

Planning a New University in Vietnam: Innovation in Urban Development

Professor David Wilmoth
Executive Director Strategic Projects
RMIT University, Australia

Paper Prepared for Eastern Regional Organisation for Planning and Housing
18th World Planning Congress, 7th - 11th October 2002, Kuala Lumpur,
Malaysia. The author was chief executive officer of RMIT International
University Vietnam to July 2002 and is a member of its Board of
Management. Comments on this paper are welcome to wilmoth@rmit.edu.au

Abbreviations and Acronyms

ADB	Asian Development Bank
AEI	Australian Education International
ASEAN	Association of South East Asian Nations
AusAID	Australian Agency for International Development
HCMC	Ho Chi Minh City
ICT	Information and communication technology
IFC	International Finance Corporation
LRC	Learning resources centre
MASD	Management Authority for Saigon South Development
MOET	Ministry of Education and Training
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
RMIT	Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology
RMIT Vietnam	RMIT International University Vietnam
USD	United States Dollars
VNU Hanoi	Vietnam National University Hanoi

Purpose of Paper

RMIT was established in 1887 as the Working Men's College and is now a university established under the legislation of Victoria, Australia. It is a major provider of international education, with over 13,000 international students in Australia and overseas, in higher education and vocational education and training programs.

RMIT Vietnam has been operating since January 2001 as a university in Vietnam, a fully-owned subsidiary of RMIT. RMIT Vietnam aims to contribute to the sustainable economic, social and environmental development of Vietnam. It must also be financially viable. In order to address needs and opportunities in Vietnam, the project has required innovative approaches to planning from the government of Vietnam, from its international financial partners, and from RMIT itself. These innovations are technological both as they embody environmental, information and communication technologies, and as they demonstrate the application of RMIT's and its partners know-how to create a new kind of institution¹. Governance addressed in this paper therefore includes both the governance of RMIT Vietnam, for which innovative arrangements have been designed, and also the governance of other universities in Vietnam and the public realm as they change to be part of an open and reformed society (doi moi).

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the ways in which RMIT Vietnam is making contributions to innovative technology and good

¹ For a wider discussion on educational technology in this context see Christopher Ziguras: 'Educational technology in transnational higher education in South East Asia: the cultural politics of flexible delivery', *Educational Technology and Society*, 4, 4, 2001: 8 - 18.

governance, and is seeking to make a difference to the lives of many people in the region.²

Rationale for Project

Vietnamese society shows a high reverence for learning, even by east Asian standards, and a long history of international provision of higher education and training.³ The country faces escalating demand for higher education and training but is able to provide publicly funded places for a small number of qualified applicants⁴. Despite low official recorded average income and persistent poverty, there is a significant cash economy and growing affordability to pay fees for education.⁵

RMIT's international strategy during the 1990s classified Vietnam as a high-priority country with long-term growth prospects and immediate opportunities for development assistance and community service.⁶ There is a large community of Australian-Vietnamese in Melbourne including at RMIT, and given its linkages with southeast Asia RMIT adopted a policy to internationalise its programs, students and staff. After establishing a number of successful university partnerships in Vietnam and providing a building on the campus of Vietnam National University Hanoi, donating computers,

² For a review of other branch campuses, which differ from RMIT Vietnam, see The Observatory on Borderless Education 'International branch campuses: scale and significance,' Briefing Note no. 5, London, June 2002.

³ See Pham Minh Hac: 'The educational system of Vietnam' in David Sloper and Le Thac Can (eds): *Higher Education in Vietnam: Change and Response*, Institute for Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, 1995: 41-61 and Nguyen Xuan Thu: 'Education in Vietnam: an Overview' in Nguyen Xuan Thu (ed): *Vietnamese Studies in a Multicultural World*, Vietnamese Language and Culture Publications, Melbourne, 1994: 230-252.

⁴ In 1999, over 1.5 million students sat for entrance exams for competed for 150,000 regular-stream (government-funded) tertiary places (MOET statistics 2000)

⁵ See for example Margo Cohen: 'Open minds open doors,' Far Eastern Economic Review, 1 August 2002: 28-31.

