NEOLIBERAL DECENTRALISATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN VIETNAM: PROBLEMS, DEBATES AND IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

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ABSTRACT. Facing the imminent collapse of socialism in the last century, Vietnam adopted the market model to decentralise its socio-economic activities. During decentralisation process, the higher education system in this country has been impressively expanded. However, the market strategy, namely societalisation of education, to implement this process has accidentally rendered the higher education system so problematic that debates over solutions are in a dead-end road. This article analyses the complexity of higher education policy making in Vietnam in the era of global neoliberalism. Firstly, it describes the consequences of the decentralisation of higher education since the late 1980s which the higher education system is confronting. Secondly, it evaluates the quasi-market model suggested by an education expert to co-ordinate this problematic system. After the argument over the feasibility of the quasi-market model, the treatise finally presents key implications for higher education policy.

Keywords: Decentralisation; Higher Education; Market; State; Funding; Glonacal; Policy

1. Introduction. In this time of neoliberal influence, many aspects in human life are analysed for economic value. This is due, in part, an outcome of the reform movements that shook modern states at the turn of the 1980s (Kamat 2002). Alongside these lines of reform since then, the neoliberal guidance by the World Trade Organisation (WTO), and of course, other supranational agencies, have commodified a number of welfare services on a global scale. Amongst them is education (Ball 1998; Varghese 2007; Mok 2008). The ‘declining publicness of public services’ (Baldock 2003, 68) as such is inextricably linked with the market mechanism, the largest edifice of neoliberalism. In Vietnam, the market mechanism was adopted in 1986. Unfortunately, the higher education (HE) system under this model of arrangement has experienced dramatically undesirable changes. In response to these, Dao (2012a, 2012b) suggests that the quasi-market model which emerged during the 1980s (Le Grand, 1991) should be adopted to resolve the problems the HE system is confronting. In order to establish an adequate analysis which centers on the problems in Vietnamese HE and the feasibility of the suggested model, I try to address the following questions:

1. How has the market model been adopted that makes the HE system problematic?
2. Given its characteristics, can the quasi-market model resolve the problems in the HE system?
3. What implications do the answers to question 1 and 2 have for the HE policy in such a context as Vietnam?

I first describe the current context of Vietnamese HE that is beset with problems and analytically evaluate the quasi-market model against the described context. Doing this I want to argue that even this model does not hold much hope. The foundation to base my argument on is that the quasi-market model has its own defects and hinges on the state’s budget. The state is caught up in weighing up whether private HE should be publicly funded to resolve the problems or not. Each option made by the state cuts both ways, and I term this tradeoff a policy trap. To make a link between the problems in the HE system and the infeasibility of the suggested model, the treatise emphasises that the Vietnamese state in adopting the market mechanism to implement decentralisation has a huge onus to resolve the problems in HE and to develop it over the long course of time. However, as can be shown in the section of implications, there are various conflicts between stakeholders’ ideals and values that the state with its limited competence in finance and in policy making cannot handle. This is what the article highlights as the complexity of policy making for HE in the hegemony of neoliberalism.

2. Decentralisation And Problems of HE. The socio-economic systems in socialist countries during the 1980s were so cumbersome, inefficient, and backward that the centralist state model was no longer appropriate. In order to avoid the failure of the state, Vietnam in 1986 began the doi moi (reform) period and decentralised its socio-economic activities through the market instrument (see Lauglo 1995). Thanks to the decentralisation process, the HE system has seen a number of significant changes. One of these is the establishment of two Vietnam National Universities, one in Hanoi and the other in Hochiminh City during the 1990s. These two universities are conceptually considered as an equivalent to Ministry of Education and Training (MoET) in many matters (Ngo et al. 2006; Hayden and Lam 2007). They are the result of the mergers of different HE institutions (HEIs) that had been established before the doi moi. Their functions are to enhance the quality of HE and research in multi-disciplines, which are supposed to contribute to the modernisation and industrialisation of the country. Another is an emergence of nonpublic HEIs that began in the late 1980s. This reflects the systemic reaction to the post-war significant economic growth and strong demand for HE (Pham and Fry 2002). According to MoET (2011), the number of nonpublic HEIs1 is 82, accounting for more than 21% of HEIs nationwide. These HEIs are funded solely by students and organisations (Di Gropello et al. 2008; Goyette 2012), which has been a measure to implement xa hoi hoa giao duc (societalisation of education) in HE since 19892. The nomenclature means promoting financial contributions from different walks of life in society. It forms part of the ground on which autonomy is given to HEIs, especially private ones, in decisions about admission and employment, etc. However, this market strategy, namely xa hoi hoa giao duc, has established a funding scheme that inevitably distinguishes public HE from private HE (Vincent-Lancrin 2009), which is consequentially problematic.

