential to impact the curriculum, the teaching, and the overall higher education system in Vietnam.

The U.S. Department of Commerce and The International Trade Administration have, as of 2011, also encouraged institutional partnerships and exchanges between American and Vietnamese universities, as international education, particularly foreign students attending U.S. institutions of higher learning, has become one of America’s top ten service exports.\textsuperscript{56} In addition, U.S. government leaders note the benefit of a growing Vietnamese middle class that is familiar with American customs and consumer goods, which will “be more likely to remain our customers.”\textsuperscript{57} In connection with the use of “soft power,” the U.S. government has continued to express the positive influence that international education can have on not only shaping future leaders abroad, but also all


\textsuperscript{55} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{57} Ibid.
foreign citizens who spend time in America and, therefore, become familiar with American customs and friendly with individuals.\(^{58}\)

Whereas, previously many universities were left to their own devices and initiatives to form partnerships, currently there is a great deal of backing and support for universities and companies looking to work with Vietnamese counterparts. For instance, the Department of Commerce is helping to “introduce accredited U.S. schools to potential students in each market; introduce these U.S. schools to potential partners and other industry representatives; and inform mission members of local cultural, political and economic factors.”\(^{59}\) At the same time, scholars and experts in international education, such as Martha Overland and Mark Ashwill of the Institute for International Education (IIE), are wary of institutions with ill-intent towards Vietnam, namely schools that “prey” on unknowing Vietnamese students desperate for American degrees by offering unaccredited or poor-quality distance-learning programs. Overland and Ashwill are also wary of “partnerships” which amount to little more than official documents signed by university presidents due to inaction on the part of the American schools and to bureaucracy in the Vietnamese government.\(^{60}\) However, for those institutions with the right goals, initiative, and patience, the institutional partnerships that have developed in

\(^{58}\) Ibid.


recent years are innovative and will hopefully continue to positively impact Vietnam’s higher education system and economy.

Meanwhile, new programs have emerged. These include new programs between Arizona State University and Intel, Vanderbilt University, and Houston Community College have emerged. 61 Vanderbilt University now offers a doctoral program in Psychology with Vietnam National University and Houston Community College offers a fully accredited associate degree program with the Saigon Institute of Technology. These two programs are examples of the new initiatives that not only allow for the exchange of students and faculty, but actually issue fully accredited degrees from American universities to students in Vietnam without these students ever having to leave the country. These are in addition to the Harvard Fulbright School, who’s MPP program has thrived since its inception in 2008, and Loyola University Chicago, who’s Vietnam Center has expanded to include undergraduate study abroad programs, a medical school rotation program, and staff immersion programs; 62

The innovative program through Arizona State University and Intel is backed by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). The program aims to provide “a model for advancing engineering education to prepare engineers to support Vietnam’s


growing high-tech industry.”  

Arizona State University’s engineering department, Intel, Siemens, and other leading engineering firms have partnered with eight universities and colleges across Vietnam to promote curriculum development and better student outcomes through faculty training and student learning experiences. This program aims to develop longstanding partnerships and collegial relationships between professionals and academics in Vietnam and the United States in the coming years and has proposed English-language undergraduate engineering programs in Vietnam to further prepare graduates for the modernizing workforce.

These burgeoning partnerships have built up on the already well-established exchanges and fellowships run through the U.S. government and have great potential for Vietnam’s higher education development and continued collaboration between the U.S. and Vietnam. As more Vietnamese students come to the United States to study or complete degrees in Vietnam sponsored and supported by American partners, the bilateral relationship that both nations have fostered for more than twenty years will only strengthen. Hopefully, both Vietnamese and American students and scholars will eventually contribute to an effective transformation of the higher education system in Vietnam.


