

In this open letter to Vietnam's new Minister of Education, Pham warns against the failings of standardized education. He advances this argument not only with evidence from diverse sources, but also by developing an authoritative but respectful ethos. (Instructor: Benjamin Gassman)

FOR THE VIETNAMESE YOUTH

Duc Minh Pham

Minister Phùng Xuân Nha,

First, I would like to congratulate you on your new position as the Minister of Education of Vietnam. You have the power to shape the development of our nation for generations to come and create a bright future for Vietnam and every one of its young citizens. As a member of the Vietnamese youth, I am writing today to voice my concerns over our education system, specifically higher education, because, when it comes to providing our students with quality and equal learning opportunities, it is never not the time to act.

As a developing country still healing in the wake of two devastating wars, Vietnam realizes that education is undeniably the most valuable investment in its future. In fact, our government spends one-fifth of its budget on education and training purposes, making Vietnam one of the most education-oriented countries globally (Government, Hồng). Still, every year, 1.2 million applicants compete for only 400,000 college spaces, thus creating a need for a fair and efficient college admissions system (International Business Publications 63).

For years, the Ministry of Education and Training has tried to meet this need by radically standardizing every aspect of education. Every student in our country, from kindergarten to high school, uses the same textbooks, adheres to the same curriculum, and, when the time comes, takes the same national college exam. Public universities rank applicants by their test scores and admit the top ones without looking at any of their other strengths or weaknesses. Your

predecessors have argued that such a system limits corruption, creates an equal playing field, provides educators with an inexpensive way to examine their students, and ensures that every child, regardless of their background, can be a part of the competition.

One would expect a system that ideal to function miraculously. Yet that is far from the case. Over the last three college admissions cycles alone, your ministry has repeatedly had to change the system to fix the obvious flaws. Two years ago, to address the difference in the learning conditions of students from different areas and of different ethnicities, the Ministry introduced a program that would award extra points to test-takers from rural areas or minority backgrounds. That initiative, while benefitting many, caused a national uproar. As one student puts it: “You get extra points for cycling 20km to school, but I don’t get extra points for waking up at 5am, and standing for 2 hours in 3 consecutive bus routes before class” (Quyên). The following year, the Ministry got rid of that program, and there were national stories about how a test that focused on a few core subjects would not be an accurate measurement and would favor urban schools with superior instructors and facilities. Then, this year, six different school subjects were merged together to create only two—*Natural Sciences* and *Social Sciences*—forcing students to be knowledgeable in many fields. Needless to say, this arrangement is going to receive major backlash from our students, educators, and parents.

To be fair to your predecessors, it is crucial to point out that more developed countries have also tried to standardize their education. For instance, in 2002, the United States president signed into law the *No Child Left Behind Act*, which would test students from third to eighth grade annually and tie their results to their educators (U.S. Government Publishing Office). The goal of the act was to increase American youth’s school performances, reduce and eradicate achievement gaps between ethnicities and regions, and give educators an incentive to deliver their best every school day. The result? Domestically, in 2015, Americans scored no higher on the SAT and ACT tests than they did before the act was passed, and the achievement gap that affected students of color and with disabilities stagnated, as it has for 50 years (Strauss, Camera). Internationally, on the PISA evaluation, a global scale to judge students’ performances, the

average score of an American student in Math and Reading stalled or decreased from 2000 to 2015, and the United States consistently ranked out of proportion with its economic power in the global academic ranking in that time period (National Center for Education Statistics). It seems as if all that extra pressure on students and teachers was for nothing.

Minister, perhaps you, like other lawmakers around world, are scratching your head as you try to tinker with the standardized system, hoping that one day it would accomplish its original aim. But I am here to tell you that such a system does not, and would never, work. Don't get me wrong; as a young engineer, I am a supporter of a standardized system where it is applicable. And, on the surface, such a system sounds brilliant, as it provides an unbiased, equal evaluation of all students and a platform for holding instructors accountable. "An accountability system must have a consequence," said President Bush about U.S. public education in 2001, "otherwise it's not much of an accountability system" (Bush).

But here's where that idea falls short: education is not, has never been, and will never be standard. It is an irony that we tell our children to chase their dreams, only to weigh them all on the same, basic scale. It is as if we assure our kids they can be whoever they desire, as long as they do well in Math, Science, and Reading. Standardizing, in this case, is suppressing creativity, is failing to recognize that each youngster is filled with incredible potential, each one unique. Additionally, 'accountability' forces teachers to turn each student into a problem-solving machine. Minister, I am a computer programmer. My job is to put sophisticated lines of codes into computers to solve millions of problems every second, not making a single mistake in the process. But educators are not programmers, and children cannot become cold, mass-produced machines. Standardizing our students is destroying their futures and our society's future as a whole.

