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Introduction

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NATIONAL POLICIES OF ADULT AND LIFELONG LEARNING AND EDUCATION: VIETNAM

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General Historical Background of ALE and LLL

Lifelong learning has been considered an important medium for promoting economic growth and educational innovation in Vietnam, which was officially highlighted in the Ninth National Assembly, organised by the Communist Party, held in Hanoi in 2001. In response, since 2005, the Vietnamese government has released a number of decisions and policies to promote lifelong learning and to build a learning society. Generally, these decisions and policies can be divided into three distinct implementation periods. The first period, from 2005 to 2010, primarily concentrated on cultivating literacy and basic IT skills for individuals aged 15 to 35, particularly those living in rural areas. During this period, the promotion and implementation of lifelong learning aimed to assist individuals in completing secondary and high school education while also scaling up basic information technology skills. In the second period, from 2012 to 2020, lifelong learning was promoted as a means of enhancing people's IT skills to meet workplace demands. In the third period, from 2021 to 2030, the Vietnamese government sought to enhance people's awareness of using lifelong learning as a means to improve digital skills for both market demand and life comforts. Within this period, lifelong learning has emerged as a key component of national education reform and the broader goal of building a learning society.

Throughout these periods, lifelong learning has been implemented primarily through collaboration among multiple government bodies, especially the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) and the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA). These government agencies, whether directly or indirectly involved, are closely connected to Community Learning Centres (CLCs), Continuing Education Centres (CECs) and Vocational

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Learning Centres (VLCs) in delivering learning resources and opportunities to individuals across the nation to accomplish basic educational programmes, including junior and senior secondary school education, and to boost literacy, vocational skills, digital skills and knowledge for everyday life. Moreover, other stakeholders, including universities, businesses, NGOs, and international organisations such as UNESCO, have significantly contributed to the promotion and practice of lifelong learning in Vietnam. For example, NGOs have established 1,600 published libraries, providing approximately 2 million books accessible to readers across the nation.

After two decades, by 2019, approximately 69.3% of individuals aged 15 to 35 were recognised as skilled labourers. Furthermore, by 2022, the number of lifelong learning institutions had expanded significantly, reaching 10,119 CLCs and 632 VLCs and CECs, which serve as important resources and environments for people across the nation to develop a variety of skills and knowledge. In addition, five cities, including Ho Chi Minh City, Son La, Sa Dec, Vinh, and Cao Lanh, have been recognised by UNESCO as members of the global network of learning cities. Despite these achievements, limited financial allocation, minimal professional development programmes for staff working in lifelong learning centres, and the shortage of a framework for digital literacy development remain challenges to ensuring the effectiveness and sustainability of lifelong learning promotion and practice in Vietnam.

Current relevant national legislation pertaining to adult and lifelong learning (ALE) and lifelong learning (LLL)

Recognising the pivotal role of lifelong learning in fostering a social learning environment to meet the new demands of Industry 4.0, the Ninth National Assembly, organised by the Communist Party, convened in Hanoi from April 19 to 22, 2001. Lifelong learning, or continuing education, was first cited as the goal for educational innovation in Vietnam during this assembly (Pham, 2023). Since then, Vietnam has introduced three key decisions and several regulations to promote lifelong learning among its citizens; these decisions and regulations are now incorporated within educational laws. However, there are no independent provisions in legislative law specifically addressing lifelong learning in Vietnam, as lifelong learning is part of the aims of these decisions and regulations. Among various decisions and regulations, three key documents stand out in forming Vietnam's lifelong learning strategy.

Decision No. 112/2005/QĐ-TTg aims to transform the entire nation into a learning society by encouraging the establishment of Continuing Education Centres (CECs), Vocational

Learning Centres (VLCs) and Community Learning Centres (CLCs), which support people of all ages and educational backgrounds in improving literacy, completing high school equivalency programs, and upgrading skills to meet workforce demands (Thuvienphapluat, 2005).

Decision No. 89/QĐ-TTg outlines a roadmap for the period from 2012 to 2020, positioning continuing and lifelong learning as essential for people to scale up their skills as well as qualifications. It emphasises opportunities to complete equivalent secondary education, improve competencies in IT and foreign languages, upgrade skills for employability, and develop life skills (Chinhphu, 2013).