64 Ibid.

IV. Growing Strength in the Bilateral Relationship

In light of the developments in international education discussed above and the years of hard and dedicated work towards building the bilateral relationship between the U.S. and Vietnam under Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, President Obama’s administration has been able to successfully continue amicable relations with Vietnam, expand defense cooperation and trade, and support the development of Vietnam and its Southeast Asian neighbors. President Obama, considered by some as the first “Pacific President,” was the first president ever to make an official visit to Southeast Asia only, stopping in Cambodia, Thailand and Myanmar in 2012 to meet with leaders in ASEAN. Although the president has yet to visit Vietnam during his term, he and his administration have done a great deal to maintain the partnership between the two nations in the last four years and meet both Vietnamese and American strategic interests.

The U.S.’s trade agreement with Vietnam, Vietnam’s membership in the WTO, and it’s permanent normal trade relations with the U.S., all of which were implemented under President George W. Bush’s term in office, paved the way for continued trade between the U.S. and Vietnam under President Obama. According to a report by Michael Martin for the Congressional Research Service, concerning Vietnamese-U.S. trade relations, President Obama’s government has provided roughly $10 million USD per year


in aid to support Vietnam’s continuing economic reforms since taking office in 2009. The two nations are also negotiating future trade deals and partnerships.68

In particular, Vietnam has been lobbying the U.S. in recent years to participate in negotiations to form the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), which would form a multilateral trade alliance second to only the WTO.69 Currently, negotiations have stalled,70 as prospective members have begun stating requirements for participation that have caused tension. Vietnam’s “mixed economy” is not as open as other prospective members, and so their participation could hinder the goal of having the TPP create a “comprehensive free trade area in the Asia-Pacific.”71 Vietnam has been working over the past few years to reform its economy further to be more market-oriented to appease its trading partners around the globe. As a result, further trade with the U.S. has great potential to continue expanding past textiles and clothing to services and high-tech products. In addition, in 2009 the U.S. was the largest provider of foreign direct investment in Vietnam, funding 70 projects worth $9.945 billion USD. As of 2013, the U.S. ranks as the seventh in foreign direct investment, with 624 projects worth an estimated $10.5 billion USD, as

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72 Ibid., 21.
nations in the European Union, South Korea and Japan, among others, have increased their role in Vietnam’s economy.\textsuperscript{73} U.S. manufacturers see Vietnam as an attractive alternative to China regarding trade, and embrace the ability to import and export a variety of products.\textsuperscript{74}

The U.S., as discussed previously, has also ramped up its military and security relationship with Vietnam. Vietnam has welcomed this development, as China’s force in the South China Sea will continue to impact Vietnam and its Southeast Asian neighbors in coming years. In addition to the military education exchanges and mentorship, which have built great trust between American and Vietnamese military leaders, in 2010 the Obama administration began a defense policy dialogue with Hanoi to align their goals and work towards greater partnership in the future.\textsuperscript{75} It is worth noting that Vietnam has, in some respects, been hesitant to open up too much to the U.S. concerning security and the governance of its military, given some speculation by leaders that the United States seeks to undermine the Communist regime and “Americanize” its youth.\textsuperscript{76} However, in spite of this, the initiative by Americans and most Vietnamese defense leaders has allowed for the two nations to learn more about one another, respect each other’s


cultures, and ultimately increase Vietnam’s capabilities and strength as a military power in Southeast Asia. It is encouraging that, after such a troubled history and bitter conflict, Vietnam and the United States have embraced one another. Their partnership in military and security affairs will provide for further developments in Vietnam’s economy and society, as ties and relationships develop across other sectors in Vietnam.

Finally, regarding the ongoing humanitarian concerns that have been discussed in previous chapters, during President Obama’s term, the U.S. has continued to make reparations for the victims of Agent Orange. In 2009, the 111th Congress appropriated $3 million USD for cleanup and “related health activities” in Da Nang and other contaminated areas in Vietnam. In 2010, funds were increased fivefold to $15 million USD, $18.5 million USD in 2011, and $20 million in 2012, marking a landmark assumption of responsibility by the United States and a huge step forward in repairing the years of tension over this issue. Leaders in Congress and across the U.S. and the Vietnamese government have identified the importance of maintaining an amicable relationship across the economic, military and societal issues, and thus the bilateral relationship between the two nations will likely grow and strengthen.

V. Conclusion

The Obama administration has seen similarities and differences in higher education exchanges with Vietnam. The continuation of programs like the Fulbright and

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77 Ibid.