As pointed out below, the market mechanism to decentralise the HE system is ex post ineffective. It is assumed that the market plays as a sphere where exchange relations are liberalised (i.e. consumers can make their own choices and pay for these choices),
maximum social surplus is successfully obtained (i.e. providers gain profits, and consumers gain utility), and providers compete therefore enhancing the quality of goods and services. These bear testimony to quality and efficiency. Relying on these jargons, in many countries, Australia, Chile, China, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Jamaica, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, Thailand, the UK, the United States, for instance, public funding and public provision of HE has significantly been reduced (Jonhstone 2004; Altbach 2005; Mok 2005, 2008, 2011; Manicas 2007; Varghese 2007; Tilak 2008; Zha, 2011; Goyette 2012). Nonetheless, in juxtaposition with the problems hereunder in the private HE sector in Vietnam, the assumption about the market instrument to achieve quality and efficiency is challenged. In fact, it does not actually explain the failures of education or success (Olssen et al. 2004). On the contrary, what it can explain is that policy which radically rests upon it may miserably fail. So as to illustrate this, I would like to describe the major problems in Vietnamese HE, which are derived from the way the market strategy has been employed for purpose of decentralisation.

The first problem lies in the socialist ideals. To explain this, let us mention that every year public HEIs only admit students who are top scorers in the national entrance examination into their programmes. Those who cannot get admitted will then turn to private HEIs as the last resort. Attending private HEIs, these low scorers have to pay a higher fee rate. Although the discourse of xã hội hoá giáo dục sounds nice, the contribution to funding private HE is almost only made by students through tuition. Together with the development of private HEIs, the amount students have to pay increases by a large margin year after year. To enhance the economy of scale, some private HEIs also offer some so-called high quality programmes that ‘cost an arm and a leg’, given that not all students at these HEIs come from a high socio-economic background. The inference one can make in this regard is that HE in this private sector is rival and excludable. This nature eradicates equity and equality in educational opportunities (Mok 2008, 2011; Goyette 2012) and ultimately the gap in social background will keep widening between the more priviledged and the less priviledged. This in turn questions the dignity of HE in empowering students since practice shows that poor students are quite disempowered in the HE market. They do not feel equity and equality in accessing HE, either, and this actually harms the socialist ideals and values. Whilst they and their families have to struggle for money to pay their education, they rarely have any willingness to trust in the promises (e.g. equity and equality, democracy, and civilisation, etc.) made by the state. It is important to recognise that mistrust often works as the link between inequity and inequality and social unrest (see Litte and Green 2009).

Being much more critical than inequity and inequality, the second problem in the HE system is the illegality of programmes. It is ruled that when HEIs intend to offer a certain programme (e.g. bachelor) to students, they have to submit a plan which details the objectives of the programme, the curriculum, human resources, etc. to MoET for approval. According to this procedure, not until they are permitted by MoET can the programme in question be offered. As has been mentioned, operating to market principles these HEIs live on the budget that is constructed from students’ payment. Therefore, tapping this funding source is very important to the existence and development of the private HE sector. Due to this, many private HEIs in order to strengthen their budget fail to conform to the regulation set by MoET. They offer many programmes without the knowledge of MoET, and instead,
many of them take in students first, and ask the permission of MoET later. These illegal programmes are conducted in many ways and forms. For instance, they may be joint or transfer programmes on HEIs’ own campus or at hired branches in other provinces. Because Vietnamese students strongly value education (Pham and Fry 2002, 2005; Mok 2008, 2011), they rarely wonder if the programmes being offered are permitted or legal in its pure sense but believe that they will obtain a degree upon completion of the programmes. One consequence of this nonconformity is that many students graduate with degrees which are not approved by MoET. In some cases, students even have to stop studying if MoET finds out the on-going programmes are unpermitted. These moral hazard behaviours generally lead to the fact that students not only lose the direct cost, money, but also the opportunity cost, time and effort.