⁶ See David Wilmoth: RMIT International Programs and Strategies, RMIT, 26October 1998
<http://www.ip.rmit.edu.au/division/slides/sld001.htm>

scholarships and books to other universities in Vietnam, RMIT became the leading destination world-wide for Vietnam tertiary students studying offshore, albeit in modest numbers. As the university provided a joint masters of systems engineering program with VNU Hanoi and a large training program with Ford Motor Company, it saw the need in Vietnam and recognised the potential market for a stronger presence. It helped that Australia and Vietnam had strong bilateral relations that feature education and training.

The government of Vietnam discussed with RMIT how an international university might be developed, inviting a proposal that addressed the patterns of demand and the particular needs of Vietnam, matching them with the technological and vocational strengths of RMIT.

As a country of 80m people in transition from a planned to market economy, enriched by its own tradition of university education but damaged by war and poverty, Vietnam presented particular challenges. Strong though RMIT's partnerships with local universities and their programs were, the best response to RMIT's experience elsewhere and to the government's invitation was full foreign ownership, independent international curricula and offshore accreditation, so that a new university, with a technical and vocational emphasis, might quickly come into being as a model and training ground to assist the development of capacity across the education, training and research sectors.

Such an innovation – opening the doors to foreign service providers – presented challenges to governance in Vietnam. To enable such a venture to start required law and regulations in a new sector for Vietnam as well as changes in emphasis to national self-reliance and cultural protection. The government pressed ahead and made the innovations. Vietnam has not been given sufficient credit internationally for opening its education, health and scientific research markets to direct foreign investment in a more open

manner than most ASEAN and many Asian countries.⁷ Determination to meet the educational and employment needs of the exploding number of qualified young people and to provide a skill base for modernising industries overcame traditional caution and political concern about opening up the education sector to private investment.

Market research showed a number of promising sectors and discrete sub-markets, each needing its own approach to program development and provision. To provide programs at international standard at a reasonable price for people in Vietnam and surrounding countries, an educational model different from current Vietnamese practice and indeed at the forefront of current international practice would be needed, with an emphasis on electronically distributed courseware, client-driven learning, an international presence and rapid staff development of local academics.

A purpose-built campus was essential, given that the bandwidth for full on-line delivery was not developed and that the new modes of learning require different building layouts and infrastructure set-ups from most existing buildings. While RMIT has operated well through service agreements in other countries, including the first such programs in Malaysia, the demonstration effect of a pilot state-of-the-art campus that accommodates on-line learning, advanced instrumentation and new educational methods was important to the government and implicit in the investment licence.

Ho Chi Minh City was seen as the best location for such an enterprise, at least for its main campus, given the government's characterisation of regional higher education policy in which the southern region is to emphasise technology, business and applied research. In practice since then, and consistent both with the licence and government

⁷ For a foreign investment perspective see David Wilmoth: 'ADB private sector financing for RMIT International University Vietnam: an investor's perspective', Paper presented at Seminar on Private Sector Development Strategy: The Strategy in Action – an Investor's Perspective, Asian Development Bank Annual General Meeting, Honolulu, 8 May 2001.

encouragement, particular opportunities are pointing to a national network of campuses and sites rather than just one location. These features shaped the project design. It had to be a new model for private international education and training delivery appropriate to a large transitional economy, with governance appropriate to that.

The government of Vietnam accepted RMIT's proposal for an international university. A feasibility study in 1998 led to a provisional licence to operate a foreign owned university in HCMC. After considerable further work, in April 2000 an investment licence was issued to RMIT for a period of 50 years. RMIT then developed detailed academic, financial and other plans which were appraised by private and multilateral financiers and by Vietnamese and Australian government authorities. Finance for the first stage of development, USD33.6m, has been raised.