79 Ibid.
VEF Fellowship, as well as institutional partnerships established prior to 2009 have effectively met the ongoing demand for exchanges on the part of Vietnamese and American students and scholars. In addition, the persistent challenges to reform in the Vietnamese higher education system have endured for the last twenty years. Main differences in progress of educational exchanges are the onset of greater military education cooperation, a growing number of independent institutional exchanges, sponsored by universities and corporations, and the serious commitment on the part of the Vietnamese government to tangible and effective reforms.

The challenges that Vietnam faces regarding higher education reform have continued to impact its need for international exchanges and partnerships with the United States and U.S. universities. Unfortunately, due to ineffective reforms over the last twenty years, the higher education system in Vietnam is still unable to produce the high-quality graduates it needs to further develop its teaching force at universities and to fill positions in its growing and transforming economy. Reforms and directives from recent years have called for further curriculum development, more Ph.D. and master’s candidates and programs, and greater quality control across the entire system. In order to contribute to these ambitious initiatives, it has been essential for Vietnam to continue its practice of international fellowships and exchanges to bring highly educated graduates back home to Vietnam to meet teaching demands and human resource requirements in the economy. The Fulbright and VEF exchanges and fellowships have continued successfully over the last four years and, as more graduates return to Vietnam each year, there is great potential for effective reform and change in the higher education system.
The bourgeoning military partnership not only contributes to the education of Vietnamese military officers, but also creates a new avenue for partnership and collaboration between Vietnamese and American military officers, strengthening the bilateral relationship further. The growing number of independent institutional partnerships between American and Vietnamese universities and companies is also a promising development, as international education has expanded beyond formal government exchanges to include programs aimed at strengthening Vietnam’s economy and development initiated at the institution-level. All these developments have been paired with the growing bilateral relationship between Vietnam and the U.S., which has been successfully nurtured over the last twenty years to become a friendship and partnership across economic trade issues, military and security matters, and humanitarian concerns.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION: U.S.-VIETNAMESE EDUCATIONAL EXCHANGES – MOTIVATIONS, CHALLENGES, SUCCESSES, AND PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE

The aim of this concluding chapter is to provide an overview of these educational exchanges over two decades to show their mixed results. On the one hand, they have generated positive outcomes in the bilateral relationship between the U.S. and Vietnam, such as closer socio-cultural ties and stronger economic cooperation. They have also transformed what was once a hostile relationship into a friendly one, a partnership in many ways. On the other hand, Vietnam’s economic growth and its students returning from the U.S. have not yet transformed nor improved Vietnam’s higher education system.

The organization of this chapter is in four parts. The first part revisits the motives behind the exchanges, tracing old and new reasons. The second part examines the main challenges that Vietnam’s higher education system still faces: bureaucracy; corruption; weak infrastructure; poor quality control; and slow implementation of reforms. The third part discusses the successes of the U.S.-Vietnam educational exchanges, especially the accomplishments of the students who have returned to Vietnam, their contributions to society, and how they have improved U.S.-Vietnam relations on the whole. The fourth part deals with prospects for the future, noting that there are five main variables affecting this bilateral relationship with regard to successful exchanges – leadership; economic ties; political-security collaboration; effective reforms to the Vietnamese higher education system; and willingness of Americans and Vietnamese to study abroad and learn from one another.
I. Motivations for Exchanges Revisited

As discussed in the introductory chapter of this thesis, after years of bitter relations due to war and conflict, economic sanctions and different ideologies, Vietnam and the United States began to mend their relationship under President George H. W. Bush and President William J. Clinton in the late 1980s and early 1990s. These U.S. presidents viewed international education exchanges between American and Vietnamese students as a valuable tool to help restore relations. Both countries had motives behind sending their students and scholars abroad. The U.S. saw a great opportunity in influencing Vietnamese scholars and familiarizing Vietnamese students with Western thought and ideas, which would hopefully be absorbed into Vietnam’s society, making the nation more open to cooperation and collaboration with the U.S. and the West. As for Vietnam’s motivations, since it was in desperate need of trade and economic support and also for reform in its higher education system, it saw inherent value in sending its students abroad to America to receive postgraduate education that could be used for Vietnam’s own development in economics and higher education.

