

HIGHER EDUCATION INTERNATIONALIZATION IN VIETNAM: UNINTENDED SOCIO-POLITICAL IMPACTS OF JOINT PROGRAMS SEEN AS SPECIAL FREE ACADEMIC ZONES

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Abstract

During the last decades, Joint Programs, a model of transnational higher education, have enjoyed tremendous increase in Vietnam. In this model, all the curricula, textbooks and other teaching materials are provided by foreign partners; all subjects are taught fully in foreign languages; foreign lecturers teach a part of the academic programs; the domestic lecturers are recommended by the local institutions but must be approved by the partner universities. The domestic lecturers, in their teaching, are required to deliver accredited courses in accordance to the partners' curricula and subject outlines. Assessment process and quality assurance are controlled by the partner universities. Upon completion of their programs, students are awarded degrees of the partners.

The underlying motivation of the JPs basically economic: income generation for the providers and market-friendly human resource for the country-receivers. However, under Vietnamese historical and socio-political conditions, the JPs come to play an unexpected role similar to that of the Special Free Economic Zones (SFEZ) in economy. Being intrinsically free academic oases, they allow the essential ideas of academic freedom to be realized despite the limitations of national higher education systems due to specific historical socio-political conditions.

1. Vietnamese Higher Education and Internationalization of Higher Education Before 1986

In a sense, the history of Vietnamese higher education, until 1945, is essentially a history of internationalization². A landmark in the history of Vietnam's education is 1075, when the first Mandarin examinations were organized by King Lý Nhân Tông. One year later, the National College

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² Although the Vietnamese probably had some sorts of teaching and learning activities before the Chinese invasion in 111 BC, it was the occupiers who brought the Chinese-styled education to Vietnam in the first century. In the second century, Sĩ Nhiếp (Shi Xie, 137-226), Governor of Giao Chỉ (Jiaozhi)², established a number of schools in the country. Although the aim of those schools was to produce mandarins for the Chinese ruling system, Sĩ Nhiếp was revered by the Vietnamese as the father of Vietnam's education (Nam Bang học tổ). Since then, for the Vietnamese, learning meant learning Chinese Classics and in Chinese – this is true even after AD 938, when the Vietnamese regained national independence and began to build their national education system.

(Quốc Tử Giám) was established. Designed for the education of sons of the royal family, the National College later received also sons of high-ranking officials, and from 1252 students from different backgrounds. Quốc Tử Giám is considered as Vietnam's very first institution of higher education. During the 10 centuries of Vietnamese higher education history, despite several nationalization attempts by Vietnamese Kings, this system remained essentially of Chinese style. It reached its apogee in the 15th century under King Lê Thánh Tông, and ended in 1919, under King [Khải Định](#).

The French domination affected radically the whole educational system of Vietnam. To produce officials for the colonial administration, the French imposed a Western-styled education system. Because the French language became not only educational but also administrative language, teaching and learning French were important both in schools and colleges. During this time, the Vietnamese language was taught only in primary schools.

The first “modern” university of Western style in Indochina³ is the Indochinese University. Established by the French in 1906⁴. The Indochinese University started its first academic year in November 1907 with 193 students (Vũ, M.G, 2006) and was the only institution of higher education in the French Indochina before 1945. The number of students during this period was very limited. In 1943-1944 period only 1,111 students were admitted, among them more than half to the College of Law, 175 to the College of Science, and 84 to the College of Civil Engineering (UNESCO, 1998).

After August Revolution (1945), the Indochinese University was renamed to Vietnam National University (VNU)⁵. During the war against the French, VNU was evacuated to the mountainous region. VNU continued to use the French programs with French and Vietnamese as instruction language until 1950. After 1950, all subjects were taught in Vietnamese.

For different reasons, VNU was later divided into different universities, of which the University of Hanoi remained at the old campus of the Indochinese University. In 1993, the Vietnamese government decided to establish Vietnam National University, Hanoi (VNU Hanoi) by regrouping some leading universities and institutes in the North Vietnam, first of all the University of Hanoi, Hanoi Normal University, and Hanoi Normal University of Foreign Studies. A similar institution called VNU Hochiminh was also established in the South. VNU Hanoi is officially considered as descendant of Indochinese University⁶.