And no, standardization is not a pathway to equality. From 2000 to 2014, while *No Child Left Behind* was in effect in the U.S., the number of effectively segregated schools—those in which 75% or more of the students are from the same ethnic background—more than doubled in number, and "the percentage of all schools with so-called racial or socio-economic isolation grew from 9% to 16%"

(Toppo). These schools are the result of either racial tension or economic division in the U.S., issues that standardized testing simply could not address. One can imagine why it's hard to reduce the racial achievement gap when students of different races study in different, isolated schools. In Vietnam, thanks to our evaluation systems, many Vietnamese people are led to become obsessed with money and power, which renowned professor Nguyễn Lâm Dũng has called the "top 2 malformations of our culture" (Hà). Our schooling has led people to believe that there exists a scale that can measure all of us, in either money or power, and that one's self-worth and life meaning depend uniquely on that scale alone. Such a mindset narrows one's options in one's career and life. It scares individuals out of speaking their minds, and prevents us from seeing the best in one another. Education and testing standardization not only fail to solve the social problems that we have right now, but also create new ones, weakening our country's sense of community and unity.

Mr. Nhã, I know it's hard to take a college freshman's words seriously. But the facts don't lie. For instance, let's look at the difference between students' dedication to Computer Science in high school and in college in our country. In the last college admissions cycle, at our top public engineering and science universities, Computer Science, as a major, had some of the strictest incoming test requirements for applicants. Furthermore, Computer Science students enjoy special programs that aren't available to other majors, such as the Advanced Program in Computer Science at the University of Science. Many universities, like the University of Technology, even invested in facilities and qualified instructors to be accredited the ABET certification in Computer Science, shared with the very top colleges in the world. Yet one would be surprised to learn that, in Ho Chi Minh City, the financial center of our nation, only three high schools offer Computer Science as a major. Of those, none of them has a Computer Science club, and one even lets applicants who marginally fail the Math or Science major join the Computer Science class. The concentration of our institutions reflect the needs of our students. And it's obvious, for high-schoolers who yearn for a career in Informatics, that their best bet is, ironically, disregarding the subject and focusing on standardized tests. This results in a considerable number of students entering

college as computer scientists, despite not knowing about the subject's ideas and challenges, or whether they have the strengths or passion to commit to that career for the next forty years. And, if you don't think there is a consequence, remember that earlier this year a Chinese group hacked our largest airline and froze our air transportation for hours (Clark). A country that in theory puts its brightest minds in the Computer Science field can't even protect itself and its citizens from foreign cyber threats. At the very least, this is about preparing our young citizens for their life decisions. At the very most, this is about our national security. Minister, this needs to change.

Yes, there are challenges ahead. A thorough, personalized evaluation system for our students means training and hiring qualified personnel in all parts of the country, which costs money. But, as the only way to reach the summit is through taking little steps, we can only achieve this aim through a long-term plan. Maybe we might add the students' three years of GPA to our evaluation this year, and next year, we could add their activities, and the year after that let them speak through an essay, and so on. You could say that such changes give urban students an unfair advantage, as rural kids don't have equal extracurricular opportunities, but that, too, like all factors, should be taken into account when examining one's readiness for college. You can say that such a system invites dishonesty, in which students participate in activities simply for the sake of their college applications rather than to be involved. But doing the right thing for the wrong reason is still a right thing nonetheless. Even if the students have different motives in mind when they reach out to extracurricular activities, they would still benefit from the experience and become more confident in whichever path they choose to follow. For the ones interested in growing into computer scientists, joining a computer club would allow them to see up close what the profession is about, to practice coding and gain insights on its potential challenges, to identify their own performances, and to be absolutely sure that they want to commit to the subject for college, and for life.

If you're still not convinced, know that any reform goes beyond just education. While I would love for our government to pass laws that specifically address ethnic and income inequalities, our people must realign our views of one another based on actions, not wealth or

power. All of these can eventually be achieved through education, through *you*, as the young students today will take over the country tomorrow. An evaluation system that gives students a chance to express themselves teaches them to celebrate diversity and invites constructive debates and disagreements. Through championing each individual, we can reinforce our country's sense of community, as each person will know that society protects and appreciates his or her personal endeavors. A nation of loving and energized people who feel respected in their own land—that, Minister, can be your legacy.

I know two boys my age, one who lives in the center of Ho Chi Minh City, but has to wake up every day at 5am to help set up his family's noodle store, and another from a wealthy but slightly unstable family, as his father spends six months abroad for business every year. Their profiles say they have every chance to succeed, but no standardized system can convey the hardships they go through or the beauty of their characters. Likewise, there is nothing standard about our students, because life is rarely simple enough to be contained in Math, Science, and Reading. Instead, the foundations of our strong future are to be found in the diversity of our backgrounds, passions, and beliefs. Soon, Vietnam will either have accomplished and united citizens in all fields and professions, or standardized ones, crumbling under the complicated pressures of life. The decision is entirely up to you. But whether you care about the lives of each young individual of Vietnam, or you are concerned about our country, its economy, culture, and security, please, persevere. No matter the reason, please, do the right thing. Because we, as a nation, need you to.

Sincerely,
Duc M. Pham

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