In the case of U.S.-Vietnam educational exchanges, since they deal with the socio-cultural aspects of a bilateral relationship, the concept of “soft power,” the ability of a nation to influence another nation through cultural exchanges and exposure to its ideas and products, can be applied. As Joseph Nye has pointed out, exchange students serve as important instruments in the sharing of information across nations and cultures.¹ U.S.-Vietnam educational exchanges contributed to America’s goal of strengthening ties

with Vietnam and of influencing its future leaders because Vietnamese students would ultimately learn and absorb American values and ideas which would, in turn, make them more conducive to friendly relations with Americans. The various Fulbright programs, implemented under President George H.W. Bush and expanded under Presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Barack Obama, are excellent examples of the initial motivations to influence Vietnam – its leaders and its society. The academic fields that Vietnamese students could study in the U.S. focused on business, public policy, and international relations, all areas where graduates could return home and have significant impact in their roles as civil servants, business leaders, and academics.

Vietnam’s desire to create a better higher education system evolved from doi moi and the gradual opening up of its economy and society in the late 1980s. Vietnamese leaders began seeing inherent educational shortcomings from the long years of Soviet-influence in curriculum planning, teaching methods, and state-run universities and colleges. Vietnam realized it needed to educate its students to compete in the globalizing world and economy. Hence, opportunities to study in U.S. universities were attractive to Vietnamese leaders and students alike, as they could receive highly valued degrees that would help fill teaching shortages at universities, increase Vietnam’s number of postgraduate degree holders, build up research capabilities, and aid in the development of Vietnam’s economy. This was at a time when foreign investments were pouring into the country and new industries were being set up. After diplomatic ties with the U.S. were established in 1995, American private investment in Vietnam greatly increased. Soon there was a demonstrated need for trained professionals in science and technology, in
In addition to business and public policy, as Vietnam began to build what is known as a “knowledge-based economy.”

In addition to the Fulbright exchanges, the VEF Fellowship, initiated under President Bill Clinton and established under President George W. Bush, shows Vietnam’s commitment to increase the number of Ph.D.’s in its own universities and colleges and America’s commitment to help them do so. Both countries also wanted to fill the growing number of skilled labor positions in Vietnam that emerged in the science and technology field thanks to foreign investments, including American, in these areas. Project 322 was Vietnam’s own initiative to reach this aim, but it only lasted to 2012 due to funding constraints.

These initial motives behind international education exchanges and fellowships have remained constant over the last twenty years. Thousands of American and Vietnamese students and scholars have participated in the various programs supported by the U.S. and Vietnamese governments and by private institutions. These programs have provided a great deal of information-sharing and relationship-building between Americans and the Vietnamese. Meanwhile, as America’s strategic interest in security issues in Southeast Asia has increased, especially with China’s aggressive stance in the South China Sea, a new motive of military ties has arisen in the U.S.-Vietnam relationship. This affects educational exchanges between them because America is now providing military education programs, including IMET funded initiatives and joint exercises. These began under President George W. Bush and have expanded under President Barack H. Obama. Similarly, as Vietnam’s economy and society have further
opened up, especially with more foreign investments and with its entry into the WTO, there is a greater demand for English language instruction. Hence, the Fulbright Vietnamese Student Program now includes a new field, TESOL. American students are also helping with this goal because the Fulbright U.S. Student Program has new English Teaching Assistantships, whereby young American students go to Vietnam to teach English. Furthermore, there is presently a demand for more science programs due to the growing institutional partnerships aimed at collaboration between American technology and science programs and companies and Vietnamese universities. This has led to a new Fulbright-sponsored science Ph.D. program that has just begun. However, despite the old and new motivations driving the exchanges, there are still significant challenges that both countries continue to face regarding these exchanges.