Meanwhile, Decision No. 1373/QĐ-TTg aims to enhance the effectiveness of the lifelong and continuing education model, which has been implemented by introducing more diverse learning approaches, particularly the integration of digital environments to facilitate lifelong learning (Thuvienphapluat, 2021).

The concept of lifelong learning in Vietnam, as listed in these decisions, has evolved over time. Whereas before 2009, lifelong learning mostly referred to non-formal education, providing adults with opportunities to access training programmes to enhance literacy and basic skills for employment in various industries or to complete the equivalent secondary and high school (MOET, 2009), recently, lifelong learning has included the involvement of formal education stakeholders, aiming to offer suitable learning environments to people of all ages to cultivate essential skills for multiple purposes, including for improvement of life standards, for leisure purposes and for career promotion (Thu Vien Phap Luat, 2019). The evolution of the concept of lifelong learning has resulted in an expansion of its scope in the context of Vietnam.

In the first period of development, the Vietnamese government released Strategy No. 112/2005/QĐ-TTg, issued in 2005, which was based on the Educational Law of 1998 (Thu Vien Phap Luat, 1998), setting the goal for lifelong learning from 2005 to 2010. The primary objective of lifelong learning in Vietnam during this period included assisting adults aged 15 to 35 nationwide, especially in rural areas, in improving Vietnamese literacy skills and in providing programmes for adults across the nation, particularly in agricultural skills and equivalent secondary and high school, to enhance productivity in the agricultural sector (Thuvienphapluat, 2005). To support the implementation of this decision, the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) launched two pillar regulations, providing guidance for the establishment and operation of specific centres for continuing education at district and commune levels nationwide (Nhat, 2023). In 2007, MOET issued Regulation No. 01/2007/QĐ-

BGDĐT, guiding the establishment and operation of Continuing Education Centres (CECs). The purpose of CECs was to provide opportunities for adults to pursue and complete junior and senior school levels, improve IT and technological skills, and assist local officers in rural and mountainous areas in learning local languages to enhance effectiveness in engaging with local inhabitants (MOET, 2007). Additionally, in 2008, MOET issued Regulation No. 09/2008/QĐ-BGDĐT, paving the way for the official practice of establishing community learning centres (CLCs). The primary aim of CLCs was to offer programmes for adults to enhance their competencies in agricultural and industrial sectors to meet the urgent needs of the regions (Chinh Phu, 2008). CLCs also played a role in organising activities such as workshops and conferences to guide people on how to utilise available learning resources for lifelong learning (VoV, 2015). Consequently, CLCs have been vital for Vietnamese adults to develop self-direction and self-knowledge aligned with market demands (Liu et al., 2019).

In a second period of development, the Vietnamese government issued Decision No. 89/QĐ-TTg in 2013, based on the amended National Education Law of 2009 (Thu Vien Phap Luat, 2009), marking an official step towards lifelong learning from 2012 to 2020. This decision added additional objectives to the lifelong learning goal, including providing an environment for people to improve information technology skills, assisting individuals working in the public sector in upgrading their qualifications to meet workplace demands, and supporting the development of social and life skills among people of all ages (Chinhphu, 2013). The key missions of the decision included helping people understand the role of lifelong learning, promoting lifelong learning through social media, promoting distance learning, and enhancing the connectivity of educational institutions, including CLCs, vocational learning centres, continuing education centres, universities, and colleges, in facilitating lifelong learning (Chinhphu, 2013).

In the third period of development, to enhance the effectiveness of lifelong learning, in 2021, Vietnam launched Decision No. 1373/QĐ-TTg, which primarily drew from the Educational Law of 2019 (Thu Vien Phap Luat, 2019), adding new objectives to the lifelong learning project that had been implemented for decades. The decision sets forth key missions for the development of continuous and lifelong learning for the period from 2021 to 2030, such as significantly enhancing people's awareness of lifelong learning, preparing for the promulgation of national laws on lifelong learning, bolstering digital skills among the population, promoting lifelong learning competitions, and fostering international collaboration to improve the quality of lifelong learning in the nation (Thu Vien Phap Luat, 2021). To support this decision, the Vietnamese MOET, in 2023, released Regulation No. 01/2023/TT-BGDĐT, providing guidance for the establishment and operation of vocational