The project planning was innovative for all concerned. For the financiers, the International Finance Corporation (the private finance arm of the World Bank) and the Asian Development Bank, it was the first of its type and a harbinger of more development investment in the services sector in the region. Neither bank was initially familiar with projects like RMIT Vietnam. Vietnam was short of investible projects following the regional financial meltdown, and indeed this was the largest direct foreign investment project of any kind in Vietnam during 2000. To provide security and long-term capital options, a subsidiary holding company was established in Australia. Significant philanthropic support to RMIT from Atlantic Philanthropies assisted the venture. For RMIT, this support and the particular form of project co-financing reduced risk to the parent – and to the parent's ultimate owner, the Victorian government. In turn, the choice of finance partners reduced RMIT's sovereign risk in Vietnam and contributed significantly to the project planning

solution. Given recently renewed emphasis on risk management of Australian offshore campuses, this is an important innovation.⁸

RMIT Vietnam commenced operation in HCMC in January 2001. It is the country's first international university. The university is established within the law on foreign investment in Vietnam and its regulations.⁹ It has an independent ability to set curricula, collect fees and manage its academic and other programs. A Board of Management is the governing authority of the university, and RMIT in Australia is the accrediting institution for its academic programs under an arms-length services agreement.

The university is now in its second year of operation, with a staff of 80 at the City campus in District 3 of HCMC, a distributed learning platform with considerable investment in information technology and information resources, and over 400 students currently enrolled. For the second and main campus, on a 57 ha site in the Saigon South Development Area, planning and project management work has commenced and a lease entered into. Beyond HCMC, through a third major planning exercise, the delivery of a number of learning resource centres to other universities is providing valuable experience and building cooperative partnerships.

Planning for these three different campus settings – Ho Chi Minh City, Saigon South and LRCs elsewhere in Vietnam – presents an interesting case study of technological innovation and governance.

City Campus Planning

RMIT Vietnam's mission is to provide professional and vocational education, training programs, outcome related research and consultancy

⁸ See Nicholas Way, 'Education: adventuring in Vietnam' Business Review Weekly, 14 September 2002.

⁹ In particular, see Government of Vietnam: *Government Decree on Foreign Cooperation and Investment in the Areas of Medical Examination and Treatment, Education and Training, and Scientific Research*, 06/2000/ND-CP, Hanoi, 6 March 2000.

services that address real world issues appropriate to Vietnam's economic and social development and its environmental sustainability.

RMIT Vietnam is specifically licensed to contribute to Vietnam's development through innovative teaching and learning, to provide a model for Vietnamese institutions in terms of curriculum, teaching and learning methods, setting educational and training standards, and monitoring learning outcomes. Clearly the paths to learning are in both directions, as RMIT learns to provide programs in a cross-cultural setting.

The campus based e-learning environment is enhanced by face-to-face learning management, with projects, individual work, presentations, work placements, team experiences and fieldwork. The courses and programs presented at RMIT Vietnam are, in most cases, the same as their equivalent in Melbourne, but the delivery process and the support environment in Vietnam are different.

To support this learning model the level of application of technology is at high standards, with extensive use of ICT and high connectivity with RMIT. The university therefore depends on high-capacity reliable domestic and international telecommunications, which in Vietnam are improving rapidly from a low base. Considerable commitment has been made to the implementation of the learning model that RMIT, university-wide, is implementing.

RMIT Vietnam's City campus offers intensive English language classes, university preparation programs, undergraduate degrees in three bachelor programs in information technology disciplines and in commerce, masters programs in systems engineering, education, architecture and information technology, and post-graduate degrees by research. Many more academic programs are planned for the coming years. Program areas also include industry training and short courses, research and development, community and regional partnerships, study abroad and consultancy and

project management. The medium of study is English for all programs and all activities on campus.

The City campus is a refurbished corporate compound close to downtown and in the university district of HCMC [see figure 1]. The conversion of an historic French villa with pool and tennis court into an open learning environment with a high-capacity information infrastructure, good internet and e-library access and 160 computer work stations presented particular challenges [see figure 2]. The HCMC People's Committee has been very helpful, encouraging protection of the heritage values of the site and providing a flexible long lease.