Not only are programmes illegally offered, but the low quality of these products in the HE market is also the crux of the matter. It is basically taken for granted that both research and the student-per-teacher ratio are very important factors in enhancing education quality. A contradiction is that many private HEIs invest little in research (Di Gropello et al. 2008; Mok 2011). For example, the number of ISI-indexed research publications by Vietnamese authors during the 2002-2011 period reached 1,389 (Nguyen 2012) but based on my study, out of this number, the percentage of the publications by authors from private HEIs was so modest. Moreover, due to financial constraints at many private HEIs, the number of students per teacher is very high (Pham and Fry 2002). According to MoET (2011), the ratio of students per teacher is 30 (there are totally 333,921 students and 11,244 teachers), a higher ratio than the one suggested by MoET. Firstly, why private HEIs invest little in research comes from their budget which depends very much on students’ contribution. Private HEIs do not receive funding from the state, so they have to calculate carefully in the activities that seem not to address urgent needs. Secondly, private HEIs do not tend to employ full-time lecturers because full-time employment is more expensive given insurance, maternity leave, sick leave, and holiday benefits. Instead, they tend to hire on a part-time basis those from public HEIs who ‘run shows’ back and forth between different HEIs to increase their income. Together with the low-achieving student intake, these two factors (little investment in research and many students per teachers) will perpetually retain private HEIs at the low quality threshold. In the country where one new HEI is established on a monthly basis, private HE quality is so problematic that even some enterprises publicly refuse to employ those who graduate from private HEIs. From the perspective of human capital, Goyette (2012) postulates that return to investment in private HE due to this factor will also be mitigated. This is a great concern to parents when they have to send their children there (Pham and Fry ibid.; Nguyen 2002, Di Gropello et al. ibid.; Dao 2012b). For this reason, Vietnamese students have actually lowered their expectations of private HEIs and reject domestic private HE. In case they cannot attend public HEIs, they look for foreign education.

Addressing the issue of quality indeed necessitates a clarification of how the concept ‘quality’ is defined. As regards this, there may be different or even opposite views as it is related to the different functions of HEIs - teaching, knowledge production, or community service, for example - and the practical role that the market mechanism attaches to them: students’ employability in the labor market. Why is it a problem? To answer this question
needs relating to the cost-recovery measure. Because students have to pay more to attend private HEIs, they rationally choose to study in programmes that promisingly make them competitive in the labor market. Currently, ‘hot’ programmes in Vietnam are mathematics, science, business, and law (Goyette, 2012), to name a few. According to Tran et al. (2012), more than 30% of upper secondary school leavers choose to study on bachelor programmes concerned with economics, business, finance, and accounting in the academic year 2012-2013. Since education is then private, individual returns are preferred at the indifference to social returns. In response, private HEIs and even foreign universities (e.g. RMIT Vietnam) due to having to function to market principles offer what is strongly demanded. Campus-knowledge is replaced by work-based knowledge (Olssen and Peters 2005). Parallel to this is that arts, social sciences and humanities decline in importance because they do not add much value to be understood in dollar terms in the labour market (Lynch 2006; Tilak 2008; Benneworth and Jongbloed 2010). Also according to Tran et al. (ibid.), in the academic year 2012-2013, only 4.43% of upper secondary school leavers choose to major in these fields. As a consequence of this, HEIs are falling into a retail system (see Giroux 2003) where the programmes are mainly produced to serve customers. In this retail system, faculty members are deprofessionalised as the latter have to limit course content and demonstrate the relevance of what they teach to ‘the labour market conditions and prospects,’ and there are no values of inquiry or respect for the integrity of what they teach (Olssen and Peters ibid. 326). Their choice propensity, if long maintained, will render the socio-economic system handicapped in that there will be a lack of contribution from the field of social sciences and humanities.

