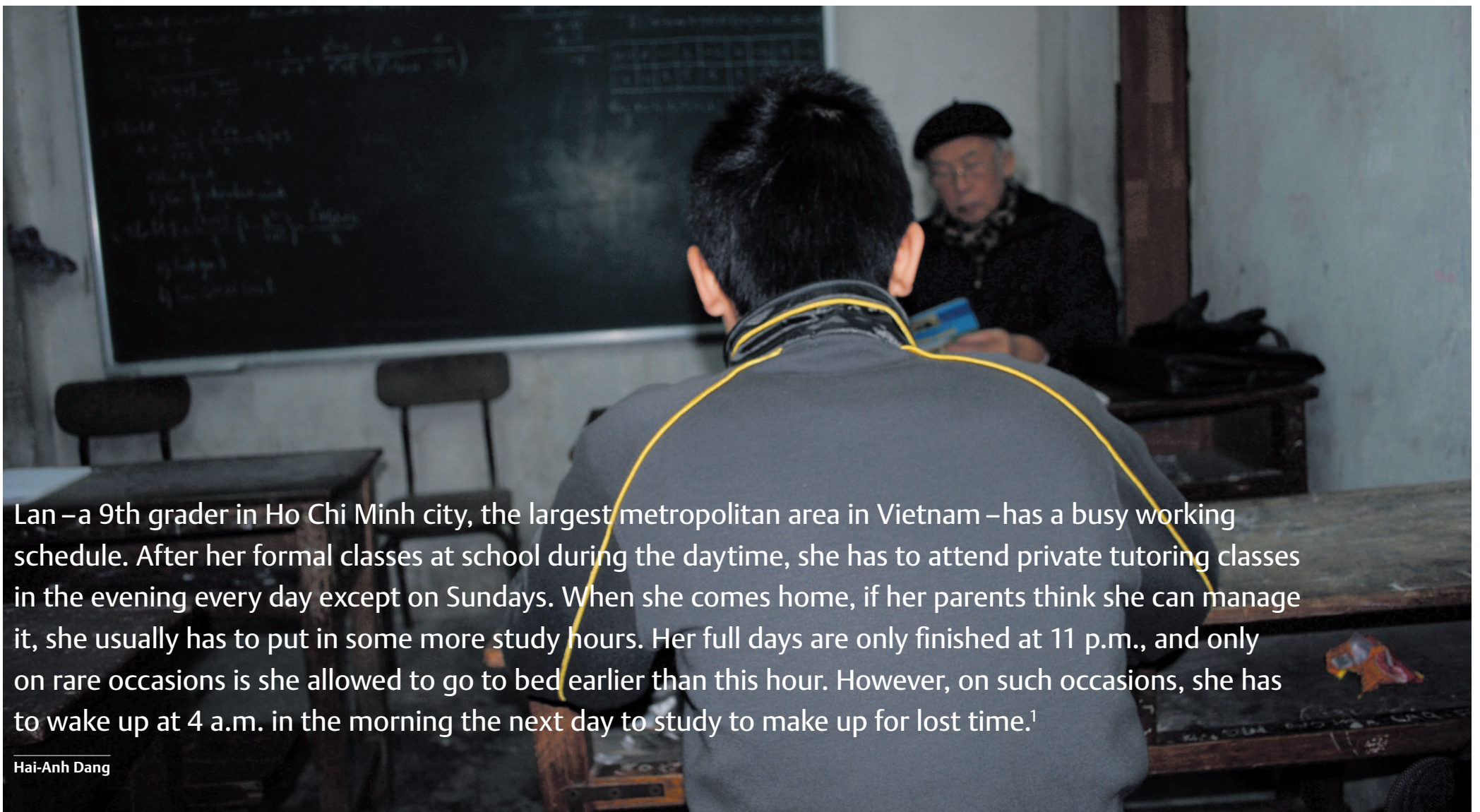


# A bird's-eye view of the private tutoring phenomenon in Vietnam



Lan – a 9th grader in Ho Chi Minh city, the largest metropolitan area in Vietnam – has a busy working schedule. After her formal classes at school during the daytime, she has to attend private tutoring classes in the evening every day except on Sundays. When she comes home, if her parents think she can manage it, she usually has to put in some more study hours. Her full days are only finished at 11 p.m., and only on rare occasions is she allowed to go to bed earlier than this hour. However, on such occasions, she has to wake up at 4 a.m. in the morning the next day to study to make up for lost time.<sup>1</sup>

Hai-Anh Dang

HOA IS ANOTHER HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT who was faced with two options from her parents: either staying at home and getting married after finishing high school or attending private tutoring classes in the big city to prepare for her university entrance examinations. Hoa took the latter option.

Lan's and Hoa's situations are not exceptions among many of their peers in Vietnam. One recent and growing feature of the Vietnamese education system is a 'shadow' education system existing alongside mainstream education, where students attend extra classes (*dihocthêm*) to acquire knowledge that they do not appear to obtain during their hours in school. These extra classes or private tutoring sessions have become widespread throughout Vietnam with a current enrolment of more than 30 percent and 50 percent of primary and secondary students respectively. Private tutoring also accounts for a considerable share of household budgets allocated to education. Our calculation using the latest household survey data in Vietnam shows that among those households that send their children to private tutoring classes, more than half (55 percent) spend between one and five percent of their total budget on these classes, and certain households spend up to 20 percent of their total budget.

