

Vietnam's Policies In COVID-19 Pandemic: What Are Consequences to Its Higher Education?

Bich Thi Ngoc Tran^{a*}, Lorien Jordan^b

^a*Dartmouth College, USA*

^b*University of Arkansas, USA*

*Corresponding author: Email: bich.tn.tran@dartmouth.edu

Address: Dartmouth College, USA

ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic and the shutdown of schools created disruptions in Vietnamese education, which has not been evaluated to date. This paper reviews the effect of COVID-19 policies on teaching and learning in higher education in Vietnam. We first contextualize higher education in Vietnam before the COVID-19 pandemic. We then analyze the Vietnamese government's policies to curb the virus spread. In doing so, we highlight on Vietnam's inequalities of access to higher education, quality of curriculum and instruction, and institutional autonomy. Our analysis focuses on how Vietnam's COVID-19 policies simultaneously responded to the pandemic and moderate prior educational issues. This review contrasts the advantages and disadvantages of the policies and highlights the challenges Vietnamese universities face in policy implementation. We conclude this paper by discussing the implications of changes made during the pandemic to comment on higher education in Vietnam post-COVID-19.

Keywords: COVID-19 Pandemic, Higher Education, Policy, Vietnam

INTRODUCTION

Vietnam successfully contained the novel coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) for over a year, whereas of mid-February 2021, almost one year into the global pandemic, Vietnam has kept its COVID-19 cases under 2,500 with 35 deaths (Black, 2020; Hartley et al., 2021; Tran et al., 2020; Van Nguyen et al., 2020; Vietnam's Ministry of Health, n.d). However, The COVID-19 pandemic and the shutdown of schools created disruptions in Vietnamese education, which has not been

evaluated to date. This lack of research on the impacts of the pandemic on higher education poses challenges to understanding how students and teachers coped during several disruptions of schooling and what can be done to support them post-pandemic.

This paper analyzes the effects of COVID-19 policies on teaching and learning in higher education in Vietnam. First, we contextualize higher education in Vietnam before the COVID-19 pandemic. We then present an analysis of the Vietnamese government's pandemic-related policies, including closing borders, relief packages, a zero-tolerance policy aimed at controlling virus spread, and educational policies focusing on the Circular No. 08/2021/TT-BGDĐT promulgating the Regulation on University Education and Resolution No. 30/2021/QH15 on urgent solutions for covid-19 prevention and control to implement Resolution No. 30/2021/QH15. Given prior research on Vietnam's inequalities of access to higher education (Trinh & Korinek, 2017; Vu et al., 2013), quality of curriculum and instruction (Hien, 2010; Phan et al., 2016; McCornac, 2014; Tran, 2013), and institutional autonomy (Hayden & Lam, 2007), our analysis focuses on how government policies can simultaneously respond to the pandemic and moderate prior educational issues. This review contrasts the advantages and disadvantages of the policies and highlights the challenges Vietnamese universities face in policy implementation. We conclude this paper by discussing the implications of changes made during the pandemic to comment on higher education in Vietnam post-COVID-19. Our study first highlights significant COVID-19 related policies in higher education in Vietnam, contrasting such policies with pre-pandemic higher education and will provide the field with an understanding of the potential consequences of COVID-19 policies on Vietnam's higher education during and post the pandemic.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Many factors contributed to the country's early success, including the government's prompt and proactive precautions and legislation (117/2020/ND-CP) in areas such as transportation, immigration, information dissemination, and health care (Hartley et al., 2021; Le et al., 2021; Tran et al., 2020). The Vietnamese government was exceptionally responsive in the education sector. In January 2020, the government made rapid decisions to close all schools and move to online learning at all levels until April 2020 (Tran et al., 2020; Le et al., 2021, Pham & Ho, 2020). In 2020 and 2021, Vietnam maintained a low record of COVID-19 transmission and deaths compared to countries like the United States and the United Kingdom. These countries witnessed extremely high rates of COVID-19 and morbidity, linked to weak governance, such as the absence of a centralized federal response in the United States (Altman, 2020) and overcentralized management of the pandemic in the United Kingdom (Ham, 2021). Following the outbreaks in Hai Duong and Quang Ninh Province in late January and early February 2021, the government immediately isolated the affected areas, extending the Lunar New Year holiday for students and preparing all schools to move to an online platform if needed.