II. Challenges in International Education Exchanges

As discussed in previous chapters, Vietnam’s goal of transforming its higher education system has been met with significant challenges since *doi moi* and throughout the twenty-year period of international education exchanges between the U.S. and Vietnam. These challenges, as listed earlier, are bureaucracy, corruption, weak infrastructure, poor quality control, and slow implementation of reforms.

Regarding bureaucracy, the higher education system continues to be controlled by MOET and the Communist Party, and they refuse to relinquish power. As for corruption, this is still pervasive in all levels of government and it trickles down to higher education administration, preventing reforms. In the case of weak infrastructure in higher education, institutions lack financial autonomy and administrative control of their staff, students and
curriculum. Concerning poor quality control, oversight is lacking due to the absence of national standards in higher education on minimum standards for degrees. As for the slow implementation of reforms, this is caused by several reasons, such as resistance to change from top administrators and unwillingness to try new methods.

So far, reform efforts and directives have not been able to overcome the problems within universities. Vietnamese leaders in the government and at universities will have to continue to work towards their vision of an internationally ranked university, and a strong system of undergraduate and postgraduate education and research that will provide Vietnamese students with good options for higher education to further their career prospects at home without having to study abroad. In general, ambitious reforms and directives by the Vietnamese government over the past twenty years, initiated by the MOET and the Communist Party leadership, have failed to substantially improve Vietnam’s universities and colleges. For example, while the overall number of schools and students has grown substantially, including a striking increase in the number of non-public universities, the government’s strong hold on curriculum development and on hiring practices within universities has persisted, stifling innovation and creativity. There is still a shortage of highly educated faculty, while the quality of education across the whole system remains poor, leading outside observers to believe that the reforms have been, for the most part, ineffective.

Meanwhile, the goals of all the reforms have remained consistent over the years – to improve quality control, to increase the number of master’s and Ph.D.’s degree students across Vietnam, and to provide for more autonomy for university administrators
concerning curriculum development and hiring practices. While the leaders recognize the inherent flaws in their system, thus far they have been unable to enact the correct reform measures to create change. One administrator at Vietnam National University in Ho Chi Minh City explained that changing a system as flawed and broken as Vietnam’s higher education system is difficult and cannot be achieved overnight.²

In addition to ineffective reforms, Vietnam’s low academic research productivity, even with the large number of foreign-educated graduates with master’s and Ph.D.’s degrees, suggests that these highly trained professionals are having trouble finding adequate support in the higher education system or in the private research sector for their continued professional development. In this connection, P.D. Hein notes that most scholarly publications by Vietnamese authors originate from outside Vietnam, such as Vietnamese scholars studying in the U.S. or in other Western nations, or are co-authored with Western researchers, meaning that they are “essentially produced in North America and Western Europe through bilateral scientific cooperation of fellowships programs.”³ While this is not necessarily a negative, because it shows that the goal of increasing collaboration between Vietnamese students and their counterparts abroad has indeed been successful, Vietnamese universities and research institutions must act quickly to find sufficient support for continued academic research within Vietnam if its goal of having an internationally ranked university by 2020 is to be achieved. Without a strong tradition


of research, the higher education system in Vietnam will not be able to compete with their counterparts abroad.

The lack of quality control across universities is also harming higher education in Vietnam. It was only in 2009 that MOET addressed the need for better quality control and admitted that there had been no organized system of oversight in the years since doi moi.\(^4\) However, in order to have better quality control they must get rid of outdated materials and subjects and replace them with new modern curriculum. Presently, the VEF administration and some institutional partnerships, especially in science and technology, are helping the Vietnamese leadership to address curriculum reform, but more needs to be done. Vietnam must also work to address and resolve the widespread corruption hurting university faculty, which contributes to the low quality of education. This corruption operates at various levels: the selection of faculty staff; the preferential treatment for administrators; and the use of bribes by students and faculty. Concerning academic staff, Dennis McCornac explains that due to the very low salaries at Vietnamese universities, professors are easily enticed to take bribes from students in exchange for higher grades.\(^5\) This practice is still widespread in Vietnam today and must be stopped if the value of Vietnamese undergraduate and graduate degrees is ever to be considered comparable to those of leading universities around the world.