³ The French Indochina back then consisted of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia.

⁴ The Indochinese University consisted of 5 member colleges (Écoles supérieures): “College of Law and Administration” (École supérieure de Droit et Administration), “College of Sciences” (École supérieure des sciences), “College of Medicine” (École supérieure de médecine), “College of Civil Engineering” (École supérieure du génie Civil) and “College of Liberal Arts” (École supérieure des lettres) (Vũ, M.G., 2006).

⁵ Hồ Chí Minh attended the first opening ceremony, and personally conferred the degrees to the last graduates of the Indochinese University.

⁶ Some other institutions, such as Hanoi Pharmaceutical University, Hochiminh University of Technology, etc. also claim to be descents of the Indochinese University.

The 1945-1986 period is a period of turbulence, with the two resistance wars against the French (1945-1954) and Americans (1954-1975); the division then reunification of the country; the difficult post-war decade with two wars against Khmer Rouge (1978) and China (1979), and the embargo imposed by the Western countries. Yet, this period also witnessed vigorous expansion of higher education.

After the August Revolution 1945, the Government of Hồ Chí Minh considered illiteracy as one of the “three most dangerous enemies” (Hunger, Illiteracy, and Occupation). By Vietnamizing the education system and organizing a nation-wide campaign to eradicate illiteracy, the new Government succeeded in raising the literacy rate from about 6% to over 90%. This remarkable success, achieved under the conditions of the first anti-French war, laid the foundation for education in general, and higher education in particular, during the anti-American war, in both the North and the South of Vietnam.

During the anti-French Resistance war, despite numerous difficulties, the government of Hồ Chí Minh opened two junior colleges (Advanced Normal College, and College of Fundamental Sciences) and some specialty colleges (College of Foreign Languages-1947, College of Civil Engineering- 1947, College of Law- 1948, College of Fine Arts- 1949, and College of Medicine and Pharmacy-1950) (Nguyễn, T.H., 2009). Many professors of those colleges were the leading overseas Vietnamese intellectuals who came back to participate in the war against invaders and the construction of the new republic.

During the anti-American war, Vietnam was divided. But both in the North and the South, higher education underwent significant developments. In the North, since 1956, the higher education system abandoned the French model and followed the Soviet model, in which all institutions were public. This system was organized according to specialization and highly centralized. In 1975, in North Vietnam, there were 30 universities with about 56.000 (university) students (UNESCO, 1998). The total number of higher education institutions was 41. (Nguyễn, T.H., 2009). Most programs were at undergraduate level. The first graduate program was launched 1970 at Hanoi Normal University⁷. The table below shows the increase in number of students from 1955 to 1975.

⁷ Website of Hanoi Normal University.

Table 1: Number of students in North Vietnam

Academic year	Number of students
1955-56	1190
1965-66	60.020
1975-76	92.100

Source: Ministry of Higher and Professional Secondary Education, 1985 (quoted by Nguyễn, T.H. 2009)

In the South, the higher education system adopted the American model. This system included both public and private institutions. Before 1964, French and Vietnamese were used as instruction languages. After 1964, all programs were taught in Vietnamese⁸. In 1975, in South Vietnam, there were 7 public and 7 private universities with about 166.000 students (UNESCO, 1998). The table below shows the increase in number of students from 1960 to 1975.

Table 2: Number of students in South Vietnam

Academic year	Number of students
1960-61	11.708
1962	16.835
1964	20.834
1974-75	166.475

Source: Wikipedia

After 1975, as the Government of reunified Vietnam chose the socialist way of development, the Soviet model of higher education was also applied in the whole country. In 1980-1981, there were 85 universities and colleges with about 140.000 students (Nguyễn, T.H., 2009). As in North Vietnam before 1975, this system was highly centralized and ideological and all the institutions were public. Their mission was to produce human resources needed for fulfilling socio-economic plans set by the

⁸ Wikipedia

Government. One of major developments during this period is the rapid expansion of graduate programs although the government continued to send a large number of students to study in the graduate programs abroad, mainly in the socialist bloc.