Assertively, xã hội hoá giáo dục as a market strategy has made the decentralisation of HE unsuccessful, at least until now. The superficial translation of decentralisation into practice as such has led to the marketisation and privatisation of HE and ultimately, the divergent reactions by stakeholders involved in HE. The market mechanism is initially understood as a way of enhancing economic efficiency and quality of goods and services (Lauglo 1995). However, even if this policy intention is plausible, in what terms private HEIs operate efficiently when they are self-funded or get funded by someone else other than the state is a question. Is it efficient because the state will not feel pressurised to fund them anymore (and that’s all), because they will have to internalize their profits and losses, or because they will offer higher quality education programmes to students? Hardly can the state or someone else have an adequate answer, and ‘debates have gone around in circles’ (Pzreworski 1998, 412).

3. The Quasi-Market: An Analytical Evaluation. The major aim of the whole system is to increase enrollments at private HEIs to 30% or 40% of national enrolments by 2020 (Government of Vietnam 2007). This means the private sector will be highly representative in the HE picture. Besides the fact that in the neoliberal hegemony private HEIs are an irresistible trend which is also going on in other countries, private HEIs accommodate a large number of students that are left out every year by public HEIs. So, their function is not only to make profits (if any) but also to reduce the equity and equality effect that their counterparts (i.e. public HEIs) cause. In this connection, public HEIs are the culprit of widening the social gap. An irony is that private HEIs are no more than ‘adopted children’
whilst public HEIs are ‘biological children’ of the state; the former receives nothing from the state whilst the latter up to 70% of their total budget (Dao 2012b). Due to this discrimination, private HEIs lack funding and so their importance decreases (Friedman 1962). The discrimination will also sabotage concerted efforts to achieve effective growth in the HE system in general and private HE in particular. Therefore, Dao (2012a, 2012b) suggests that the current market should be turned into a quasi-market to better co-ordinate HE. This also means the role of funding this level of education should be reconfigured. As analyzed below, the funding role in the quasi-market falls on the state, which simultaneously leads to a number of policy issues.

In fact, the state’s funding education in order to lessen private nature of education is a trend in coordinating education that takes on increasing salience in many countries (see Organization for Economic Cooperation Development 2012). This is a convergent point of the application of the coordination theory and the Samuelson’s approach (public goods theory) to providing public goods (Hardin 1997; Marginson 2007). The coordination between the state and the private sector this way leads to the formation of the quasi-market (Vandenbergh 1999) which makes private education less rival or excludable (Hardin ibid.). As Vandenbergh (ibid.) describes, the education quasi-market is characterized by private management (the pure market) and public funding (bureaucratic control). This ‘market by design’ is the response to the failures of both market failures (underinvestment and inequality) and bureaucratic failures (inefficiency or ‘ratchet’ effect) in education (see Przeworsk 1998). In Le Grand’s (1991) elaboration, the quasi-market is both similar to and different from the conventional market (see Figure 1). It bears resemblance to the conventional market since it replaces the state in a centrally-planned economy as a single provider with different public and private providers. As Figure 1 indicates below, in the quasi-market and conventional market, there is still monopoly at a degree that is higher than that in a centrally-planned economy. On the other hand, the term ‘quasi’ (meaning not real or almost) indicates that the quasi-market is different from the conventional market. One is that providers in the quasi-market are not necessarily private or for-profit, but they can be public and provide education for non-profit purposes. What’s more, in the quasi-market, students do not have to pay in cash for their education but they ‘purchase’ education by vouchers. Another difference is that both public and private providers compete on a fair ground for the state’s finance allocation which depends on choices (Le Grand, ibid.; see Calero, 1998). This means how much finance each receives from the state will depend on size of the annual student intake (Le Grand and Bartlett, 1993).