learning centres and continuing learning centres in districts and communes nationwide. This action is the compulsory step to extend the number of vocational learning centres (VLCs) nationwide up to 1,800 centres by 2025 and orientate by 2030 (Nhân Dân, 2025). The purpose of extending the VLCs is to provide more learning resources for people to scale up their skills to meet the human capital needs (MOET, 2023). Likewise, in this period, educational institutions across the nation are instructed to utilise digital technologies for both teaching and learning (Doan, 2025; Hai, 2024). This movement is the crucial preparation for the young population to get used to digital tools for lifelong learning under the spread of digitalisation as defined by Håkansson et al. (2024). Alongside, Vietnam has received support from a number of international agencies for promoting lifelong learning across the nation, for example, UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, UNESCO Bangkok, and other UN Agencies in Vietnam, SEAMEO CELLL, ASEM Hub for LLL, and UNESCO Vietnam (SEAMEO, n.d.). Vietnam still maintains these precious international collaborations, especially with UNESCO, for proficiently building the effectiveness framework of lifelong learning in the nation (Voice of Vietnam, 2023).

Extent of devolution of powers in ALE and LLL to regions and cities, and to social partners

The programmes and operative activities of all centres for lifelong learning, including CLCs, VLCs, and CECs, are overseen and guided by both the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA) and the Ministry of Education and Training (Belete et al., 2022). VLCs and CECs are considered as part of the legal national education system, so these centres, like universities and colleges across the nation, are directly under the instruction of MOET via the Office of Education and Training of Districts and the provincial Department of Education and Training (MOET, 2023). Unlike VLCs and CECs, CLCs are administered by either the vice-heads or heads of the local people's committee of the districts or communes (Nguyen, 2019). This arrangement empowers CLCs' directors to organise programmes essential for improving the competencies needed in their regions, but the programmes or projects should be in line with the directives of MOET via consultation with the district Office of Education & Training (Chinhphu, 2008; MOET, 2014). CLCs also have their own authority to issue certificates to learners who participate in and complete programmes at their centres, and these certificates hold legal value for learners' various purposes (Belete et al., 2022). It is to be precise that although MOLISA also takes part in instructing the design of the curricula and programmes at VLCs, CECs, and even CLCs, all kinds of activities of these centres should be

reported annually to the Office of Education and Training in districts or communes, which is under MOET (MOET, 2023).

In addition, CLCs are under the directives of the Office of Finance of districts, while VLCs and CECs are funded by the provincial Department of Finance. The fees for any kind of activities organised at these centres, whether received from the central department of finance or obtained from donations from enterprises and local stakeholders, have to be reported in detail to the district Office of Finance and the Provincial Department of Finance (Khuu and Tong, 2021). According to MOET, these centres can also receive financial support from individuals, but the use of this financial fund for any activities should also be reported clearly (MOET, 2023).

Influence and/or policy linkages to supranational organisations

The movement to promulgate and promote lifelong learning in Vietnam has gained pivotal support from UNESCO and other non-governmental organizations. In 1997, UNESCO initially collaborated with the Vietnamese government to establish the first CLC in Soc Son of Ha Noi, providing adults with the opportunity to continue developing literacy skills (Minh, 2020; Nguyen, 2019). The success of this initial CLC laid the foundation for the expansion of CLCs nationwide. Furthermore, UNESCO often participates in advising the Vietnamese government on establishing suitable strategies for lifelong learning implementation across the nation. For example, in December 2010, the ASEM Lifelong Learning Hub, along with UNESCO staff and 400 policymakers and experts from Vietnam, convened in Hanoi for a forum to discuss various aspects of building a comprehensive learning society. All discussions at the forum were taken into consideration for the plan to construct a learning society from 2011 to 2020 (Que et al., 2010). Additionally, UNESCO consistently collaborates with several provincial governments on non-formal activities related to environmental and cultural protection. For instance, UNESCO has partnered with Kien Giang province to provide activities that engage people and increase understanding of how to protect the biosystems of the coastal areas and islands, as well as preserve the cultural heritage of ethnic inhabitants in the province (Tri et al., 2019). UNESCO also frequently engages in conducting analyses and preparing reports on the effects of lifelong learning in Vietnam (Carlsen, 2016). There is no significant involvement of the World Bank in lifelong learning development in Vietnam, although the World Bank has been the key consultant for the establishment of higher education in Vietnam (Dang, 2009).