Study in foreign universities abroad is a traditional mode of internationalization and is always seen by the Vietnamese as one of the best ways to modernize their national education system. The current situation of Vietnamese higher education system reminds somewhat the beginning of the 20th century, when the Vietnamese intellectuals and revolutionaries saw education as the best way to modernize and eventually liberate the country from colonialism. The 1900s witnessed the first massive and organized mobility of Vietnamese students overseas when Phan Bội Châu launched the movement “Đông Du”, literally “Go East”, with the aim to send the young Vietnamese revolutionaries to study in Japan. However, under the pressure of the French, in 1909 the Japanese expelled Phan Bội Châu and refused to receive Vietnamese students. Meanwhile and later, thousands of Vietnamese young people went to study abroad, most to France, but some also to China and Russia. Later, they formed the core of Vietnam’s new intelligentsia before 1945.

During the two Indochinese wars, thousands of Vietnamese students were sent abroad to study at undergraduate and graduate levels. In the North, students got scholarships - most from the governments of the “brother” socialist countries, and some from the Vietnamese government. In the South, apart from scholarship recipients there were also self-financing students. In the 1975-1990, most students going to study abroad received scholarships of the socialist countries, with a few exceptions. The country that offered the greatest number of scholarship to Vietnamese students is the Soviet Union and later Russia. According to *Nhan Dan* newspaper, Among 20,160 Vietnamese students who graduated from different institution of USSR and Russia in the period from 1951 to 2000, many have become leading scientists, artists and politicians in Vietnam (Nhan Dan, 2010). After the collapse of the Socialist bloc in 1989-1990, the number of foreign scholarships was reduced dramatically, although the Western countries began to increase the number of scholarships for Vietnamese students.

2. Vietnamese Higher Education since 1986: Between Ideology and Market

In 1986, after a decade of tragic economic failure that pushed thousands of Vietnamese to leave the country by boat, the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) initiated a reform policy that has become a watershed in the modern history of Vietnam. Later widely known in the West as “Đổi Mới”, this policy led to opening the country to the outside world, adopting the market economy, and gradual liberalization of the Vietnam’s socio-political life. In a short period, the policy has turned Vietnam from a war ravaged and chronically starving country into one of the fast growing economies in the world. Despite two financial crises in 1997 and 2008, during the last 25 years, the country’s GDP increased at an average rate of over 7%. In 2010, Vietnam’s GDP is expected to be over US\$

102billion, 5 times higher than its GDP in 1986. GDP per capita increased significantly from about \$140 in 1976 to about \$1055 in 2009⁹.

Along with its expansion, Vietnam's economy has also become highly internationalized. From 1989 to 2009, Vietnamese Government has granted licenses to 12575 FDI projects with total capital of over US\$ 194 billion. At the same time, Vietnam's investment in other countries has also increased at a high rate. The total volume of Vietnam's overseas investment during the 1989-2009 period is over US\$7.7 billion. The openness of Vietnam's economy is expressed also by its dependence on foreign trade, with an import-export turnover equal to 150% of its GDP.

Another important change of Vietnam's economy is the strong expansion and growing role of the private sector. During the 2000-2009 period the number of private companies increased at an annual rate of 22%, and in 2008 the private sector contributed 47% to GDP (Huỳnh, B.S., 2010).

The Đổi Mới policy and the country's economic progress have had enormous impacts on Vietnam's Higher Education system. As both living standards and market demand for qualified human resource are now much higher, the number of universities has been growing very fast. While many colleges were transformed into universities and many junior 2-year colleges into 3-year colleges, a large number of new universities were established. Now, most provinces in Vietnam have their own universities. The table 3 shows the development of Vietnamese higher education system in terms of number of institutions in the 2000-2009 period.

