

# THE FORD FOUNDATION

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Dear colleagues,

Before I get into the details of this letter, I want to wish you all a happy and successful new year. It has been a pleasure getting to know you and I look forward to a long friendship with you all.

Before submitting my request for funding for a third phase of the Pathways program in Vietnam, I spent some time reviewing your proposals, our program evaluation, and notes from our meetings in October and December. As a result of my own review and discussions with Nguyen Ngoc Thuy, Pathways Coordinator, and Prof. Dr Tran Duc Vien, Rector of Hanoi Agricultural University, I have proposed to New York that our third phase will make a stronger effort to participate in government's the Higher Education Reform Agenda. Due, in part, to these changes, The Pathways committee has allocated us 1.6 million USD for a third phase of Pathways in Vietnam.

Built on the experience of countries in Latin America, Asia and Africa, the Pathways program globally is developing with a mixture of direct services to disadvantaged students, higher education research, and higher education reform activities. At the university level, this reform agenda could involve the development of outreach programs, support for student run organizations and activities, training and use of student centered teaching methodologies, and changes in curriculum. At the national level, the objective might be to include the needs of disadvantaged students in policies related to enrollment, tuition, loan programs, and scholarships.

Vietnam is one of the first countries to participate in PHE program. We understand what works and what does not. Our objective now is to use this experience to re-define our goals and develop strategies for sustainability that support poor, female, rural and ethnic students to achieve their dreams of a better life through higher education.

Each university in every country in the Pathways program is finding its own way of doing this. We are no exception. But I do think we have enough experience, and have discussed the issues so thoroughly, that I can offer you some important points for our work in phase three. In brief:

1. We need to redefine how we link goals, activities and indicators.

Currently, we focus on the direct outcomes of activities, generally in terms of the number of students who receive certificates, complete a course, or enter a college or university. In

the future, we will need to focus more on the goals of these activities and strategies for their sustainability, as well as a variety of indicators for success.

University outreach programs are a good example of what I mean. The larger goal of outreach programs is make it possible for more poor, ethnic and female students from remote areas to enter a college or university. We recognize that this is important not only for these young people, but for society as a whole. For this reason, we encourage these young people to return to their home areas to play a role in socio-economic development. We hope that, by making opportunities for these young people, we will encourage the development of a rich, fair and equitable society. The immediate objective, however, is to increase the number of students who pass their college or university entrance exams. We can measure this easily. At the same time, in order to extend the benefits of these outreach programs to more students over a longer period of time, we need to find means of “localizing” these outreach programs. This becomes a strategy for sustainability which we can promote through discussions with district and school authorities. In other words, the quantitative element (the number of students) serves only as one means of assessing whether we have reached our goal. Other important issues, such as sustainability, need to be assessed through other indicators. Some of these indicators might be called “unintended consequences”. For example, one unintended outcome of the outreach programs has been an increase in high school completion. Teachers have also been encouraged, in many ways, when they find their students motivated by the possibility of entering a university. Finally, we have found that when these results reach district authorities, they are eager to expand the outreach program to other schools, financed in part through the district budget.

2. In order for us to make a strong case for Pathways within our own universities and in order to make an impact within larger debates regarding higher education reform, we will need to systematically collect data.

We have discussed this before, but here I want to point out how we might do this.

Within universities, I would like to encourage better tracking of student progress. The pilot project being carried out in Hue is one example of how we might do this. The Management Information System Hue University is developing can be used to link independent data on students’ age, place of birth, ethnicity, sources of finance, etc. with progress in their university education. While we might not be able to monitor student progress from course to course, we will be uncover difficult courses and monitor the effectiveness of Pathways activities in relation to other aspects of student life.

At the same time, I would suggest periodic counseling of a sample of students receiving support from Pathways to create student case studies. This could offer us a means of identifying students needs and difficulties, as well as stories of success.

By combining better tracking with student counseling, we would be able to both provide a quantitative database and qualitative evidence of the benefits of our work.

3. As a means of reforming teaching methods, we need to encourage student initiative and independent learning.

In our meeting in December, we discussed some of the problems we face with the certificate based approach to English and Information Technology, and the test based approach to difficult courses. In some ways, there is not much we can do with difficult

courses since many of them are “gatekeeper” courses that students must pass in order to receive degrees in their fields. At the same time, some courses, such as English and IT, are immediately useful to students in their studies. In our last meeting, Huynh Van Thong encouraged us to focus more on improving students practical skills in English and IT through a variety of means, including open computer rooms and student clubs. These kinds of student centered, rather than curriculum centered, approaches to learning are useful means of changing how some courses in the university are taught.

I should say that I recognize that lectures are, perhaps, the only way to efficiently teach large numbers of students. At the same time, all of us have wither worked, studied under, or heard of “teaching assistants.” In our program, we might call them tutors. While tutors need to teach for the test, they do not need to use lectures as a means of teaching. This is another areas where we might improve university education.

Finally, as some of you saw in China last year, activities created by and for students can be partly self-supporting and can encourage students to be more independent learners. We need to consider how might, for example, fund a student run job counseling service or computer lab. When I was a student at the University of Hawaii, for example, the Student association in my department sold drinks to pay for printer cartridges in our small computer lab. The computers were donated by faculty who had received a computer ‘upgrade’ .

In Vietnam, where students have not been encouraged to be independent and education has often been regarded as a transfer of knowledge from teacher to student, we may need to begin with training and discussion of possibilities before encouraging students to develop their projects. Nevertheless, such projects are important for us to consider within the context of student needs and project sustainability.

4. Because of the changes noted above, I want to suggest a new format for the organization of your revised proposals. This new format would focus on five (5) program areas.

#### Outreach programs

Current this includes teacher training, tutoring for college and university entrance exams, educational counseling, and financial counseling.

#### University activities focused on improving academic performance.

Some of our current activities include English and IT clubs and classes, tutoring, and support for academically strong students to complete a senior thesis

#### University activities focused on improving student’s life skills

Some of these activities are currently carried out through lectures, visiting experts (including business people), and clubs. I want to suggest a greater role for student initiated activities, as noted above.

#### Tracking and Counseling

As I mentioned this above, you could do this through a combination of quantitative and qualitative means.

#### Research and Promotion

Your tracking and counseling work will offer you as source of qualitative and quantitative data. You might want to consider this as your “basic research”. In

addition, you might also want to consider more specific, targeted research related to your own institution or possibly, comparison with others. This could take the form of evaluations, feasibility studies, policy analyses, etc. You might want to do these studies yourselves, or you might find it more effective to contract your own departments or colleges of education. As I mentioned in our last meeting in Hue, research is one of several means of increasing the involvement of your education departments and colleges.

We are now aiming to start Phase 3 in September 2007. This gives you until April 15, roughly 2 months, to revise your proposals. You should them to Nguyen Ngoc Thuy for review first. I will then check them over.

In Phase three, I expect to make one "companion grant to HAU to cover all of your programs. You will still prepare annual narrative and financial reports, which Thuy and I will read and comment on. But I will only submit one report for Pathways in Vietnam to New York.

Again, I want to wish you all a happy and prosperous new year. I look forward to working with you on Phase three.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Michael DiGregorio". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Michael" being more legible than the last name "DiGregorio".

Michael DiGregorio, PhD  
Program Officer for Arts & Culture, Education & Scholarship