Chapter 13
Higher Education in Vietnam

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“Whether the Vietnamese mountains and rivers will attain glory and whether the Vietnamese land will gloriously stand on an equal footing with the powers in the five continents, this depends to a great extent on your studies.”

*Special letter written to Vietnamese pupils by President Ho Chi Minh on September 3, 1945, the day after the declaration of Independent Democratic Republic of Vietnam* (Phạm 1998: 13)

“We should grow trees for ten years interests, and grow man for one hundred years interests.”

*Ho Chi Minh (Cited in Phạm Minh Hạc 1998: viii)*

“To cross a river, you should build a bridge; to have your children well-versed in letters, you should love the teacher.”

*Vietnamese proverb (Cited in Phạm Minh Hạc 1998: viii)*

“With science and technology, education in general and higher education in particular, is considered as the first national priority policy, as the driving force and the basic condition in ensuring the realization of the socio-economic objectives, and of building and defending the Fatherland.”

*7th Party Congress, 1991 (Sloper and Lê 1995: 67)*

13.1 Basic Background on the Socialist Republic of Vietnam

One of the most famous images of the US War in Vietnam is a naked young Vietnamese girl, Kim Phuc, running from a village, her body inflamed with napalm. That photograph, taken by Nick Ut, displayed to the whole world the horrors of the US war in Vietnam. Kim Phuc, now a Canadian citizen living in Ottawa with her two children, runs a foundation to help child victims of war. Kim’s success and inspiring story is reflective of the resilience of the Vietnamese both at home and abroad in the face of the dramatic tragedy of war, death, and violence.

Especially during the early period of communist rule (1975–1985) that followed US withdrawal from Vietnam and the end of the Vietnam War, many refugees (often as boat people) left Vietnam for the USA. Currently there are 1,418,234 Vietnamese-Americans (representing 0.5% of the US population). They are the...
second largest Southeast Asia-American group in the USA. Much attention has focused on the military conflict in Vietnam and the US war there. However, Vietnam is not just a war, but a country. Already in 2008, many books have been published about Vietnam. Nearly all are still about the tragic war. Vietnam has a long and rich history as a literate culture strongly influenced by China. On many occasions, the Chinese tried to dominate and defeat Vietnam, but always failed.

Vietnam is one of the five remaining communist countries in the world. It is a one-party state with the Communist party dominating politics and policies. Opposition to the one party state is not tolerated, though within the country’s National Assembly there are often intense policy debates and differences.

With the unification of Vietnam in 1975 and the introduction of Dổi Mới in 1986, Vietnam has made impressive economic gains and is a rising phoenix on the world economic scene. Vietnam has greatly reduced the number of state-owned businesses and opened its economy to trade with much of the world. Vietnam normalized relations with the USA in 1995, became a member of ASEAN in 1997, a member of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum (APEC) in 1998, and became a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO) on January 11, 2007. Since 1996, the year after relations with Vietnam were normalized, trade between the USA and Vietnam has expanded roughly by 900%. Between 2005 and 2007, Vietnam was the fastest growing economy in the ASEAN region and one of the hottest economies in the Asia-Pacific region. Among nations of the Asia-Pacific region it has one of the lowest levels of inequality. Thus, Vietnam is striving to achieve growth with equity and pro-poor growth (see Banschap and Klump 2007; Klump 2007). The role of higher education in achieving that goal is a major focus of this chapter (Tables 13.1 and 13.2).

### 13.2 Historical and Political Context

In the analysis of contemporary political economy and educational issues, important historical and political context is often ignored. Such historical myopia and amnesia can lead to tragedy, as was the case of the US War in Vietnam (McNamara 1999). Nguyen Khac Vien (1993) has provided an excellent overview of Vietnamese history from a Vietnamese perspective (Trân and Hà 2000). In terms of the historical and political context of Vietnam, five themes are important to mention. The first is the continual Vietnamese struggle to free themselves from foreign domination, starting with roughly 1,000 years of Chinese rule, threats from the Mongols, and then external domination by the French, Japanese, and the USA. In all these instances, the Vietnamese displayed courage, creativity, and determination in winning their eventual freedom and independence. The second theme is the struggle against natural disasters such as floods and typhoons. Reflective of this struggle are the huge dykes protecting the capital, Hanoi, from possible flooding by the Red River. A third theme is nam tiên (expansion to the South), the need for