

PROGRAM FOR TALENTED BACHELORS IN VIETNAM: COMPARING WITH THE HONOR PROGRAM OF UNITED STATES OF AMERICA AND ITS DEVELOPMENT IN THE FUTURE

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ABSTRACT

The development of society, sciences and technologies required education and training, especially higher education, many new challenges. To meet the high human resources, many schools have developed advanced, high quality training programs for talented students. The article compares the Vietnam talented bachelor training program with the talented bachelor programs all over the world, taking typical examples from the United States on the starting context, goals, how to implement and build the program. From there, some predictions about the development of training programs for talented and high-quality students in Vietnam in the future are made.

1. INTRODUCTION

Bachelor of Science Talent Program (honor program) is a special training model applied in many countries around the world such as the United States (Long, 2002) or Australia (Barron & Zeegers, (2012). The first talent bachelor program was implemented at the VNU College of Sciences, Vietnam National University, Hanoi in 1997. Up to now, many universities in the country have also established the honor programs. Some names of the program came out later and also gained many achievements, such as talented engineers (Hanoi University of Science and Technology), high quality engineers (School Hanoi University of Science and Technology, Hanoi University of Construction, University of Transport, University of Technology, Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City etc.), bachelor of high quality (University of Social Sciences and Humanities, University of Foreign Languages, Hanoi National University, etc.) and later bachelors and engineers in advanced programs under the proposal of the Ministry of Education and Training (Ministry of Education and Training, 2008).

These programs have advantages compared with the common university level in Vietnam today, such as the content of the program, the complete modern curriculum system and quality associated with the corresponding requirements about teachers, training methods, evaluation methods, etc. However, so far, there is not enough information about the similarities and differences between talented bachelor programs in Vietnam compared to other talented bachelor program in the world.

This article compares the honor program of Vietnam with the programs all over the world, typically, the program of the United States of America: the starting context, the goal, how to implement and build the program.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

More than 20 years ago, a talent bachelor program was started at the VNU College of Sciences, Vietnam National University, Hanoi. The outstanding success right after a few years of establishment of the program started a trend of education about training highly qualified students throughout the country in the late 1990s and early 2000-2010.

What leads to the success of this program firstly lies in the different minds and foresight of the people who build and develop it. Despite the history and society of Vietnam in the early 1990s, there have been many prosperous stems from reforms in many aspects of life since Doi Moi (1986), but the consequences of a successive economy. The plan still leaves many imprints in scientific and educational development. Equilibrium thinking in assessing or voluntarism in policy implementation makes Vietnam's science and education no longer play a role in creating the motivation for the development of society. The collapse of many Soviet Socialist states and the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 made a serious shortage of human resources to train highly-qualified scientific and educational personnel. Therefore, the idea of self-training quality human resources to build and develop the VNU Colleges of Sciences, and furthermore, the elite training for science and education of the country, is a breakthrough at the time.

The Talent Bachelor Program, known as the Honor Program, is inspired and learns a part of the approach from the similar program universities in the United States as well as some of the advanced countries in the world (Dam, 2007). However, the question arises for policy makers or who is interested in talent bachelor programs is where we are currently in the overall picture of the Honors Program in the world? Therefore, the article introduces the Honor Program in the United States, the country where this training model thrives; summarizing the highlights of the talent bachelor training system at the VNU College of Sciences and showing differences.

As individuals pursue the development of their talent, critical programming must become more domain specific. In performance domains, programming is more likely to take place outside school (dance lessons, music lessons, acting lessons) and school may only provide an introduction through extracurricular activities or study of noncore subjects (e.g., band, orchestra, school plays, team sports). For serious study in sport and music, parents resort to community programs (e.g., club sports) or private teachers and coaches. For some academic domains, particularly mathematics, acceleration is used to accommodate a student who is capable of working well above grade level. Most schools lack concerted pathways with articulated sequences of courses for students who demonstrate early talent and exceptional interest in language arts, science, or social studies (Paula et al., 2017).