The effort involved in creating an effective learning platform in Vietnam should not be underestimated. The Ho Chi Minh City campus, including its purpose-built new ICT centre and the set-up for distributed learning across the campus, attracts many visitors interested to learn how it can be done. By September 2002 the campus is nearing capacity and a major planning effort is being put into the next stage, the development of the Saigon South campus.

Saigon South Campus Planning

Saigon South is Vietnam's largest urban development project, a USD800m, 2600ha land-for-infrastructure swap between the Management Authority for Saigon South (MASD) and the Phu My Hung Corporation, a Taiwan-owned development company. Urban infrastructure investment by the HCMC People's Committee, the metropolitan government, is opening up a large area for development cross the Saigon River south of downtown HCMC. The award-winning master plan was developed in 1992 by Skidmore Owings and Merrill, and while development of this mega-project has been slower than originally expected, its structure plan provides a robust sub-

metropolitan framework for the campus [see figure 3]. The chosen RMIT site was designated for a university in the master plan [see figure 4].

The campus site is at the junction of South Saigon Parkway and the Ong Lon River, 5 km south of downtown Ho Chi Minh City, very close once current bridge and road construction is complete. The 57 ha site comprises wetlands and reclaimed agricultural land, and campus master planning has sought to retain water movement and wetland research sites [see figure 5 and 6]. The plan provides for first stage development to 2012, by which time over 10,000 students are expected. This is an opportunity to create an environmentally sustainable advanced learning environment that integrates not only with metropolitan HCMC but with the local community. An innovation sought to put into practice is that all aspects of the project are the subject of self-reflective practice and applied research, so that RMIT and its partners learn as we go. This approach is working very well so far, for example through a recently-completed environmental monitoring design project involving 15 students from RMIT Australia and RMIT Vietnam, and through the campus planner, Norman Day and Associates, leading a 'masters by project' program in architecture, using the campus planning process to help build the capability of local architectural practice.

The master plan provides for core facilities such as learning resource centres, academic and student hub buildings, laboratories and research facilities, student and staff housing. The long-term plan envisages the creation of innovation institutes linked to industry and located alongside academic areas, with a corporate and technology precinct between the core of the campus and the surrounding development zone. Such institutes will cover such fields as environmental studies, information technology, biotechnology and food, urban planning and infrastructure, business management and finance, and product innovation and manufacturing design. Each area would work with, and attract funds from corporate, government, non-governmental and philanthropic sponsors.

Other ancillary services such as recreation and sporting facilities and club, bookshop, computer shop, food outlets and concessions, clinic, apparel and equipment retail, travel services, conference facilities and services, and other franchises are needed for the effective operation of the university and provided for in the planning. They represent opportunities to attract visitors and promote partnerships from beyond the university community and to create employment and skills development. Such facilities will be developed by the university in joint venture with others, or by franchise.

Environmental impact statements have been prepared and publicly exhibited in HCMC, Manila, Washington and Melbourne and approved.¹⁰ They are based on the best of local environmental research. In March 2000 an initial environmental examination was undertaken to determine whether or not significant environmental impacts warranting assessment are likely. The assessment was based on independent consultant studies of site assessment; infrastructure requirements; socio-economic impact and environmental analysis.¹¹

A challenging part has been to negotiate a Resettlement Action Plan for the 134 households who have a real interest in the site. The full Resettlement Action Plan was developed and implemented through a process consistent with Asian Development Bank and World Bank guidelines, to meet international standards of best practice in relocation and resettlement of population, households, livelihoods and cultural properties. Given those banks' involvement, and some contentious projects financed by them elsewhere, the design of the compensation and resettlement process has