Table 3: Number of higher education institutions

	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Total	178	191	202	214	230	277	322	369	393	403
Public	148	168	179	187	201	243	275	305	322	326
Private	30	23	23	27	29	34	47	64	71	77

Source: Vietnam's General Statistics Office

A new and important tendency in the development of the higher education system is the rapid expansion of the private sector since the establishment of the first private university in 1988, despite the lack of an adequate legislative framework. In 2009, the country had 77 private universities and colleges out of the total number of 403. And the number of private universities is expected to grow even faster in the years to come. According to Vietnam's General Statistics Office, in 2009, Vietnam has 1.796.200 students, of which 248.800 study in private universities". The data of the General Statistics Office also shows that the number of students in the public education sector increased by

⁹ According to *CIA's Factbook*, Vietnam's GDP - per capita (PPP) in 2009 is \$2,900 (est.)

5.2%, while that in the Private sector increased by 17%. The table 4 shows the development of Vietnamese higher education system in terms of number of students in the 2000-2009 period.

Table 4: Number of students (thousands)

	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Total	899.5	974.1	1020.7	1131.0	1319.8	1387.1	1666.2	1603.5	1719.5	1796.2
Public	795.6	873.0	908.8	993.9	1182.0	1226.7	1456.7	1414.7	1501.3	1547.4
Private	103.9	101.1	111.9	137.1	137.8	160.4	209.5	188.8	218.2	248.8

Source: General Statistics Office

The rapid expansion of higher education has been received by the population with great concern and pessimism. Many argued that it is one of the factors leading to low quality of Vietnamese universities.

But the biggest problem of Vietnam's higher education system is the mismatch between its old education governance and philosophy and the country's market economy. In my opinion, Vietnam's higher education system is now at a very special historical and socio-political moment. As I mentioned above, after 25 years of reform, despite the label "Socialist" in the official name of the country, Vietnam has become much similar to the capitalist countries in world, except for a state-owned sector that is ineffective and irresistibly diminishing. However, the Soviet-styled education system remains much the same as it was decades ago. Meanwhile, the globalization trend as well as the integration of the country, especially after Vietnam joined ASEAN (1995), APEC (1998) and WTO (2006), have posed before Vietnam's higher education system many new problems of administrative, financial, pedagogical, and ideological nature. It is not too exaggerated to say that Vietnam's education is now in crises.

a. Administratively, the government controls nearly all aspects of university operations. One of the issues that have generated nationwide debates in the recent years is the enrolment quota set for each institution. Moreover, to be accepted to a university program, students must pass three national entrance exams, and the universities are allowed to admit only those who earn a total grade higher than a minimum set annually by the MOET. Although these entrance exams, together with tighter regulations on the establishment of new institutions, might be seen by some authors as a measure to maintain quality, they deprive two thirds of over 2 million candidates of opportunity of getting any higher education degree. For this reason, the entrance exams become highly competitive which leads to the persistence of the exams preparatory classes widely criticized by numerous educators.

b. Financially, Vietnam's higher education system is trapped between the socialist concept that perceives the university as a welfare institution and the neoliberal concept that sees it nearly as a profit

making corporate. The attempt of the MOET to raise significantly the maximum monthly tuition fees (called the “ceiling fees”) in the public universities, that was VND180, 000 (US\$ 9.00 at current exchange rate) faced strong opposition and the new “ceiling” was finally fixed by the National Assembly at VND 230, 000 (slightly over US\$11). The low tuition fees, together with the Vietnamese traditional obsession with university degrees, are two reasons for the chronic shortage of students in colleges and vocational schools. At the same time, the low tuition fees prevent Vietnamese universities from raising their teaching staff’s salary and improving their facilities while the funding from the Government remains low, although the spending for education counts for 5.6% GDP and 20% of the Government Budget spending in 2008 (MOET).

c. Pedagogically, with its old teaching philosophy, method and materials, the present education system cannot produce qualified human resources needed for Vietnam’s current market oriented and increasingly globalized economy. Vietnam inherits a long tradition of Confucian education with its imposing and indoctrinating method of teaching, based on memorizing some Classic Books. This teaching method was reinforced by the Soviet model that emphasizes theory over practice, and continues to be used widely even today. For this reason, rather than accomplishing its enlightenment missions, education becomes intrinsically what I call “spiritual cloning”. The leading intellectuals in Vietnam have attempted to promote the student-centered pedagogy that encourages more learners’ active involvement but the success has been very limited, if any.