Therefore, it is necessary to have programming which is critical at every step of the talent development pathway and, as children progress, needs focus less on general academic skills and more on ones specific to the domain of talent. For example, in Vietnam today, STEM students need opportunities to do hands-on work that is increasingly similar to the authentic experimentation of scientists and engineers.

3. METHODS AND RESULTS

3.1. Research methods

Method of document analysis and matching analysis: This study will summarize the documents; analyze and synthesize to clarify issues about the history of formation and operating model of honors programs in the United States; compare it to the VNU College of Science's program.

3.2. Research results

3.2.1. The Honour Program in United States of America

The United States has a relatively different system of higher education in the world, when private universities were born before public universities. Public schools were born late and have only really grown since the 20th century with the United States government's greater investment interest in higher education. According to the stratification of the university mission, if the current United States university education is a pyramid, the top of the tower is the elite university, the second floor is the training-oriented and the bottom are community colleges as can be seen in Figure 1.

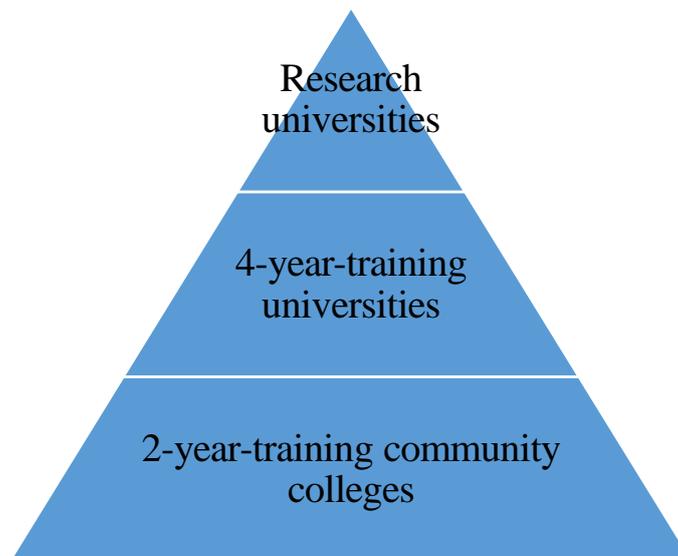


Figure 1. University Pyramid in the United States of America

The top floor of the pyramid is composed of a small group, which accounts for less than 10% of the total of 4,600 higher education institutions in the United States. They are medium-sized research universities where the ratio of graduate students to the total number of students is high; the input is the best student in the country and internationally; the rate of acceptance for admission is always very low (below 20%). Within this small group of research universities, the most prominent are private universities, typically Ivy League schools. Research-oriented public universities (such as those at the University of California) account for a small proportion of these and often each US State (equivalent to a Province or Central City in Vietnam) of the United States only has some schools. On the second and third floors of the pyramids are four-year training colleges and two-year community colleges. At these two levels, the proportion of public universities is higher than that of private universities. These two groups of universities are mainly invested by the state, aiming to universalize education for the majority of young people who want to improve their educational attainment. The tuition fee and competition rate are therefore lower than the research universities in the above mentioned research universities.

According to Seifert et al. (2007), most of the Honor Program in the United States is on the second floor (4-year training university), and a few are on the third floor (2-year training community college). According to statistics, the National Collegiate Honors Council states that currently the United States has about 1400 schools with Honor Program, with about 65% (approximately 900 schools) are already members of this Council.

Many Honor Programs are offered by 4-year training universities and 2-year training community colleges. Sometimes they also have a “nickname” that is “public Ivy” which implies that public universities are of the same quality as Ivy universities. There are many reasons for these schools to open the Honor Program. One of the most important reasons is to encourage and support well-educated students to have a suitable learning environment in the context of 4-year universities and 2-year community colleges with moderate academic qualifications (Austin, 1985; Shushock, 2003). Besides, better students are also the motivation to retain good lecturers (Bulakowski & Townsend, 1995) and motivate students to learn better (“peer effect”) (Long, 2002). Another reason, perhaps most important, is the image building and branding of the school. When it comes to good universities, the common sense of society is often associated with having good students. Therefore, many schools with the common mission of training masses (4-year and 2-year schools) still try to open, even provide scholarships for excellent students to attend the Honor Program in order to compete directly with research universities (elite orientation, for excellent students) to create reputation (Seifert et al., 2007). In other words, this is a way to develop the brand of “low and middle-class” universities to better recruit students, in the context that many universities in this group in the United States are increasingly difficult because of budget cuts from the Government and become forced to rely more on tuition fees collected from students.