Among the biggest challenges to reform is resistance to change on the part of the Vietnamese leadership. Despite years of reform and international education programs, it is evident that leaders within the government are hesitant to fully embrace Western influence on Vietnamese culture. This can be seen through news articles and reports citing the “increasing paranoia” of the Vietnamese government and their continuing practices of jailing dissidents, writers and reporters who do not conform to their views.\textsuperscript{6}

In addition, there are reports of suspicion amongst Communist leadership about the motives of American exchange programs, as some think that the U.S. intends to transform Vietnamese culture by “Americanizing” Vietnamese youth and weakening public morality at home.\textsuperscript{7} These are just a few examples of how the Vietnamese government has resisted change and reforms on a larger scale than just higher education. By discouraging cultural change and by restricting the freedom of expression, including censorship of the press and the Internet, Vietnam hinders its full potential as a future leader in international higher education programs. Without these basic freedoms and the encouragement of the government, the academics and scholars, particularly those trained in the West, will continue to struggle in their careers in Vietnam and in their efforts to modernize the higher education system.


III. Successes of Educational Exchanges

Despite the significant challenges faced when reforming higher education in Vietnam, the successes of international educational exchanges are important to note and promote high confidence in the potential for future exchanges. The achievements of graduates from the formal exchanges, like the Fulbright program and VEF fellowship, in addition to the output of institutional partnerships and the plans for greater collaboration, are all proof that these exchanges have greatly impacted Vietnam and the United States. Furthermore, the bilateral relationship between the two nations is strong and will strengthen as more ties are established and the programs continue.

Perhaps the most successful of the Fulbright programs is the Fulbright Vietnamese Student Program. It has the longest history of all the exchange programs with Vietnam and has produced a strong group of graduates who have gone on to leadership positions in Vietnam and in Southeast Asia. In her speech commemorating the 20th anniversary of the Fulbright Program with Vietnam, then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton lauded their achievements, saying, “Fulbright alumni are already major figures in Vietnamese policies – deputy prime minister, a foreign minister…And others have gone on to make important contributions in science, in business, in the arts, and certainly in academia.”8 As mentioned in Chapter 2, the current Vietnamese Ambassador to the United States, Nguyen Quoc Cuong, received a Fulbright scholarship in 1996 and

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graduated from Tufts University with a Master’s in Law and Diplomacy in 1998. He has had a tenured career in international diplomacy in Vietnam, serving as Deputy Foreign Minister and as Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs prior to his appointment as Ambassador. Other graduates from the early years of the Fulbright include the current Minister of Foreign Affairs, Pham Binh Minh; Vietnamese Ambassador to Singapore, Nguyen Trung Than; and Vietnamese Ambassador to the Philippines, Nguyen Vu Tu. Prior to their current appointments, these men had successful careers as diplomats, serving in the Vietnamese Embassy in the U.S. and in other positions in Vietnam’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The women who have participated in the Fulbright Vietnamese Student Program have also seen great success. Secretary Clinton noted two women, in particular, in her speech who have used their degrees in Vietnam and abroad to become leaders in their fields. Do Minh Thuy received her journalism degree at Indiana University and returned to Vietnam to start a mentoring program for young journalists, with 2,300 current and former participants. Given Vietnam’s censorship, this initiative is remarkable and an important step forward for Vietnamese citizens. Dam Bich Thuy, a Fulbright alum who attended University of Pennsylvania for her MBA, is considered “one of the most prominent women in finance in Southeast Asia.” These women are contributing to Vietnam outside of formal diplomacy through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and show

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11 Ibid.
the positive “ripple effect” that Fulbright alumni, and alumni of other programs and partnerships, can have when they return home and are given adequate support and tools to enact change. Many other Fulbright alumni have used their degrees from prominent American universities to become leaders in their fields at home. The continuation of the Fulbright Vietnamese Student Program, along with the other Fulbright programs, shows that it is a valuable asset to both Vietnam and the U.S.