d. Politically, Vietnam’s education system remains essentially in the tradition of the orthodox Marxism - Leninism. All Vietnamese universities and colleges have to use the standard curricula set by the Government that are not only outdated in terms of information and knowledge, but also strongly ideological, with a large amount of learning time devoted to subjects of political nature, such as Marxism-Leninism, Hồ Chí Minh’s Thoughts, History of Vietnamese Communist Party, Military education, etc. Many scholars have called for minimizing the learning time for these subjects and/or diversifying their contents with the aim to forge students’ critical thinking. But since 1986, instead of reducing, the Government seems to have enforced those subjects. According to the standard BBA curriculum issued by MOET in 2004, for example, the minimum number of credits required for degree earning is 180 (64 general education credits and 116 specialization education credits). These 180 credits do not include 5 credits of physical education and 188 hours of military training. The curriculum is divided into compulsory courses (88 credits) that include 52 general education credits and 36 specialization credits and the elective courses. The table 5 below shows that 25/52 credits of compulsory general education courses are of political nature.

Table 5: Compulsory general education courses

Total: 52 credits

No	Course Title	Number of Credits
1	Marxist-Leninist Philosophy	6
2	Marxist-Leninist Political Economy	8

3	Scientific Socialism	4
4	History of the Communist Party of Vietnam	4
5	Hồ Chí Minh's Thoughts	3
6	Foreign Language	10
7	Advanced Mathematics	6
8	Theory of Probability and Mathematical Statistics	4
9	Introduction to Legal Studies	3
10	Basic Informatics	4

Source: MOET

The weight of courses of ideological and political nature is even higher for the programs in social sciences as they have Marxism-Leninism as epistemological and methodological foundations. Some authors argue that the 160 hours of military training must also be seen as a political course because they focused on the military policy of the CPV and Government (Thanh Hải, 2006).

Along with the quantitative expansion, Vietnam's higher education has also undergone increasing internationalization. There has been a rapid growth of the number of students going to study overseas, and most of them are self-financing students. There have been also some FDI projects in Vietnam's higher education market. At the same time, numerous Vietnamese institutions have been collaborating with foreign universities to offer joint programs. Those joint programs enjoyed remarkable development in the recent years. We will study the underlying motivations as well as the socio-political impacts of this phenomenon in the next part of this paper.

3. Internationalization of Higher Education: Joints Programs as Special Free Academic Zones

In general, there are two major motivations underlying higher education internationalization. First, the need of the domestic market for internationalized human resource. Second, the revenue seeking – first of all for the foreign providers, especially those from Australia, UK, and the US, the countries with long traditions of corporate universities, but also for their domestic partner institutions.

But in Vietnam, internationalization has other implications. The Vietnamese educators and policymakers are certainly aware of the problems that their national system of higher education is facing. They understand that it must be reformed and modernized. But it is impossible to change the whole system overnight, especially when there are ideological obstacles from the conservative leaders, while the time does not allow anyone to wait. And internationalization, especially in the form of study

in foreign universities and joint programs, is a possible way to solve the problems of a system in transition.

As mentioned above, student mobility is a traditional mode of internationalization of the Vietnamese. However, never ever study abroad is as important and appreciated as it is today. And the Vietnamese Government has widely recognized this. In 2000, the Vietnamese launched the “Project 322”, sending about 450 students abroad annually with a funding (about VND100 billion) from the State Budget. In 2008, MOET promulgated an ambitious plan of producing 20,000 PhDs by 2020, half of which will be trained in the developed countries.