Regarding the training program, the Honor Program in the United States has many forms. Some schools open their own colleges that specialize in honoring colleges while others offer special programs embedded in mass training (specific credits, joint credits with regular students). In many places, the Honor Program is for undergraduate students (usually graduating in 3-4 years) who have excellent results, want to go to higher education, where they will have 1 more year for further training or participating in research. In general, while most students pursue the study-exam process to earn a degree, students at Honors Program are often facilitated to participate in research and dissertation in their final years (Sederberg, 2005). The National Honorary Training Council also participates in and supports Honor Programs across the United States through the issuance of a set of subject syllabus frameworks and the organization of periodic support and training programs.

Regarding the effectiveness of the Honors Program, there have been many empirical studies showing that students studying under this program have better academic results in many aspects including cognitive competence, interpersonal skills, confidence, mathematics etc. (Bulakowski & Townsend, 1995; Seifert et al., 2007). However, the Honor Program also received a lot of criticism. For example, there is an opinion about why it is necessary to invest specifically in a small group of students, which is contrary to the function and mission of 4 or 2-year public schools in the United States. Others argue that the segregation of the Honors Program (at individually designed programs) has led to the trend of isolating students from the university’s student community.

3.2.2. *The Talent Bachelor Program in VNU College of Science, Vietnam National University, Hanoi*

The Talent Bachelor Program was established at the VNU College of Science in 1997 in an educational context facing many difficulties: the country has just begun to integrate after reform; investment in higher education is generally very low; the quality of student input is not high and the risk of shortage of highly qualified lecturers in basic disciplines at Vietnam National University, Hanoi is increasingly evident (Bui & Nguyen, 2007).

In this context, leaders of VNU College of Science and Vietnam National University, Hanoi launched a “breakthrough” initiative to overcome these problems. The idea is to create a program specifically for good students who have won national and international awards (later expanded to students with high scores for university entrance exams), specially trained. Along with that, students who are best supported in terms of facilities, lecturers, receive scholarships higher than the average for 4 years of study, are given priority to sign a contract as a lecturer upon graduation, to study straight up to PhD (skip master) and many other benefits. By 2001, on the basis of the success of the bachelor program of Natural Sciences, the project “training talented human resources” of the VNU College of Sciences, Vietnam National University, Hanoi was approved by the government. This program is funded with considerable support, higher than the average of ordinary students (Mai & Nguyen, 2007).

Training programs for talent Bachelor students are basically similar to the curriculum framework of mass students. The biggest differences lie in the following: (1) Classroom organization, (2) Content of knowledge and curriculum, (3) Facilities supporting the subject and (4) Teacher qualifications. Each year, about 50-100 students will be selected after the entrance exam (IQ, EQ and essay writing) from a few hundred qualified applications. Each department in the school will have corresponding to 5-15 students selected, depending on the size of the department and the aspiration of students on entrance exam. For the first two years, all students from many different disciplines and disciplines are concentrated in their own training programs, with heavier professional requirements. According to Dam (2007), in these first 2 years, students of different disciplines will have to study together basic subjects such as Mathematics, Physics, etc. Due to the small number of students, classes can be combined; for example, Mathematics will pair with students training bachelor of science in Physics and Mathematics and vice versa. Therefore, learning requirements will not only be harder than mass students, but also more advanced than the general level of other specialized students. Along with increasing English learning, this is expected to create a solid foundation of knowledge in basic subjects and foreign languages before the student enters third year and is sent back to the faculty, a joint study with mass students. Class lecturers are usually the most specialized scientists in each department, or are invited from research institutes. Regarding support conditions, because of the higher level of investment, students of the Talent Bachelor training program receive more scholarships, along with better facilities and curriculum, not to mention many other priorities.