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**Figure 1.** A comparison of different market structures for education (adapted from Kähkönen 2004)
If I understand Dao’s (2012a, 2012b) suggestion correctly, the characteristics of the quasi-market can resolve the problems in the private HE sector in Vietnam. First of all, public funding makes HE more public in nature (Marginson, 2007). It insures that students can equally attend HEIs regardless of whether they are public or private. In this funding system, students can have equal opportunities to HE, earn income proportionally with their educational career, narrow the income gap for the rest of their life, and turn more to the fields of social sciences and humanities which later help balance socio-economic development. For private HEIs, with the allocated finance, they do not have to struggle for students. With the budget strengthened, it is easier for them to invest in research and teacher employment. As a result, they can greatly enhance their offered education quality, therefore staying competitive in the higher education market.

Despite the fact that this is promising especially in countries such as Belgium (Vandenbergh, 1999), the Netherlands, Sweden, (Niklassen, 1996), Bulgaria, Chile, Georgia, Hungary, Kazakhstan and the United States (i.e. Colorado) (Salmi, 2009), the quasi-market model more often applies to general education than it does to higher education. This is probably due to the increasing costs of HE which state’s budget cannot cover. Moreover, many authors (Le Grand 1991; Calero 1998; Kähkönen 2004; Boettke et al. 2011) albeit having strong interests in the quasi-market are skeptical about its effectiveness. There are many ominous issues which stand around this central concept – quasi-market. In the scope of this paper I will examine them in two distinct but related sets.

The first set of problems lies in the quasi-market model itself. One of them is how students can evaluate the quality of the amount of HE they purchase (Calero, 1998). It is noteworthy that education is a kind of service (invisible goods) which is irreversible in consumption irrespective of its high or low quality. Also, if a sounder institution for HE is adopted whether it be the quasi-market, it cannot lead to any increment in personal income tax. Otherwise, recipients of subsidies (e.g. vouchers or grants) and those who are not will ultimately shoulder the financial burden, and subsidies in this case are not different to a ‘deferred fee’ (Creedy 1994, 87). Together with progressive income tax plan, says Creedy (ibid.), this will increase lifetime inequality. Another thing at issue is the self-sorting problem that may occur in HE. In that students have free choice over where their academic life should begin, high-achieving students always tend to attend (or to be admitted into) top HEIs. As indicated by Figure 1, this reflects the monopolistic character of market models, which can be epitomized by the US HE system (Allmendinger, 1989; Astin and Oseguera, 2004). Less reputable HEIs may go into a vicious cycle wherein they cannot select good students but have to admit low-achievers who will after graduation be discriminated in the labor market, and this will in turn spoil the reputation of these HEIs. Even worse, they may remove their operation (Le Grand, 1991; Calero ibid.). If removal is the case, huge costs will be incurred, which is of course not our conceptualised efficiency. These concerns inter alia imply that the quasi-market is one way or another as problematic as the conventional market. If adopted, it may cause positive effects for some time but the development of the whole system is not endurable in the long run.

Let us assume that the variables in the first set are held constant. Still, the second set of problems makes the quasi-market model infeasible. This set of problems must, as can be seen hereafter, begin with a fairly larger context. In fact, under the trial-and-error approach,
developing countries often borrow and/or exchange policies and recontextualise them to appropriately institute their HE systems (Ball, 1998; Engel, 2009). This institutional journey poses an always contested task. To developing countries, in institutional pursuit and then institutional reform the state may get caught up in a policy trap. Explaining this use of phrase must begin with the difference between policy ends and policy means (Bonal, 2003). The ends are that economic efficiency will be boosted and quality of goods and services will be enhanced, whilst the means are the market strategies which marketise and privatize goods and services. Up to these strategies, there is a shift of funding and providing goods and services from the public sector to the private sector and of social responsibilities concerning this provision from the public sphere to the private sphere (Clarke, 2004). However, their market strategies do not inform how the provision of these goods and services is efficient (in terms of use of scarce resources) or reliable (in terms of quality) but actually bring about problems. In response, if private HE is funded by the state, it seems that the problems shall be resolved. But if the state is to fund private HE, the question remain over whether the funding includes the HE provided by foreign HEIs in the country since it is also private and whether there will be a sufficient budget for funding all. Thus, in this policy trap the state has only one choice to make: either funding private HE to correct the problematic HE system or withdrawing its funding role from the private sector and leaving the system problematic.