The number of Vietnamese students abroad is growing very fast. Although Vietnam’s nominal GDP per capita is only US\$1052 (2009), according to US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton, the number of Vietnamese students in the American Universities was tripled during the last three years and reached 13,000 in 2010, making Vietnam the number 9 among the countries with greatest number of students in the US (Clinton, 2010). Vietnam is also number 4 and 7 among the countries with greatest number of students in Japan and Australia respectively (MOET). The number of Vietnamese students pursuing education overseas is expected to rise even faster in the coming years. The rapid increase of the number of overseas students is a phenomenon so striking that it is described by some authors as “Education exodus” (Võ, T.X., 2006).

But more impressive is probably the fact that most of Vietnamese students abroad are self-financing students. According to MOET, there are 60.000 Vietnamese students now in over 40 countries, mostly in the USA, Australia, Japan, France, UK, China, Russia, and South Korea..., of which only 4.000 are “Project 322” students and some thousands are recipients of foreign scholarships. The recent trend of globalization created the possibility of study in the domestic sub-campuses of foreign universities, as in the case of RMIT in Hanoi and Hochiminh City. Being the first 100% foreign institution to be established in Vietnam, RMIT is also an example of success. According the RMIT website, the number of students at both Hanoi and Hochiminh campuses had passed 5000 in 2008. In 2008, the Government announced an ambitious project aiming at establishing 4 “world class” universities in cooperation with partners from USA, France, Germany and UK. The Vietnam-German University was established in 2008.

In part, the increase of the number of self-financing students in foreign universities reflects the improvement of living standard in Vietnam and the concern of some Vietnamese parents about the quality of domestic universities. Another reason is the enrolment quota and the required minimum score in the entrance exams. Being refused by domestic universities, those students have no choice but enter the foreign universities which have not such requirements. Here is the paradox: while the Vietnamese universities are in bad need of funding, they refuse to accept the rich students who can pay high tuition fees, and if a student is admitted, the tuition he or she has to pay is miserable.

However, studying abroad is still too expensive for most Vietnamese people. The other solution is to study in the Joint-Programs.

In typical Joint Programs all curricula, textbooks and teaching materials are provided by the foreign partners. All subjects are taught fully in foreign languages. Foreign lecturers teach a part of the academic programs; the Vietnamese lecturers are recommended by the Vietnamese institutions and must be approved by the partner universities. The Vietnamese lecturers are required to deliver accredited courses in accordance to the partners' curricula and subject outlines. Assessment process and quality assurance are controlled by the partner universities. Upon completion of their programs, students are awarded degrees of the partners.

Since the establishment of the MTESOL program co-offered by Hanoi University of Foreign Languages and Victoria University (Australia) in 1998, Joint Programs have underwent spectacular development and become very popular in Vietnam. Recently, the MOET has publicized the list of 112 authorized JP. This list does not include several dozen programs at VNU Hanoi, VNU Hochiminh, and three regional universities in Thái Nguyên, Đà Nẵng and Huế, which have the power to approve the JPs offered by their member institutions. VNU Hochiminh has a member institution, the International University – VNU Hochiminh, specialized in conducting JPs in English. The International School of the VNU Hanoi (ISVNU) is even more original. It offers a dozen of JPs in four foreign languages, Russian, Chinese, French, and English.

Since its foundation, ISVNU has recorded remarkable developments in both academic scope and quality. From a small institution only offering one undergraduate program in Russian, the School has designed and successfully offered a dozen of joint undergraduate programs in cooperation with universities from the US, Australia, Malaysia, France, Russia, China, to name just a few. ISVNU has also offered graduate programs, such as Master of Business Administration, Master of Business Administration (International), Master of Finance, Banking, Insurance (Vietnam & South East Asia), Master of Market Research and Marketing Decision Making. In 2010 ISVNU has over 2000 students, a significant increase in numbers compared to only 43 in 2002. Among the current students, 136 are foreigners (Canadian, Chinese, and Russian), and meanwhile 291 have transferred to ISVNU's partner universities (Australia, USA, Holland, China, Russia, UK, and Malaysia).

JPs have many advantages. While remaining under regulations of the local Government and assuring a relative low tuition fees compared to those in foreign universities, Joint Programs offer a way to avoid the problems that Vietnam's higher system is facing. One can say that in higher education, of Vietnam at least, Joint Programs have been playing a role similar to that of the Special Free Economic Zones (SFEZ) in economy.