After graduation, students are often referred directly by the Executive Board and lecturers or through letters of recommendation to reach the scholarships. Thanks to this reputation, along with their capabilities and achievements, alumni of this system have won scholarships to attend prestigious universities in the world. List of (incomplete) prestigious schools that have imprinted student footprints including: Harvard University, Stanford University, Princeton University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, California Institute of Technology, California Universities (United States) United), Cambridge University, Oxford University (UK), Paris Polytechnic University, Paris Universities (France), Zurich Polytechnic University, Lausanne Polytechnic University (Switzerland), Tokyo University of Technology Institute, Kyoto University, Osaka University, Tohoku University, Institute of Advanced Science and Technology (Japan), National University of Singapore, Nanyang Technological University (Singapore), University of Melbourne, University of New South Wales, Australian National University (Australia), etc. Students of the system are also more likely to win scholarships compared to mass students when competing for level 9 scholarship programs such as: VEF (USA), ADS (Australia), Monbusho (Japan), etc.

In terms of effectiveness, no comprehensive statistics have been conducted to assess where students of the program after 20 years do, or moreover, the degree of success of the program. Some statistics from 2007 summarizing 10 years of establishment of the program also reflect some initial successes (Bui & Nguyen, 2007) although the time period is 5-6 years. Since the first graduate, it is too short to evaluate the effect. However, under personal observation, alumni of bachelor’s degree training programs have a large proportion (50%) of continuing to pursue and achieve achievements in science and education. Many of them are currently professors at well-known universities around the

world in the United States, France, Germany, Japan, Singapore, Australia, etc. Some are now moving to the fields of industry and engineering, economic, social, public sector and has also achieved certain success. In general, the training unit needs to have methodical surveys to evaluate and compare the results of the students of the Bachelor of Science degree compared to the students of the general program according to the output standards of the skills and knowledge. It is always respected by the programmers of the Honor Program in the world (Seifert et al., 2007).

3.2.3. Comparison between two programs

Although they have the same name (in English) and many similarities, the two programs have different motivation to launch, different program and many different characteristics:

- In terms of student quality, in Vietnam, the program was designed to target a relatively few excellent groups in the context that only a small percentage of Vietnamese youth go to university. Figure 2 shows that the GER (Gross Enrollment Ratio) in Vietnam in 1997 (the program's year of birth) was only about 7%, meaning that for every 100 young people, there were about 7 young people going to university. Meanwhile, the Honors Program in the United States was born very early, in the 1960s and 70s, amid a growing national higher education landscape. At that time, the GER rate in this country was 40-50%. The Honors Program then opened to target quite good, good students in the "lower segments". In other words, the program of VNU College of Sciences (as well as similar programs for talented engineers, high-quality bachelor's degrees and more recently the advanced programs in general in Vietnam)) is currently targeting the "elite of elite" students. Meanwhile, the Honor Program in the United States only targets the "elite of the masses", with the aim of competing with top universities (such as the Ivy League) in attracting students.