Financing of ALE and LLL

Vietnam, since 2007, has decided to allocate 20% of its annual national spending to education. This allocation represents a remarkable investment, amounting to approximately 5.7% to 6.0% of the country's gross domestic product (GDP), as stated by UNESCO, the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, the Vietnam Ministry of Education & Training, and the Vietnam General Statistics Office (2016). However, funding for lifelong learning education is apparently low, constituting only 1 to 1.9% of the total annual expenditure for education (Khau and Tong, 2021).

The funding for CLCs is considered too little for conducting necessary activities. As described by Hossain (2016), each CLC receives a basic fund of 20 million VND (approximately 850 USD) and an annual budget to operate learning programmes that address the skills gap in their respective regions. CLCs in rural and mountainous regions can receive up to 25 million VND per year, while CLCs located in urban areas receive only 20 million VND (Vietnam Financial Department, 2008). This funding is allocated to CLCs by the district Office of Finance, which receives direct funds from the provincial Department of Finance. However, as this budget is often insufficient for operations, CLCs have the right to use funds received from collaborative projects with other stakeholders, such as non-profit organisations or business organisations, as budgets for their centres (Vietnam Financial Department, 2008).

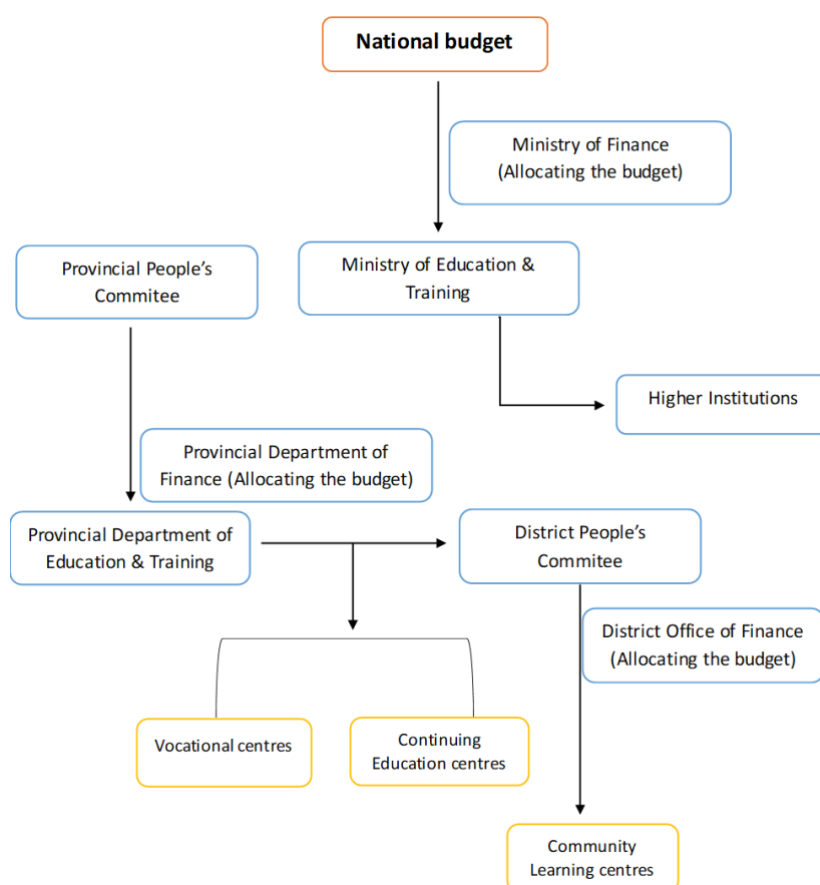
There are, however, no specific details regarding current budget allocation to VLCs and CECs, or to colleges and universities conducting lifelong learning programs. However, as determined by the central government, they apparently receive a certain budget from their district Office of Finance (Khau and Tong, 2021). Additionally, they can also earn money from donations and other business projects to fund their activities (Ministry of Finance, 2018).