¹⁰ Environment Impact Assessment, dated March 2000, entitled 'RMIT International University Vietnam: Initial Environmental Examination', Volume 1, Public Consultation and Disclosure Plan, Dated April 5, 2001; Environmental Assessment Summary, Dated April 5, 2001; Resettlement Action Plan, Dated April 5, 2001; Summary of Initial Environmental Examination, Dated February 8, 2001 (prepared for Asian Development Bank) <http://wbln0018.worldbank.org/IFCExt/spiwebsite1.nsf/2bc34f011b50ff6e85256a550073ff1c/7ac884c364db9c4b85256a2a00734c65?OpenDocument>

¹¹ These studies were conducted, respectively, by Meinhardt (Victoria) Pty Ltd, Bonacci Winward (Victoria) Pty Ltd, Dr David Petch, and jointly by Dr Robert Noakes and Dr Le Trinh, Vice President of the Vietnam Association for Conservation of Nature and Environment.

been exemplary. Funded by AusAID, this phase was treated as a development project in its own right so that all project-affected persons will become better off as a result.¹² This requires an innovative approach in its implementation which the foundation President now brings.

Site development and infrastructure provision also require innovation. The zone planning certificate process was part of the application for the investment licence. This required an assessment of the infrastructure needs of the proposed development and the estimation of preliminary costs for the associated capital works and ongoing service charges. Given economies of scale in land compaction and works with waterways most of these costs will be incurred up front. Infrastructure services are brought to site boundaries so that there are no headworks or other development charges. There is some scope for cost-effective staging of infrastructure capital works such as deferral of services to later-staged buildings. The necessary approvals were facilitated by the MASD, the development authority created to streamline development processes and handle statutory and other approvals.

The community liaison with project affected persons will develop into a wider involvement with local groups over elements of campus development and university access. RMIT Vietnam is planned as an open institution serving many communities, with an active campus and balanced student life. In the long term there will be a mix of Vietnamese students and trainees with international students from surrounding Mekong states, ASEAN, Australia and other countries, as well as staff, researchers and visitors. Social life will be enhanced by the provision of common academic, sporting and recreational facilities, and through the support of student activities and associations provided for within Vietnamese law. Sporting and recreation

¹² See ADB: Handbook on Resettlement A Guide to Good Practice, ADB, Manila, 1998; ADB: Handbook for Incorporation of Social Dimensions in Projects, Manila, 1994; and IFC: 'Policy on involuntary resettlement', Operating Procedure 4.30, June 1990, IFC, Washington DC.

activities and facilities will be open selectively to the public and an effort will be made to create social and cultural integration with the surrounding community and beyond. All these activities will operate within the laws and customs of Vietnam. With triple bottom line reporting – relatively innovative for Vietnam – sustainable development issues will stay at the forefront of RMIT Vietnam’s governance.

Learning Resource Centre Planning

In issuing RMIT a licence to operate in Vietnam the government expressed a desire to encourage reform in university management in Vietnam, and requested that RMIT work with local universities in university planning, quality assurance and the use of information technology. This is consistent with Vietnam’s putting institutional reform and governance high on its development agenda and with the current World Development Report focus.¹³

One of the most effective means of enabling Vietnam to develop is to bring university programs into the international information age through developing places with high information intensity, good electronic platforms and the means to create, find and disseminate knowledge. Such places are learning resource centres. Universities in Vietnam have been struggling to provide basic libraries, limited by rules and regulations, traditional modes of learning, lack of library management and information technology training and acute lack of financial resources.

A program to develop a set of learning resource centres to assist the key universities in Vietnam to transform their teaching and learning, their research and development, and their outreach to the community is being

¹³ See World Bank World Development Report 2002: Building Institutions for Markets, The World Bank, Washington DC, 2002; also Roumeen Islam ‘Institutions to support markets’ Finance and Development, 39, 1, Mar 2002: 48-51.

managed by RMIT Vietnam with financial backing from Atlantic Philanthropies and in cooperation with the Ministry of Education and Training and the World Bank. This program is being implemented through the collaborative design and building of LRCs that serve university campuses, linked to distributed learning resources through common systems including a shared national internet backbone, EduNet.