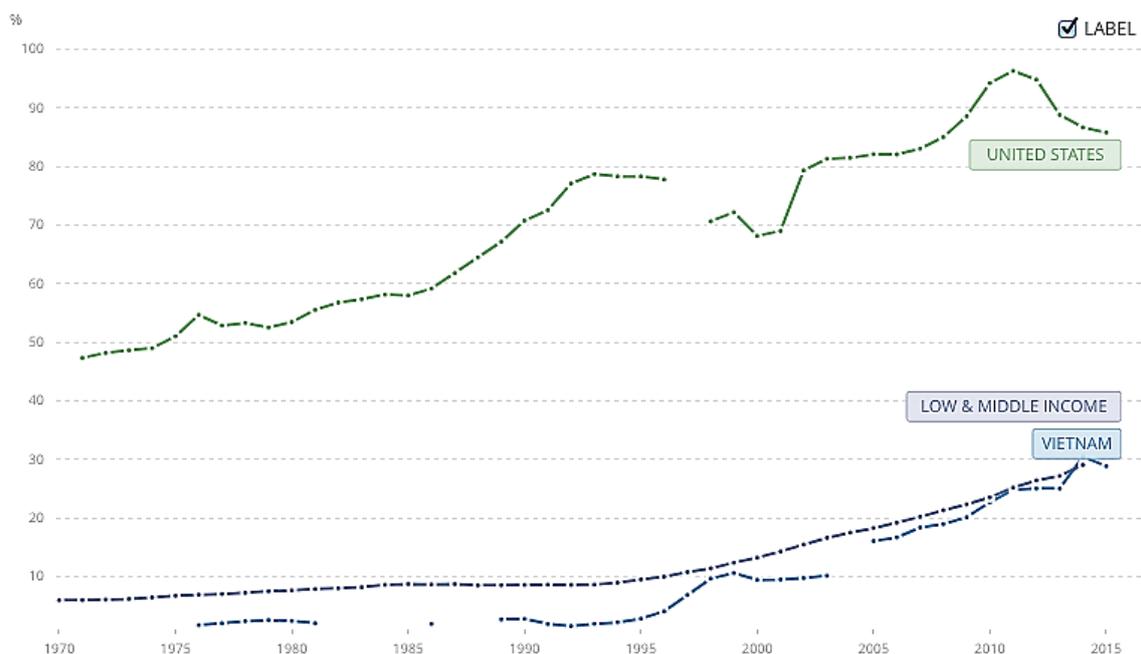


Figure 2. GER index in the United States and Vietnam in the period of 1970-2015 (Source: World Bank, 2017)

In terms of the way of organization and operation, with such different context, the way of organization and operation of the two programs also becomes different. While the program of VNU College of Science in particular and similar programs in Vietnam remain small, limiting the scope between selecting a number of science (natural, social science) and technical schools, Honor Program thrives in the United States, present at about 1400 4-year training colleges or 2-year training community colleges. The reason for this difference probably comes from financial motivation. If high-quality and talented training programs in Vietnam are almost entirely dependent on state investment, the U.S. Honors Program was born in part to build brands and earn revenue, attract excellent faculty, which makes universities in the United States willing to invest a significant amount of money in these programs.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Looking back at the present and towards the future, the context of Vietnam's higher education is now very different from the time when the talent bachelor program was born. Vietnam's GER has now reached about 30%, close to the corresponding GER level in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s when the Honor Program in the country was simultaneously launched. The current higher education environment in Vietnam has become more diverse, with many drastic changes, rather than the same homogeneity as 20 years ago. In Vietnam, the structure of higher education system is also gradually arranged in 3 levels, similar to higher education in the United States. Accordingly, some universities at the top of the pyramid are beginning to move towards research, while those at the middle level focus on training, leaving the bottom floor for colleges and middle schools plays a role of universal education. Another factor that also influences future changes is that the State's level of investment capital tends to decrease gradually, leading to the picture of higher marketization in higher education.

From these dynamics, we anticipate that in the near future, talent and high-quality bachelor programs will continue to thrive in quantity and quality, following a closer approach to programs in developed countries like the United States. It can be seen that, then, high-quality talent-training bachelor programs will no longer be exclusive to the top schools, but universities that are considered lower-ranked will also actively talented, advanced and high quality training program. This will also promote the trend of cooperation and alliances to form specialized associations/clubs/networks for talent training, similar to the model of the National Honor Training Council at America.

Moreover, the training of talented bachelors will be possible not only by the public sector. The private sector will be able to make more investments in this sector. Moreover, the medium-term policy for maintaining and developing a talented bachelor's education is still a beneficial, resource-saving and suitable option for Vietnamese conditions.

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