The role of sectors and involvement of community stakeholders

The promotion of lifelong learning in Vietnam involves multiple government sectors, including the Ministry of Education and Training, the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs, the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism, the Ministry of Planning and Investment, the Ministry of Home Affairs and Social Republic of Vietnam, the Ministry of Information and Communication, and the Ministry of Finance (Thu Vien Phap Luat, 2021). Among these government sectors, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labour,

Invalids and Social Affairs work in cooperation to provide guidance for the implementation of community learning centres, vocational centres, and continuing education centres, while the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Planning and Investment manage, monitor, and allocate the budget for the activities of these centres (Chinhphu, 2013). Furthermore, the Ministry of Information and Communication and the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism are responsible for organising programmes, workshops, and conferences to promote lifelong learning among the general population, with these activities being advertised nationally on social media and in newspapers (Thu Vien Phap Luat, 2021). In addition to their administrative responsibilities, some government agencies significantly involve themselves in the financial allocation and operational management of lifelong learning institutions. The involvement of these key actors in supporting VLCs, CECs, and CLCs can be visualised in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Involvement of stakeholders in financing VLCs, CECs, and CLCs

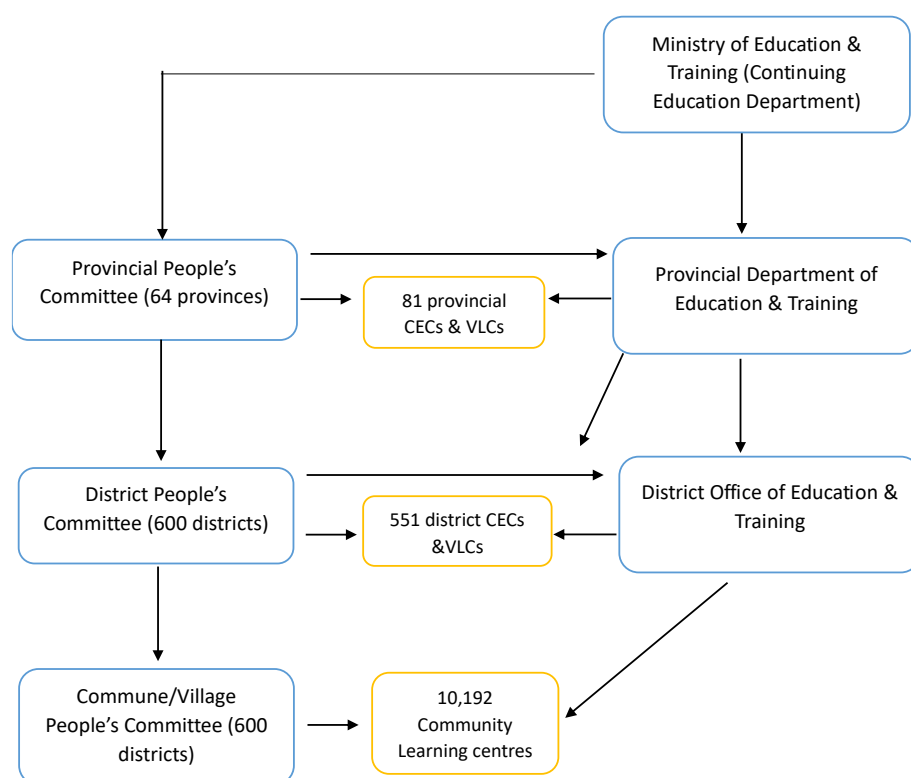


Source: Created by author based on Khau and Tong (2021, pp. 148-159)