Despite entering 2022 in good shape, between February and April 2022, Vietnam experienced its worst wave of COVID-19, averaging almost 270,000 cases per week (Center for Systems Science and Engineering, 2022). As of May 2022, Vietnam had 10,656,649 cases and 43,044 COVID-19 deaths (Center for Systems Science and Engineering, 2022). The rapid increase in cases in 2022 mirrored that in other countries with low infection rates, as seen in South Korea, Hong Kong, and New Zealand. These increases are attributed to initially low vaccine uptake rates, countries' opening up for tourism and business, and new COVID-19 variants, which spread quickly. In response, Vietnam now has one of the highest vaccination rates globally (Irfan, 2022).

After peaking in March, numbers have returned to the low levels experienced pre-surge (Vietnam's Ministry of Health, n.d.).

The COVID-19 pandemic and the shutdown of schools created disruptions in Vietnamese education, which has not been evaluated to date. However, emergent literature focused on the impact of school disruption and higher education's response to governmental policies can be found (Dinh & Nguyen, 2020; Pham & Ho, 2020). Dinh & Nguyen (2020) surveyed 186 undergraduate-level social work students at a national university to study the university's adaptations to address disruptions in learning the teaching. They found that students faced multiple technical problems while shifting to online learning. Students also report low satisfaction with online teaching. Pham & Ho (2020) described the possibilities and challenges of online learning in Vietnam's higher education system, acknowledging that there may not be sufficient policies and resources to integrate online learning fully. However, they concluded that 'the COVID-19 pandemic has brought about an opportunity to introduce e-learning comprehensively into Vietnamese higher education' (Pham & Ho, 2020, p.1329), outlining pathways for its incorporation in post-COVID-19 Vietnam.

METHODOLOGY

Against the background of the current picture and existing issues of higher education in Vietnam facing a new challenge, the pandemic, we attempted to answer two questions. First, what are significant COVID-19 related policies in higher education in Vietnam? And second, what are the potential consequences of COVID-19 policies on Vietnam's higher education during and post the pandemic?

Given the questions and limited research on the impacts of policies on higher education, integrative review is the most appropriate methodology to use in this paper. Integrative review is "a distinctive form of research that generates new knowledge about a topic by reviewing, critiquing, and synthesizing representative literature on a topic in an integrated way such that new frameworks and perspectives on the topic are generated" (Torraco, 2016, p. 62). The purpose of using integrative review as a methodology to study such a newly emerging topic is to "combine perspectives and insights" to "create initial or preliminary conceptualizations and theoretical model" (Snyder, 2019, p. 336). There are two reasons why we selected this methodology. First, our research questions center around speculating consequences based on past and current events. Second, there is indeed limited knowledge about the impacts of policies on higher education in Vietnam during and post the pandemic. The integrative review approach allows us to generate our perspectives on the impacts of the Vietnamese government's COVID-19 related policies, particularly educational policies, on higher education: the consequences of such policies given the pre-COVID-19 picture of higher education in Vietnam.

To answer the above research questions, we conducted a three-step comparative review of Vietnamese education pre-pandemic compared to education policies implemented during the pandemic. The first stage of this design included a thorough review of the pre-pandemic state of higher education in Vietnam. This phase was implemented through a thorough review of history, development, organization, management, funding mechanism, and issues in higher education in Vietnam by domestic and international scholars. Our goal was to create an overarching picture of the challenges and successes that Vietnam's higher education system experienced, with a specific lens toward organization, management, and quality. We used various resources, including Google

Scholar, our university library search engine, and a review of all references from identified literature.

The second stage of this design included a policy review. We identified relevant Vietnamese governmental COVID-19 policies. The policies we selected were general, such as transportation, border control, and economy, and specific to education, such as online teaching, COVID-19 prevention at schools, and support for schools and students. We chose these policies because we wanted to provide a contrast between education-related and non-education-related policies and build a foundation for our speculation in the next final stage. We searched for policies using both English and Vietnamese. We utilized search tools on Google, Google Scholars, Webs of Science, and the search engine provided by the University of Arkansas Library. There are three broad categories: (1) government's responses to the pandemic, (2) news articles on higher education and education policies during the pandemic, and (3) scholarly articles on the impact of the pandemic on education and higher education.