4. Implications for HE Policy. Amongst many issues presented hitherto it is noticeable that attending private HEIs is a major economic problem to Vietnamese students who come from poor families. Just as important, public knowledge of HE quality in Vietnam is still a major issue due to limited access to information on the actual performance of HEIs. As my analysis of the HE picture manifests, the disappearance of public goods (Samuelson 1954) and asymmetric information (Akerlof 1970), despite having been employed in economic analysis for decades, can still be lively exemplified in this context. The implication herein is the necessity of the state in insuring that welfare services for citizenry such as education are more affordable and accessible. Therefore, the state plays an inseparable part in coordinating HE with the market.

However, the inseparability between the state and the market does not mean that latter is the hideout where the financial role of the former legitimately devolves. From the responsibility point of view (Przeworski, 1998), the amelioration of HE must be associated with the public finance. UNESCO (1996) maintains that the state should be responsible for education no matter how education systems are organized, decentralized, or diversified, and this responsibility should not be passed to the market. Nevertheless, if the state returns to its funding role for the whole HE system or, say, if the recommendation by Dao (2012a, 2012b) is taken, the financial constraint is the largest challenge, not to mention that there remains concern about the success of the quasi-market model for HE.

Given the infeasibility of the quasi-market model, all the state can do for the time being is conduct more reliable and valid debates as to how the issues concerning the provision be adopted and reshaped. Implicit here is the degree of public held faith in the competence of the state in policy making. In fact, the market mechanism adopted in Vietnam was for the most part the reaction of the regime to the imminent collapse of the
socialist world towards the end of 1980s. The Vietnamese state therefore hardly prepared for handling where the HE system would be led by the market forces. Due to the lack of preparation, market strategies which determine HE policy making seems to have fallen into the trial-and-error approach, and the effects they systemically create are not predictable. An excellent example is xa hoi hoa giao duc, which has turned the private HE sector into a situation where its stakeholders have to struggle disproportionately. With respect to this, Dao (2012a, 2012b) concludes that these private HEIs are not dissimilar to private companies. As a result, the HE policy in the influence of the market strategy not only fails to propel the HE system forward as it is designed to do but also seriously erodes people’s beliefs in the goals and strategies of the state to enable the this long-cherished system to operate to a desired level.

Decentralisation is always an issue for debates, and the neoliberal decentralisation of HE is not an exception. In its pure sense, decentralisation means giving ‘some power of a central government to smaller parts or organisations around the country’ (Whemeier, 2000, 342; see George and Lewis, 2011). Ironically, the decentralisation of HE in Vietnam more often than not concentrates too much on the meanings which justify the withdrawal of the state from funding. The financial withdrawal has also happened on a global scale from Africa, (Latin) America, Asia, to Europe (see the section ‘Decentralisation and problems of HE’). Regardless of whether the states in these continents are socialist or capitalist, what they have in common is that whilst promoting freedom and choices they abdicate their responsibility for the funding of HE, especially in the area of privately provided HE. In fact, states as an agent in the principal-agent relationship make more than deliver on promises vis-à-vis funding and/or providing basic welfare services. To conceal this lip service, they often bring reform to the fore with dazzling terms and jargons. Consequentially, policy instruments and strategies constructed and imposed are derailed from the purposes to be fulfilled, and say Lindblad, Johannesson, and Simola (2002; see Dale 1998), they are mostly concerned with cuts in funding education. Such a deviation between ends and means will sooner or later spark the arrival of two things: the life of economic, political, and social institutions is short, and they the states fail to legitimise themselves in trying to do so. Therefore, the deviation between ends and means must be considered as a problem in policy agendas. Developing policy is a process whereby policy makers have to understand not only the problems the would-be policy is to address but also the problems right in that process.