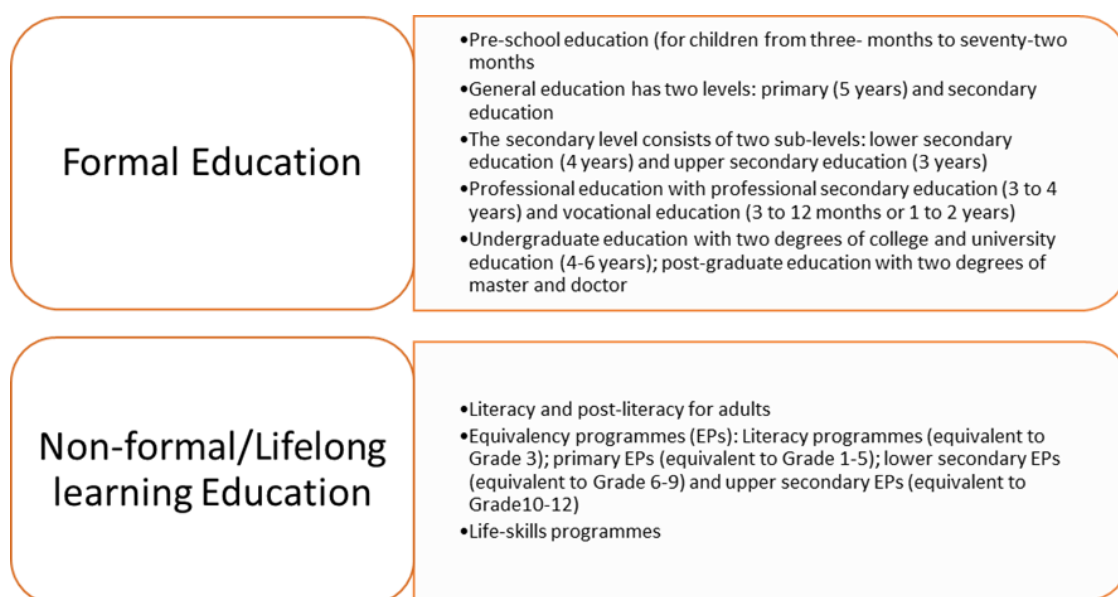
In practice, in non-formal settings, based on the report conducted by Hossain (2016), there are approximately 11,900 CLCs in Vietnam. However, the statistical figures released by MOET in 2022 show that there were about 10,119 CLCs nationwide by the year 2022, as there was

the closure of some centres for other purposes (MOET, 2022). These CLCs were distributed in almost all the districts and communes across the nation; thus, people from all locations across the nation, including rural and mountainous areas, can easily access learning programmes provided by CLCs (Okukawa, 2009). CLCs offer multiple programmes for lifelong learning, such as short-term training in agricultural and IT skills, and promote knowledge of lifelong learning within the community (Thoa, 2021). According to Decision No. 09/2008/QĐ-BGDĐT, CLCs are instructed directly by the MOET through the provincial department of education and training and district office of education and training, but the director of a CLC should be the head or vice-head of the people's committee of the district or commune for having suitable programmes to fulfil the local capital demands (Chinhphu, 2008). Likewise, there are about 632 VLCs and CECs distributed in districts and provinces around the nation by the year 2022 (MOET, 2022), and these centres play a key role in supporting adults in pursuing equivalent programmes (equivalent to junior and senior high school programmes in formal education), life skills programmes, IT skills and foreign languages programmes (An, 2023). Currently, CLCs, VLCs, and CECs are not limited to addressing the shortage of skills and basic qualifications for adults. Programmes have expanded to include sustainable development and well-being, encompassing areas such as HIV prevention, healthcare, maternal and childcare, peace, and human rights (Desjardins et al., 2016).

Lifelong learning in Vietnam has not only included the mission of helping individuals to upgrade their skills for workforce demand, as proclaimed by Cummins and Kunkel (2015), but it has also formed a system. In the system, lifelong learning not only provides the resources and facilities for people to scale up necessary skills for the workforce and life comforts, but also delivers basic educational programmes, which support people to complete the primary school level, junior school, and senior school level (MOET, 2009). These basic educational programmes were initially distributed at the weekends or at night to those who had passed the maximum age for registering at formal educational institutions or those who had no time to pursue formal education. However, in recent years, a significant number of youths have chosen to pursue their junior and senior high school at CECs and VLCs (MOET, 2019).

Figure 2: Number of CECs, VLCs, and CLCs deployed across Vietnam by the year 2022

Source: Created by author based on Chinhphu (2008), MOET (2022), and MOET (2023)

Figure 3: Comparison between formal education and lifelong learning education/non-formal education in Vietnam

Source: Created by author based on Ministry of Education & Training (2009, pp. 16-17)