In the final stage of our review, we contrasted the policies against Vietnam's state of education pre-pandemic to develop potential implications for Vietnam's post-pandemic educational governance. This step allows us to anticipate the effects of the government's policies on higher education in Vietnam. We reviewed 103 documents, including 55 peer-reviewed articles, 18 news articles, nine book chapters and reports on history, organization, and issues of education and higher education in Vietnam, eight websites and blog posts, and 13 legal documents on Vietnam's COVID-19 policies. The review was done solely by the first author with a language advantage. See the supplement for a complete list of reviewed documents (<https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.20044730.v1>).

FINDINGS

Organization and Management of Higher Education in Vietnam

Vietnam's current higher education organization and management can be classified as centralized. However, at the same time, it also has features of a localized system. In short, we categorize the system as a hybrid. First, the system is "strongly centralized" (Hayden & Lam, 2007, p. 75). The State's power is demonstrated through various regulations on the responsibilities of individual universities and colleges. There are five ministries involved in the administration and supervision of higher education institutes in Vietnam, namely the Ministry of Education and Training, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Planning and Investment, the Ministry of Home Affairs, and the Ministry of Science and Technology (Hayden & Lam, 2007). Among the five ministries, the Ministry of Education and Training (MoET) by far has the most extensive supervision of universities and colleges in Vietnam. MoET allocates funding for the majority of public universities and colleges, appoints chancellors/rectors, and regulates enrollment quotas, admission, and curricula.

However, there has been a growing attempt to decentralize the system in recent years. The amendment to Higher Education Law in 2018 and the Regulations on Organizing and Performing of the University of 2014 state that the university councils "should have more authority, including the authority to evaluate the rector's performance" (Salmi & Pham, 2019, p. 104). By law, university councils theoretically have the power to approve the "institutional charter, the strategic development plan, and the organizational structures" and supervise "the implementation of the strategic plan" (Salmi & Pham, 2019, p. 108). However, in practice, the power is concentrated on

the chancellor appointed by the central government through the MoET (Hayden & Lam, 2007). All higher institutions must report to the MoET, and many depend on the MoET for funding and curriculum approvals.

Private higher education institutes have more autonomy compared to their public counterparts. However, that autonomy is virtually limited to finance. By law, their institutional governance and leadership are regulated by the State. The State also regulates its curricula, content, assessment requirements, and degree conditions (Salmi & Pham, 2019). However, many private institutes do not fully take advantage of their autonomy but merely “mimic the public higher education institutes” (Salmi & Pham, 2019, p. 109).

In conclusion, higher education in Vietnam is under the direct control of the State through funding mechanisms, leadership appointments, and curriculum approvals. In comparison, countries in Europe and North America project a level of autonomy from governmental influence. However, in these countries, most control is enacted through federal and state spending mechanisms dependent on political will and managerialism (Whittington, 2022). Conversely, in Vietnam, there is a movement towards more institutional independence. This movement is growing yet still facing structural limitations by laws. The central government, represented by the MoET, has considerable power over the appointment of the chancellor. However, the chancellor has the power to direct the institutes’ planning. Therefore, the chancellor’s ability to govern, stay in power, and make decisions depends on their relationship with the higher management in the central government. Therefore, this system in higher education in Vietnam is a hybrid system.

Quality of Education

Vietnamese government emphasizes education as the key to economic development and improving living standards. Annual school opening day, September 5, is a big event. However, this event is most relevant in the PreK-12 system. Higher education is considered differently. For example, Vietnam invests relatively more in education by international standards, “but lightly on higher education” (Salmi & Pham, 2019, p. 106). With the lack of funding and social enthusiasm, it is no surprise that Vietnam lags behind Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines regarding the Human Capital Development Index (World Bank, 2019). For example, new graduates in automobile maintenance companies lack updated knowledge about the latest technologies, practical knowledge, working behaviors, foreign language skills, disciplines, and professionalism (McCornac, 2014).