The VEF Fellowship’s fellows and Vietnamese and American scholars have also used their exchange experiences and degrees to impact Vietnam’s development. Although the VEF is relatively new and many participants have yet to graduate from their master’s or Ph.D. degree programs, to complete their professional training, or to fully establish themselves in their careers, data from the 2010 and 2011 VEF reports and from their alumni database on the website show that those who have returned are finding employment in universities, in the government, or in the private sector, in technology and science positions. Given that these scholars are required to return to Vietnam for a minimum of two years after completing their degrees, it is possible that some will find employment outside Vietnam if the higher education system continues to resist reform and does not provide adequate support for research and academic freedom.

Nevertheless, VEF states:

With active involvement of U.S. and Vietnamese scientists, engineers, and experts, VEF is building solid connections between the United States and Vietnam. Moreover, VEF program participants foster an exchange of ideas and information between the Americans and the Vietnamese; and, thus, they
strengthen the appreciation and understanding of each country’s culture and people.\textsuperscript{12}

As the exchanges continue to go on, more academic ties with the West and collegial relations between Vietnamese and American scientists hold the potential for continued success for VEF Fellows and Scholars. The VEF’s commitment to helping Vietnam’s higher education system develop, as discussed in Chapter 4, also shows that this important program has great promise in helping Vietnam become a leading participant in the international technology and science community. Overall, the VEF can be seen as a successful program with a great future ahead of it.

The strong bilateral relationship between Vietnam and the U.S., bolstered by substantial trade and economic partnerships and increasing military ties, shows that years of exchanges between students and scholars have not hindered and in fact have likely helped relations between the two nations. The continuing bilateral cooperation regarding trade, security, China’s rise, humanitarian concerns, and their commitment to maintain exchange programs and reform Vietnam’s higher education are all positive outcomes of these exchanges. Vietnam is currently the 9\textsuperscript{th} most popular country for students studying abroad in the U.S., according the Education USA, showing that Vietnamese students desire to come to the U.S. through formal exchanges and the increasing number of institutional partnerships, and this would not be possible without the important groundwork laid by the early educational exchange programs and the significant effort

put forth by Vietnamese and American leadership to mend relations and work towards amicable ties.

IV. Prospects for the Future

Prospects for the future success of educational exchanges between the U.S. and Vietnam depend on five main factors. These factors are leadership, economic ties, political-security collaboration, effective reforms, and the continued desire for Vietnamese and American students to study abroad and learn from one another. Concerning leadership, leaders in both countries must remain committed to the bilateral relationship and to the many avenues of partnership available, including educational exchanges. Students have successfully served as unofficial diplomats for both nations over the past two decades and leaders must continue to recognize their value and potential, and not limit their opportunities to study abroad. As for economic ties, further investment and trade between U.S. and Vietnam will lead to greater closeness and more institutional partnerships. As Vietnam is committed to building a knowledge-based economy, the institutional partnerships will most likely be in the technology and science fields. This will require ongoing economic support from the U.S. and other Western nations. The political-security collaboration between the U.S. and Vietnam must continue to grow in order to maintain the options for U.S. and Vietnamese military personnel to participate in the current military exchange programs and to develop new ones in the future. As China’s aggression in the South China Sea grows, the U.S. and Vietnam must work together in all ways possible, and this includes military educational exchanges. For a more effective higher education in Vietnam, reforms are essential, as more than twenty
years of attempted reforms have not met expectations within Vietnam. Leaders must be committed to these reforms and work to implement them so that success can be achieved. American and Vietnamese students must also continue to want to participate in these exchange programs to learn about each other’s cultures and societies. Their desire to study abroad has contributed a great deal towards strengthening the growing bilateral relationship between the U.S. and Vietnam, as they have returned not only with their degrees but also with greater understanding of a foreign culture and with creative ideas for more collaboration and partnership – within the government, in the private sector, and in academia. Thus, there is great potential for the continued success of educational exchanges between the U.S. and Vietnam, which will, in turn, eventually reform higher education in Vietnam, as well as foster more cordial relations between the two nations.
APPENDIX

Figure 1: Map of Vietnam

BIBLIOGRAPHY