Thus, policy making for HE in this neoliberal era is indeed neither easy nor simple. It evolves as a complexity of interrelations between different stakeholders or groups of stakeholders. To clarify the issues, I employ a concept credited to Marginson and Rhoades (2002) in their shaping of comparative HE research concerning globalisation; this is the ‘gonacal’ (global + national + local) approach. However, I do not use a hexagon as Marginson and Rhoades (ibid.) do but employ a triangular pyramid or tetrahedron (Clark, 1983). The purpose of doing so is to emphasise that analysis for HE policy needs to reflect two things which in my interpretation characterises the ‘gonacal’ approach.
As described in Figure 2, each vertex of the triangular pyramid or tetrahedron represents a stakeholder or a group of stakeholders (e.g. global neoliberal bodies, education providers, students as choice makers, or the state). Between these (groups of) stakeholders are their interrelations represented by the faces of the triangle. As can be seen, one triangular face is formed by three edges, each of which is also involved in the formation of the others. Based on these geometrical features, I interpret that the interrelations between (groups of) stakeholders are hybridized, and it is these hybrid interrelations that determine how HE practice is played out. To explain this, let us recall from the section on the problems of HE above that the (groups of) stakeholders work towards related but divergent desired ends, thereby unintentionally creating tensions. Some of them are the neoliberal guidance by international bodies versus the states’ socialist ideals, the neoliberal policy by the state versus the performance of educational providers, and the employability of students as the consumer of the system versus the professionalism of teachers involved in the delivery of the system. Given these tensions, the interrelations between the (groups of) stakeholders are critically significant. Moreover, they are difficult to be observed and quantified since they take place not in a traditional fashion such as center-periphery or margin-center (Engel, 2009) but in multi-dimensional context. For these reasons, my emphasis is that current HE policy making has to attend simultaneously to how the global neoliberalism affects the state and students in decision making at HE level together with teachers in providing education services, how education providers respond to decisions made due to the influence of global neoliberal forces, how choice makers respond to measures by education providers and national policy which bears the neoliberal colour, and how the state responds to the global neoliberal influence together with the behaviors of education providers and choices students make. This is what I call a ‘glonacal’ approach to policy making. Conceptualised this way, the ‘glonacal’ approach not only considers the (groups of) stakeholders’ interrelations in their multi-dimensions but also adheres to the simultaneity in considering them. The two characters (i.e. multi-dimensionality and simultaneity) make it a well-rounded paradigm for shaping HE systems in today’s complex world.
4. Conclusion. This story of the decentralisation of HE asserts that educational reform does not always culminate in rosy outcomes but very often reaches crises. Without question, xa hoa giao duc has successfully resulted in the participation by different investors in expanding and diversifying the HE service in response to the increasing number of students after the Vietnam War. Nevertheless, many problems have arisen due to the marketisation and privatisation of HE, an effect caused by this superficial market strategy (i.e. xa hoa giao duc). As the analysis of this paper points out, these problems can hardly be tackled in the quasi-market as this suggested model harbours inherent defects and depends on public funding. Within the current context of neoliberal globalisation wherein ‘goods, services, capital, people and ideas’ (Little and Green, 2009, 167) move across national borders, the complexity due to the tensions in (groups of) stakeholders’ interrelations significantly challenges the success of the HE policy. Therefore, the analysis in this paper corroborates that policy making should be conducted from a ‘glonacal’ approach. The question arising in this regard is what market model will be adopted under this policy-making paradigm. Will it be a ‘flexi-market’, where public goods such as HE are equally accessed from choices made based on reliable market information, the public and private sectors grow synchronously, and the national socio-economic development is encouraged at best practice?

Notes

1. HEIs in Vietnam can be categorized into three types: public, non-public, and foreign-owned HEIs. Public HEIs are completely owned and run by the state-appointed officials. The nonpublic category consists of people-founded (by NGOs or associations) and private-founded (by individuals). Examples of foreign-owned are RMIT Vietnam (Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology) and The International College of IT and Management (Troy State University). Hereafter, ‘private HEIs’ if mentioned will represent the nonpublic category. Because categorization of HEIs in Vietnam is a complex task, this nomenclature will facilitate the intelligibility of our analysis.

2. The first private HEI, Thang Long University, was established this year, and those who wanted to matriculate had to pay tuition. The cost-recovery measure has been employed in private HE since then.

3. Le Grand (1991) elaborates that sometimes consumers are represented by agents in making choices. This presents another challenge to the lifespan of the quasi-market, which is also considered to boost freedom of choices.

4. These author observe that the US HE system is characterized by stratification (i.e. high-achieving students are admitted into prestigious HEIs and low-achieving students less prestigious ones).

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