Low labor force quality stems from Vietnam’s lack of high-quality human resources at the higher education level. Vietnam’s education system needs to address the question of human capital, such as teaching and administrative staff (McCornac, 2014). Indeed, many domestically trained Ph.D. holders in Vietnam are only at the bachelor level at international institutions (McCornac, 2014). Nguyen et al. (2019) look “into quality management of Vietnamese higher education programs through analyzing results of accreditation to fill part of this research gap” (p. 508). They found that “only a very small number of programs have satisfied requirements to be recognized as meeting quality standards regulated by MoET” after examining 19 universities (p. 513). They found that “many programs lacked essential conditions and resources for survival and growth. Around a half of these programs did not satisfy important requirements related to the operation of a higher education program, such as curriculum development, methods for student assessment, professional development for academic staff and support staff, libraries, teaching and learning facilities, and the continuous review and evaluation of the teaching and learning processes

and student assessment. Even programs achieving most of the accreditation criteria still need strategic plans for quality enhancement” (p. 513).

Vietnam must invest in fostering, recruiting, and retaining talents and simultaneously improving administration and curriculum to address this fundamental quality issue. There have been national programs to recruit talents for post-graduation education. These talented students receive full funding to study for master’s and doctoral degrees from international universities and are obliged to serve the country two full years after completing their programs. However, such programs are costly, and only a small group of students was selected. It is also not uncommon for these award recipients to serve their two-year commitment and migrate to another country, citing the need to accommodate a research environment or better life opportunities (Nguyen, 2020).

Internationalizing higher education is another way universities in Vietnam utilize to improve the quality and credibility of education (Nguyen et al., 2016). Internationalization of higher education in Vietnam includes staff, faculty, and student exchange programs, international teaching and research collaborations, upgrading the standard to international standards and transferring knowledge through adapting curricula. The approach, however, is costly for many students in Vietnam. Such internationalized programs have higher tuition fees and are more selective in admission requirements, often correlated with socioeconomic status (Jibeen & Khan, 2015; Trinh & Conner, 2019).

In short, during the pre-pandemic years, Vietnam needed to address the issue of quality and resources to create a skilled labor workforce that could facilitate the country’s economic development. This mission was constrained by a limited budget for higher education, unattractive recruitment and retainment policies for talents, high cost of attending international programs. Barriers also include universities’ limited autonomy on leadership, strategies, and curricula. Additionally, issues of inequity which will be discussed in the following section, also play a significant role in the low-quality labor force of Vietnam.

What Are the Issues of Inequality in Higher Education in Vietnam?

Apart from the concern about governance, management, and quality of education, there are other issues in Vietnam’s higher education. Such issues include unequal access to resources, school choice, and educational infrastructures. First, although there has been a rapid increase in opportunities to attend college and universities in the past two decades, these opportunities are not equitably distributed. Hayden and Pham (2015) found that well-off urban students and those from the ethnic majority group appear to benefit more from expanding higher education. Such differences stem from the fact that resources are not equally distributed in the K-16 educational system (Holsinger, 2009). Urban schools receive more funding and support from the government. Urban well-off students also have access to more resources than rural students, such as private tutoring, international language centers, and technologies.

On the other hand, rural students do not have access to services their well-off urban peers receive. As a result, they tend to have lower performance in the national exam in colleges and universities. It is worth noting that 63% of Vietnam’s population lives in rural areas (World Bank, 2018). At the root of the educational system, rural students already have a lower starting point (Pham & Tran, 2015). It is no surprise that when the door is open to attend college and universities, many of these rural students struggle to get into good universities, adopt the fast pace of urban life, and ultimately be successful.

This urban and rural distinction is further complicated by ethnicity. As Hayden and Pham (2015) noted, the students of ethnic majority groups appear to benefit more from the expanded opportunities for attending college and universities. Many studies have resonated with this finding (Trinh & Korinek, 2017; Doan & Stevens, 2011; Salmi & Pham, 2019; Vu, 2020). The majority of students of ethnic minorities live in rural, remote, and mountainous areas of Vietnam, where access to education is limited and challenging. Having a property setting for studying is already a challenge in many places, not to mention how to get to schools. Some students have to walk a long distance or embark on dangerous trips every day to go to school. In remote and mountainous schools, they do not even have the facilities for teaching, such as books, computers, electricity, or the internet. This ethnic gap exacerbates the quality of education these students receive in K-12 and, consequently, college (if they ever go to college).