Lifelong learning in Vietnam is implemented by the utilisation of both non-formal and formal approaches. The non-formal educational approach to lifelong learning has also engaged NGOs and businesses. NGOs contribute to the development of lifelong learning in Vietnam, for example, through educational projects promoting education for sustainable development (Bui, 2020). Some NGOs, such as Learn to Read, The Library Project, The Asia Foundation, and the Library of Vietnam Project, have successfully established nearly 1,600 libraries, containing over 2 million books, located at schools and community learning centres. Among them, Learn to Read has been the key contributor, as it has built up approximately 1,522 libraries and has delivered 461,060 books in libraries across the nation (Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, 2019). These libraries are free and open to provide learning resources for lifelong learning to people (Hossain, 2012). To enhance the effectiveness of lifelong learning, the Vietnamese government also requires entrepreneurs and business firms to provide opportunities for their workers to upgrade their skills (The Prime Minister, 2022). In non-formal settings, business enterprises independently provide opportunities to support their workers in bolstering or upgrading essential skills. These firms often develop self-learning environments as a strategy to boost workers' competency (Nhung, 2023).

In a formal approach, as instructed by the Educational Law of 2019, colleges and universities across the nation are required to be actively involved in promoting lifelong learning (Thu Vien Phap Luat, 2019). However, the actions taken by these higher institutions are more diverse compared to those of CLCs, VLCs, and CECs. With the rapid spread of digitalisation, lecturers and students in higher institutions are mandated to develop strategies to continually enhance their digital skills to meet the demands of the labour force. For students, higher institutions have been preparing them with essential soft skills, enabling them to further develop their competencies in the workplace (Pham et al., 2021). This preparation extends beyond skills for social work-based learning, as indicated by Han et al. (2016). For lecturers, some higher institutions offer training programmes to support them in improving their digital teaching skills and to provide them with knowledge on strategies for lifelong learning to impart to students (Lan-Nguyen and Zarra-Nezhad, 2023). Additionally, some universities actively contribute to community development. For instance, Vietnam National University in Ho Chi Minh City (VNU_HCM) recently initiated a project called the Lifelong Learning Bookshelf. This project aims to collect books from various stakeholders to establish a community reading forum at the library of VNU-HCM, providing open access to the community (Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh, 2023).

The tracking of the effective implementation of policies

After nearly two decades of practice, lifelong learning projects in Vietnam have achieved certain success. For example, five cities in the nation, namely Ho Chi Minh City, Son La, Sa Dec, Vinh, and Cao Lanh, are listed as UNESCO learning cities due to the impressive impact of lifelong learning on sustainable and inclusive development in those regions (Tuổi Trẻ News, 2024). Nationwide, there are more than 10,119 CLCs and 632 VLCs and CECs (MOET, 2022). These centres have been effective in providing non-formal programmes, assisting adults in all regions, including rural and mountainous areas, to improve IT skills, agricultural skills, literacy skills, foreign language proficiency, and obtain qualifications upon completion of junior and senior programmes (An, 2023). Additionally, Vietnamese adults aged 15-35 are more skilled and flexible in scaling up their competencies, with 69.3% compared to 43%, 52%, 52.6%, and 50% of adults in the same age range from Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia (Phan, 2019).

However, the funds allocated for lifelong learning projects are significantly too few, limiting the capability of educational centres and institutions to organise comprehensive programmes (Khau and Tong, 2021). This underscores the need for government policymakers to address these financial issues. Furthermore, educators, especially those in rural areas, still lack self-direction for lifelong learning, hindering their ability to effectively guide their students in building fundamental competencies for lifelong learning (Thuy et al., 2022). Hence, there is a need to construct a framework for digital literacy for adult participants to efficiently improve their skills (Phường et al., 2023).

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Appendix

Table I: Comparison of concepts of formal education, non-formal education, and informal education in Vietnam and international contexts

Terms	International concept	Vietnamese concept	Rationales and implications
Formal education	Organised, intentional education and training leading to formal qualifications.	Full-time education in mainstream education leading to formal qualifications.	Curricula and qualifications decided by the government. Education subsidised by the government.
Non-formal education	Organised, intentional learning, education and training, not leading to qualifications, but to increased competences.	Education provision outside the mainstream education system (supplementary, part-time, distance mode of learning, fee-paying adult education at higher education institutions), leading or not leading to qualifications.	Vietnamese concept reflects : - Inadequate recognition of non-formal education - Shortage of attention to quality - Financial contribution of learners.
Informal education	Unintentional learning for example in the family, at leisure time, not leading to qualifications.	Not yet recognised.	

Source: Carlsen (2016, p. 28).



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