SFEZs are conceived as free oases inside a certain economy. In these oases the currents of capital, technology and human recourses can flow freely without disturbing the old rigid socio-economic and political system. The SFEZs are highly appreciated not only for economic efficiency, but also because they allow the experiments of economic liberalization to be realized without affecting the

old socio-political and economic regimes. If successful, these experiments can be expanded and applied gradually within a nation¹⁰.

In the same way, in Vietnam at least, the Joint Programs are intrinsically free academic oases. *Administratively*, the JPs enjoy more freedom. Because most JPs do not require scores of the entrance exams, they open the university doors to practically anybody who wills and can pay for his or her higher education. *Financially*, because the JPs are allowed to charge relatively high tuition fees, they can pay higher salary to their professors, including those from foreign universities. This is, they have more possibility to attract a better teaching staff and to fight against corruption, a negative and shameful phenomenon in Vietnam's education today. *Pedagogically*, JPs allow the advanced educational philosophy, method and technology to be implemented – although not without difficulties given Vietnam's long tradition of teacher-centered pedagogy. The use of foreign languages as instruction languages also has important impacts on the outcomes of the JPs.

But the most important role of JPs in Vietnam, in my opinion, is that they allow academic freedom to be realized despite the limitations of national higher education systems due to specific historical socio-political conditions. Traditional mission of higher education, as we know, is enlightening. Immanuel Kant, the father of the modern university, conceived it with universal and autonomous reason as its guiding idea. The purpose of Kant's university is to produce the "enlightened man," who is able "to make use of his understanding without direction from another" (Kant, 1784). Arguing that for this enlightenment "nothing is required but freedom," Kant sees self-criticism as the essential for the modern university. In other words, according to Kant, universities can only operate well if they are given the academic freedom¹¹.

If there is no such academic freedom in Vietnamese universities at the moment, and I think neither in the near future, at least one can find a much greater space for uncensored research and speech in JPs. This is, JPs have a much more possibility to maintain political freedom and scientific advancement despite the limitations of national higher education systems due to specific historical socio-political conditions.

That is why JPs are intrinsically Special Free Academic Zones¹².

¹⁰ It is often argued that the free economic zones are the first modern building in Taiwan in 1966 then spread to South Korea, Malaysia, Philippines, China, Thailand, and Vietnam. Actually since the beginning of the nineteenth century the port of Singapore, Penang, Hong Kong and the Philippines can be considered as the free economic zones. In a research paper, I once wrote that the United States could be seen as the first, largest and the most successful SFEZ in the world history (Ngô, T.L., 2005).

¹¹ In Vietnam, the first author to have referred to the university autonomy and academic freedom is probably Ho Chi Minh, in the Executive Order No. 43, signed on 10-10-1945, on setting up a fund for the autonomous university of Vietnam.

¹² At the Forum of Vietnam's young researchers in Hà Nội (11/2007), I first used the term SFUZ (Special Free University Zones). However, later at I thought that SFAZ (Special Free Academic Zones) is a better term and I have used on different

4. Conclusion

With its population of 86 millions, 60% of which are younger than 30, and its long education tradition, and a fast growing economy, Vietnam represents a huge market for higher education. However, Vietnam's higher education system is facing many problems of administrative, economic, pedagogical, and political nature. In this context, internationalization, especially in the form of Joint Programs, is widely seen as a solution. However, in Vietnamese special historical socio-political conditions, the Joint Programs have had unexpected socio-political impacts. They can be seen as special free academic zones, which play an important role not only in producing high quality human resource and facilitating the transfer of education technology, but also in promoting democratic spirit.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follow. The first part is the theoretical framework and research hypothesis development; the second part describes the research methodology and data collection process; the third presents the results of hypothesis testing and discussions; the fourth part is the recommendations and implications for future research.

occasion, as at ASCOJA conference (Yangon, 11/2009), or at APEC SEAMEO Language Seminar (Singapore, 03/2010). (Ngô Tự Lập).

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