Finally, there is a hierarchy in the higher education system in Vietnam. A small group of designated ‘key’ universities is usually located in big cities. This group of universities is seen as more prestigious than others. There is another group of provincial universities located in the capital of each province. These universities are considered less prestigious than the key universities. The last group is private universities which have their internal hierarchy. Private international universities have higher regard than domestic private universities (Dang & Pham, 2017; Vo & Phan, 2019). However, more and more domestic universities promote internationalization for better education quality and reputation. Depending on which group, a higher education institute will receive respective treatments on funding and resources. Top key universities receive significant funding from the State because they are classified as strategic to the country’s development. Provincial universities receive less attention and less funding. However, the key universities do not educate all the labor force in Vietnam. It is often competitive to get into one of those universities. Many students are left with second-tier universities and colleges, including most private and provincial universities. This inequality of funding and resources contributes to the low quality of higher education in Vietnam.

An Overview of General Policies

By March 2021, Vietnam was seen as one of the successful cases in containing the spreading of the novel COVID-19 virus among its population. Many scholars have praised the country’s prompt, proactive, and decisive responses to the pandemic (Tran et al., 2020; Le et al., 2021; Hartley et al., 2021). Vietnam’s responses to the pandemic through various measures, including border closure and entry ban, quarantine and lockdown, non-essential business, school/workplace, public transport closure, improving the capacity of health care systems, information campaigns, economic support, and other responses (Tran et al., 2020). Before the WHO announced COVID-19 as a pandemic, in late January 2021, the Vietnamese government issued a temporary travel ban on all travelers from Wuhan, China. It later expanded the travel ban to other hotspots such as Daegu, South Korea. As the pandemic progressed, the Vietnamese government banned all international commercial flights into the country. It also tightened illegal land crossing incidents.

Vietnam only allowed its citizens and experts to enter the country on specially arranged flights approved by the government or by land via legal entries. Everyone, however, had to quarantine at a government-approved facility for 14 days. The country also announced several lockdowns in hotspot cities and a national lockdown as more cases of COVID-19 emerged from within communities, mostly in big cities like Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh, and Da Nang. The transmission

rate did not seem to stop as the noble virus mutated. Where the lockdowns happened, only essential businesses were allowed. Local police and the civil defense force took responsibility for delivering food, guarding entries to neighborhoods, and testing community members. As of March 2022, Vietnam officially opened its borders to all travelers. Vaccinations are encouraged in the population, and public health procedures include 5K (in Vietnamese): Khau Trang (facemask) - Khu Khuan (disinfection) - Khoang Cach (social distance) - Khong Tu Tap (no gathering) – and Khai Bao Y Te (health declaration) (Kim Anh, 2020).

Significant Education Policies in the Time of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Along with general policies on transportation and economy, from the very beginning of the pandemic, the MoET released Dispatch No. 239/BGDĐT-GDTC on disease prevention for winter-spring 2020 on January 22, 2020. Nine days later, Dispatch No. 260/BGDĐT-GDTC on organizing the on-site teaching at education institutions specifically mentioned the COVID-19 virus for the first time on January 31, 2020. In February of 2020, there were four other Dispatches on COVID-19 related preventions and cautions for schools in PreK-16 (265/BGDĐT-GDTC, 269/BGDĐT-GDTC, 460/BGDĐT-GDTC, and 550/BGDĐT-GDTC). Locales have the authority to decide K-12 school shutdowns. Many cities and provinces moved to teach to online platforms. Higher education institutions also have autonomy in closing schools subject to the Ministry of Education and Training's guidelines. As of March 2021, however, there were no official online teaching and learning regulations regarding the pandemic. Universities and Colleges were left with virtually no instruction on conducting online learning and teaching and accountability measures.

For most of 2020 and 2021, the government focused on preventing and restraining the virus in schools and communities. It was not until August 2021 that the Ministry of Education and Training issued Circular No. 08/2021/TT-BGDĐT promulgating the Regulation on University Education, which stated the regulations on online teaching and learning most comprehensively for the first time. In the same month, the MoET also released Dispatch No. 3734/BGDĐT-GDCTHSSV to support students at all levels impacted by the COVID-19 virus and plan for the new academic year. In this Dispatch, the Minister of MoET emphasized three points: flexibility in teaching and learning, adequate support for students, especially disadvantaged ones, and planning to go back to in-person learning and teaching.

