

The strategic target set by the VCP is to modernize and industrialize the economy with a view to making Vietnam an industrialized nation by 2020. The Mekong Delta has an important role in realizing this target. The industrialization and modernization process, however, depends on many resources, especially the human one. In January 1999, a conference on "Education in the Mekong Delta" was held to work out measures to develop the education service in this Delta. In this article, we want to discuss the problem of higher education in the Delta.

1. Some natural, social and economic features of the Mekong Delta



ON HIGHER EDUCATION IN MEKONG DELTA

by MA. PHẠM THẾ TRI

The Mekong Delta has an area of some four million hectares, equaling 12% of the Vietnam's area and some 22% of the country's population live here. The Delta supplies over 50% of the national rice output. This is the Vietnam's greatest plain and the Southeast Asian second biggest granary that can help Vietnam ensure its food safety and annual rice export.

The education service in the Mekong Delta has made good progress in the past decades. In eight out of 12 provinces here the illiteracy have been defeated completely and the primary education has been made compulsory. Ninety percent of children of school-leaving age are attending school.

The Mekong Delta, however, is still an educationally backward part of the country:

- Four provinces still have the problems of illiteracy and primary education to solve;

- The ratio of students to population is 0.143% compared with the national average of 3.312%;

- The ratio of trained labor force to the working population is 7.5% compared with the national average of 13%;

- The only university in this zone is Cần Thơ University (CTU) that consists of nine faculties. From the Liberation Day up to 1998, based on joint efforts by local governments

and the public and help from foreign organizations, the CTU graduated 17,335 bachelors, medicine doctors and engineers. According to an estimate by the Ministry of Education and Training (MET), the ratio of graduates from the CTU to the population in the Delta (0.143%) is rather low in comparison with the national average of 0.312% and those of other zones (0.568% in the Eastern South, 0.174% in the Central Highlands and 0.595% in the Hồng Delta). Generally, the development of education, especially the higher one, in the Delta is slower than that in other zones. The main cause of this, according to the MET, is the fact that local governments haven't paid full attention to this service. And this cause also leads to the shortage of well-trained human resource in this Delta.

2. Objectives of the higher education system in the Mekong Delta and measures to achieve them

Objectives set by the MET for the higher education system in the Mekong Delta for the period 2000- 2005 are "raising the ratio of university students to the population to 5% by 2000 and 10% by 2000, and increasing the number of postgraduates by 120% by 2000 and 150% - 200% by 2005 compared with 1998". To achieve these aims, the Government

has recently formed the An Giang University and Vinh Long Private University. These schools will help with developing the trained labor force in the Mekong Delta.

Many measures are needed to achieve these aims but the best one is to make the best use of inner strength of the Delta along with help from the Government, foreign organizations and universities in HCMC.

First of all, the CTU should be developed into the Mekong Delta University because of the following reasons:

- In the CTU, 33% of its teaching and researching staff are postgraduates, many others are doing postgraduate researches at local and foreign universities. It is estimated that the postgraduates will represent

over 50% of its teaching staff by 2000.

- The CTU is offering 34 training courses in various disciplines to some 11,000 students every year.

- Facilities for study in the CTU are rather sufficient for students from all provinces in the Delta.

Prof. Dr. Trần Thượng Tuấn, Dean of the CTU, said that for the period from now to 2010 the CTU plan to increase the number of full-time students to 20,000 and part-time students to 15,000. To achieve this aim, the CTU has developed its distant-learning system and admit some 2,000 students to its postgraduate courses. The number of faculties also increases according to the demand for education service in the Delta. The CTU also planned to give courses in some new disciplines, such as precision engineering, food processing industry, automation, biotechnology, construction, architecture, electricity, electronics, tourism, marketing, pharmaceutical, sociology and law.

Its achievements in training, scientific research and international cooperation have helped develop the human resource in the Delta and affirm its role as a university for the whole zone.

- In making the best use of the inner strength, it's necessary to develop on-the-job universities. All

provinces in the Delta have formed their own universities of this kind but their development is done without a master plan. They should be organized into a system with the CTU as its center. The CTU will bear responsibility for working out training programs, giving refresher courses to teachers, disseminating new teaching and managing methods, ensuring quality of training courses and recruiting freshmen. On-the-job universities are responsible for managing student affairs, cooperating with the CTU in working out the training programs and with provincial governments in mobilizing local resources to develop the education service.

When the system takes shape, these universities could admit both full-time and part-time students. Full-time classes that need facilities for practice (laboratories for example) could make appointments with the CTU to use them. This model allows the better use of local resources and help from provincial government. Graduates from these universities will tend to find jobs in their home provinces instead of moving to big cities. After some time, these universities could be developed into standard universities when necessary conditions are ensured. At present, the An Giang University and Vinh Long Private University had better secure help from the CTU and other HCMC universities.

The cooperation between the CTU, provincial on-the-job universi-

ties and HCMC universities has produced certain good results. The number of students from the Delta attending HCMC universities rose from 2,676 in 1996 to 3,392 in 1997 and 3,488 in 1998. The number of students in provincial on-the-job universities was 1,069 in 1996 and 1,867 in 1997. However, this development wasn't linked with a plan to train the human resource for the Delta. That is why this cooperation should be reorganized: HCMC universities will help with training students from the Delta in certain disciplines beyond the reach of local universities and important to the industrialization and modernization of the Delta. The cooperation in training the human resource for the Delta is a matter of great urgency but a good organizational model is needed to make it efficient and sustainable.

- The second measure we want to present here is the help from the Government.

In recent years, the Government has paid much attention to the education service in the Delta. According to the MPI, the budget expenditure on the education in the Delta represented 13.1% of the whole expenditure on education in 1997 and this figure rose to 15.5% in 1998 (the highest percentage was found in the expenditure on education in the Hồng Delta: 18%). Investment in infrastructure for education in the Mekong Delta represented 24.7% in 1996 and 22% in 1999, second only to that in the Eastern South. This help,

however, doesn't meet the requirement posed by the Delta development. In my opinion, a system of stronger policies should be made to help the higher education in the Delta catch up with other zones. These policies could be divided into three groups:

+ The first group consists of policies on the structure of industry in the Delta with great importance attached to industries needed for the modernization and industrialization, including education, food processing and high technologies.

+ The second includes policies on investment: the Government should review the infrastructure for education in the Delta and make fixed investment appropriate to the education strategy set for the zone.

+ The third consists of policies on teaching staff and students. These policies should aim at creating conditions for the teaching staff to pursue their career and encourage graduates from local universities to take jobs in depressed areas.

Besides these groups of policies, attention should be also paid to the international cooperation, especially in training in high technologies and postgraduate courses, and attracting financial support from foreign institutions.

In short, developing the education service should be considered as the key to the industrialization and modernization of the country and the Mekong Delta as well.