This network is enabled by another RMIT Vietnam project which supports national reforms in information, education and library policy such as consistent and shared classification system and interchange standards, readability of Vietnamese fonts, common standards of cataloguing of materials, choice of multi-lingual search engines and collaboration among universities in procuring electronic library materials and management software systems.¹⁴

Each LRC includes common design elements such as central access to learning resources both electronically and in print form; information services and help desk support; national and international e-library and inter-library links and other multi-purpose workstations; work and seminar spaces for new teaching and learning systems; access to multimedia services in various formats; a hub for future academic management systems and course data warehousing; an integrated teaching and learning / research and development site, including points for joint international programs; and capacity for the production and dissemination of knowledge, including electronic publication.

As a network of LRCs is established they will have compatible facilities and objectives and will benefit from shared databases, cheaper licence fees, enhanced access to materials, and shared training and

¹⁴ Michael Robinson and Robert D. Stueart (eds): *Systems and Standards for Libraries in Vietnam: Proceedings and Outcomes of a Workshop*, RMIT International University Vietnam, Melbourne, 2001.

educational programs [see figure 7]. Costs are typically of the order of USD 5 million each.

- The LRCs at RMIT Vietnam campuses in HCMC described above will serve as major nodes in the network.
- Jointly with Hue University and East Meets West, an NGO based in Danang, a 7000m² new LRC is under construction in a prime riverfront location in Hue serving several university campuses, with design led by David Chesterman, Sydney. The centre has been designed for long-term sustainability, for example with low operating requirements for lighting and air conditioning [see figure 8].
- An LRC is in operation on the city campus of the University of Danang, with advisory input from the University of Queensland [see figure 9]. A further LRC is being developed with RMIT Vietnam to serve the technology and education campuses of the University of Danang, jointly with East Meets West and adapting David Chesterman's design [see figure 10].
- A major LRC at Can Tho University is under development by RMIT Vietnam, with design led by Norman Day, Melbourne, and construction managed by GHD Limited [see figure 11].
- In Hanoi the Vietnam Development Information Centre, under the auspices of the World Bank and financed by several development agencies including AusAID, acts as a small but well-connected LRC [see figure 12]. A feasibility study is in preparation for LRC support to VNU Hanoi, RMIT's long-time partner in Vietnam. Meanwhile, joint programs are provided from International Cooperation House on the main campus of VNU Hanoi.

- For Thai Nguyen University, with a particular mission to serve the northern mountainous region and its many minority groups, a further LRC feasibility study is planned.
- As the Ministry of Education and Training's EduNet comes into place and further investments in university capacity made through the World Bank higher education loan program, it can be expected that other LRCs will come on line.

As partner / recipient universities reform to accommodate the changes that enhanced access to information resources will bring, and take part in the essential training programs that come with them, they are reconsidering university planning and learning management arrangements, including elements of their governance. At the national level, in the National Library and the National Centre for Scientific and Technological Information and Documentation, issues of determining national standards and systems are causing some rethinking of governance of the country's information resources infrastructure. Thus, the joint planning of a network of LRCs may be seen as a program that will not only underwrite further innovation in teaching and learning and research, but challenge and help change the governance of universities and the higher education system and the management of information resources in Vietnam.

Conclusion

Vietnam has shown considerable courage in opening its doors to foreign providers in education services, wider than most other 'ASEAN plus three' countries. Its resolve to internationalise its higher education, training and research sectors is very strong, but clearly hampered by lack of resources and know-how. RMIT Vietnam is the only fully-owned offshore university from Australia and possibly the only fully-foreign-owned university

in Asia. This makes its campus planning of some interest as an area for innovation. RMIT Vietnam can make a difference through innovative provision of programs and development of facilities and partnerships. RMIT Vietnam's City campus, Saigon South campus and the network of LRCs demonstrate not only that innovative provision of educational programs required an innovative approach to the corporate governance of RMIT Vietnam, but that they challenge, and support, changes to public sector and university governance in Vietnam. This is as it should be: RMIT Vietnam is dedicated to make a positive contribution to Vietnam's economic, social and economic development.