In September 2021, when the Prime Minister issued Directive No. 24/CT-TTg regarding the issues of a safe and healthy environment for learning and teaching and quality of learning and teaching PreK-16 became the focus of educational policies during the pandemic. Regarding higher education, the Directive acknowledged that students at all levels and educators faced numerous challenges physically, mentally, and financially, including the lack of resources and facilities, the sudden changes and tremendous pressure coming from the unprecedented pandemic, and anxiety from lockdowns and school closings. The Directive also mentioned different ministry's responsibilities in tackling the challenges posed by the pandemic. The Ministry of Health was to provide guidance on preventing COVID-19 transmitting in schools and homes; the Ministry of Information and Communications was to consider lower cost of services for students and educators; the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was to support Vietnamese students who study abroad; the Ministry of Defense was to support students and educators, especially those in remote, mountainous, and bordering locations to adapt to online learning; the State Bank of Vietnam was to provide preferential policies for students, educators, and personnel working in the education sector.

The Focus on Online Learning and Teaching and Its Issues

Even though the Vietnamese government passed two budget packages for COVID-19 relief, higher education was not included in the packages. Here witnessed the sharp differences in resources among higher education institutions in Vietnam and how higher education was not prepared for this pandemic when institutions were shut down, and learning was moved online. First, there was disorientation in changing teaching and learning platform. Online education was never widely regarded as mainstream in higher education. Distance learning is the closest form to online learning in higher education. Students must be on-campus to take specific exams, even with distance learning. When the pandemic hit and classrooms were moved to online platforms, the sudden move overwhelmed the administration.

Second, because online education was never focused on, higher education institutions lacked the resources to successfully adapt to the new normalcy. Faculty were not trained to do their job online (UNICEF ROSA et al., 2021). Many faculties were overwhelmed by the change. For example, checking attendance was a challenge using online platforms for some faculty (BBC News, 2021). Online classes became particularly challenging for subjects requiring practice and hands-on experience. Many universities did not have the facilities to support online teaching and learning, for example, camera, computers, sound systems, or even broadband internet.

Third, college and university students were also disoriented during the pandemic. As the government did not have any specific policy to support students, it was left to the universities and students to arrange their learning and teaching. From a classroom setting, teaching and learning moved to a home setting, where concerns regarding space, devices, and support arose. Since nearly all schools and non-essential businesses were shut down, many generations were forced to stay under the same roof simultaneously (UNICEF ROSA, et al., 2021). For example, there were concerns about arranging time and space for learning, seeking support from faculties and universities and doing group work (BBC News, 2021).

In short, by the end of March 2021, higher education institutions in Vietnam were left with virtually no instruction nor support to adapt to changes caused by the pandemic. Faculty and students were under extreme pressure to quickly adapt and perform their work with limited resources. This reality was exacerbated by existing inequalities in the system mentioned earlier, including inequalities in resources among universities and inequalities and lack of access among students, particularly those from low-income and rural families.

DISCUSSION

We conducted this comparative review to understand the potential implications of Vietnam's COVID-19 policy response on both current and future higher education. In response to this focus, we highlight three serious issues that governmental policies for higher education face: diversifying mode of education, human resources, and resource inequality. First of all, the pandemic struck in-person education in Vietnam severely. As the need to stop conducting in-person classes arose, there was evident disorientation in moving classes to online platforms. This disorientation is since online education was never a significant part of education in Vietnam, notably higher education. The change shocked the whole system and disrupted teaching and learning. Relatedly, because online education was never emphasized, universities lacked the resources to prepare for the change. They did not have well-trained lecturers or facilities to accommodate learning and teaching administratively and professionally as needed. Finally,

significant inequalities were observed as higher education institutions adapted to the change. Among institutions, those with more funding and resources adapt quickly to the change. Those with limited resources struggle to support their faculty and teachers. Among students, those with resources, such as technologies and space, are less affected by the change than those who struggled financially to adapt. This tendency is not unique to Vietnam's higher education. It is a global phenomenon (Engzell, 2021; Hough, 2021; OECD, 2020).

Such issues in education and inequality highlighted by the pandemic further create consequences for the current higher education system. As the pandemic still dominates our daily conversations, many students struggle to have an education; many lecturers struggle to teach from their homes with limited resources (UNICEF ROSA et al., 2021). The effects of the pandemic on the quality of education remain uncertain, for many of the changes happening are unprecedented. However, the pandemic has certainly created further barriers to education for students, especially those of low-income families. We can expect an extended gap in achievement due to educational disruption.

For institutions, the pandemic-related policies have sorted institutions into groups. Institutions with diversified teaching methods have resources to adapt to the pandemic and support teaching and learning, and those with limited capacity to adapt to the pandemic changes. These categories will significantly impact prospective students' opinions of the institutions, ultimately impacting the performance and direction of the instructions for the future. We can expect significant changes in how higher education functions in Vietnam due to the pandemic.

It took more than a year well into the pandemic for the Ministry of Education and Training to issue official instruction on online learning and teaching. Many universities and colleges had already taken action to support learning and teaching during this time. This suggests that instructional autonomy may help with unpredictable, unprecedented situations like this. After the pandemic, we may see a loose grip of power from the Ministry to the university level.

This is a lesson for the MoET as well as for the government. The early success of Vietnam on the health front does not translate into success in education. Health-related policies were not comparable to the limited policies on education, particularly in higher education, which was already facing numerous issues ranging from unequal resources to low-tech traditional instruction. The slow response in supporting academic policies also exacerbated the inequalities issues in higher education.

In short, the mismatch between health and education policies could potentially lead to a wider gap of inequalities between institutions, which may hinder the recovery of Vietnam after the pandemic. Such wider inequalities may result in a loss in education and a decrease in labor force quality. Vietnamese government and particularly the MoET should focus on interventions that support universities to recover from the pandemic with finance, social and human capital.

LIMITATIONS

As with any review, there are limitations. First, we focused our review on Vietnam specifically rather than conducting a comparative review of COVID-19 response policies across countries. However, multiple studies have shown that education is one of the greatest harmful social implications of the pandemic that will have lasting effects beyond health and mortality (Burgess & Sieversten, 2020). Given this reality, we intentionally focused our comparative review on Vietnam due to its early success in mitigating the effects of the virus, leading us to question how Vietnam responded to higher education policies. Limiting our analysis to Vietnam adds to the

emergent literature on the patterns of consequence seen in other countries, including disproportionate impacts of the pandemic on students from low-income families, rural, and underrepresented groups. A secondary limitation is that we focused our comparison on the pre-pandemic state of higher education in Vietnam with COVID-19 era policies to speculate about the potential consequences of these policies. This intentional choice resulted from the dearth of contemporary scholarship on Vietnam, education, and COVID-19. Future studies comparing the effects of COVID-19 policies and current-day higher education will show the policies that influenced the state of higher education in Vietnam.

CONCLUSION

From our review, it is clear that the picture of higher education in Vietnam has been changing since the beginning of the pandemic and is expected to continually change as the pandemic still dominates daily conversations and government policies. The COVID-19 pandemic cohorts will definitely look different from other cohorts. The pandemic exposed many shortages in the current higher education system in Vietnam. At the same time, it has brought opportunities for change.

March 2022 marked the world's entry into the third year of the COVID-19 global pandemic, and it is becoming clear that a post-pandemic world may not occur as soon as many hoped. However, our era of new normalcy marked by uncertainty and disruption suggests that higher education institutions across the globe and especially in Vietnam, need to innovate to adapt to the challenges caused by the pandemic. School administrators, policymakers, and educators are the key to shaping the educational landscape; however, it is clear that they require strong governmental support to reach the full potential of Vietnam's higher education system. From our review, it became clear that there is an urgent need for governmental commitment to financially support institutions, faculty, students, and families, ensuring that the educational system can help tackle the inequalities exacerbated by the pandemic. Secondly, the lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic should encourage all levels of the education system to consider how to develop a sustainable change, which is prepared for the next big hit.

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BICH THI NGOC TRAN, Ph.D., is a Research and Evaluation Associate at the Center for Program Design and Evaluation, The Dartmouth Institute, Dartmouth College. Her research interests include program design and evaluation, gifted identification and education, comparative studies, higher education, online schooling, and educational politics.

Email: bich.tn.tran@dartmouth.edu

LORIEN S. JORDAN is an Assistant Professor in Arkansas University's Educational Statistics and Research Methods (Qualitative Methodology) program. As a graduate of the University of Georgia (2018) in Human Development and Family Science, she specialized in critical qualitative research and theory. Lorien's research is comprised of two intersecting strands; the production, analysis, and critique of qualitative methodologies, and explorations of the intersections of culture, policy, and justice that inform institutional landscapes. These emphases include a specialized focus on deconstruction of white supremacy and colonialism in science and challenging colorblind racism in research practices.

Email: lsjordan@uark.edu