#### Some characterizing features of tutoring

There are many forms of private tutoring in Vietnam. Private tutoring can be organized by students' parents, by teachers, by schools or by private tutoring centers. This can range from selective classes for just one student at either the student's or the teacher's home to very large classes of 200-300 students in private tutoring centers. Teachers teach such large classes by using a microphone in large theaters, in which case private tutoring classes resemble college classes. The diverse forms of private tutoring classes seem to be equally matched by the various types of private tutors, who can include both full-time tutors and part-time tutors such as college students, retired school teachers, university professors, poets, and writers.

Private tutoring is available for almost all subjects that are taught and assessed at school. The most popular subjects are those tested on the university entrance examinations and upper secondary school graduation examinations: Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, Literature, English, French, Russian, Chinese, History, Biology, and Geography. Of these, Mathematics, Physics, and Chemistry are the most popular subjects for private tutoring, since around 60 percent of students are reported to take examinations in these three subjects for their university entrance examinations.

#### The impact of tutoring

Private tutoring is interesting to study not just because it is a widespread phenomenon, but also because of its potentially significant impact on student academic performance. Private

tutoring is found to decrease the probabilities that students have poor or average GPA (Grade Point Average) rankings, and is found to increase even more the probabilities of students achieving good or excellent GPA rankings. These results are obtained from our careful analysis of household survey data in Vietnam and are robust to different modeling specifications and control characteristics.

However, private tutoring has unintended consequences as well. One common concern is that private tutoring can deepen the social inequalities between rich and poor and between urban and rural areas. Some poor families in Vietnam are reported to either borrow money at high interest rates or even take mortgages on their property in order to send their children to private tutoring classes. Furthermore, many students from rural areas have to go to urban areas to attend private tutoring lessons, since these lessons are not usually available in their areas. The resulting costs to these students (e.g. transportation costs to and living expenses in urban areas) can be a financial barrier for poor families.

Another concern is that too much private tutoring not only occupies a considerable amount of student time, but it may also have harmful consequences for student health. A recent survey of 38 schools in Ho Chi Minh City implemented by the Institute of Education Research at Ho Chi Minh City Teachers' College found that 76 percent of parents think that private tutoring leaves their children no time to study on their own, and 49 percent of parents say that private tutoring decreases their children's physical and mental health.

#### What factors determine private tutoring attendance?

A natural question then arises: why do parents send their children to private tutoring classes? Given the current evidence in Vietnam, there appear to be a number of factors that can explain the rise of this phenomenon. These factors can be considered from both the macro and micro (economic) perspective. Macro-level factors that affect private tutoring may include the level of development of the economy, the education system, and cultural values. Factors at the micro level may include the different characteristics of individuals, households, schools, and communities.

#### Macro factors

First, private tutoring can be regarded as a form of private and supplementary education which is a good, or more precisely an educational service, that is purchased in a free market. The growth of the Vietnamese economy from a centrally planned economy towards a market-oriented one in recent years has brought about a variety of new services that almost seem not to have existed before. It appears that tutoring classes are among these.

Above:  
A tutor and his  
student. Photo by  
Bich-Nga T. Nguyen.



Above:  
Students hard  
at work in the  
shadow education  
system. Photo by  
Ban-Mai H. Dang.

Second, the current education system in Vietnam is rather inflexible, especially at the tertiary level. Until recently only a few universities were multi-disciplinary, while the majority was devoted to a single discipline. Once admitted to a university, it was not easy for students to transfer to another school or even to change their major (within the discipline) at the same school. Furthermore, entrance examination scores are the single most important factor for student admission to a university. Thus practically, students have limited choices and they have had to try their best in every possible way to get into the schools that they want, including using private tutoring lessons in the hope of enhancing their academic performance.

To make matters worse, the growth in educational demand appears to exceed that of supply. Between 1995 and 2004, while gross enrolment rates almost doubled from 41 percent to 73 percent at the secondary level, and more than tripled from 3 percent to 10 percent at the tertiary level, the number of secondary schools and colleges respectively increased by only 27 percent and 111 percent.

Last but not least, cultural values can be an important driver behind the growth in private tutoring. In countries influenced by Confucianism such as China, Korea or Vietnam, there existed for hundreds of years the imperial examination system by which the ruling officials were selected based on their examination results. The education system had been mostly an elitist system where only a privileged minority could have access to education and could advance through educational achievement. This situation remained largely the same even when Vietnam was a French colony from the middle of the 19th century to 1945. In this period, it is reported that only 3 percent of the population enjoyed access to schooling and the major purpose of the education system was to train foremen, secretaries and low-level officials for the French colonist regime.

Coupled with a high-stakes testing system, this cultural heritage seems to have clearly left its mark on today's current attitudes and aspirations towards good performance in examinations in Vietnam and the (perhaps subconscious) pressure on parents to do everything they can to guarantee success for their children, including using private tutoring.

#### Micro factors

From a micro perspective, the variables that most influence the consumption of private tutoring at the household level are household living standards (as measured by household expenditure), household size, parental education, and urban location. Richer households spend proportionally more on private tutoring classes than poorer households do, with households in the richest quintile of the consumption distribution spending almost 14 times higher than in the

poorest consumption quintile. Households with more children spend significantly less on tutoring classes per child than households with fewer children. Higher parental education levels are positively associated with more expenditure on tutoring. And not surprisingly, urban households have higher spending on tutoring classes than do rural households.

At the student level, it is notable that the closer students are to the last grade in their current school level the more they spend on private tutoring. One year nearer to the last grade brings a 30 percent increase in spending on private tutoring at the primary level and a 66 percent increase at the lower secondary level. This clearly reflects households' concerns over student performance during the final grade of each level of schooling and in the subsequent examinations.

#### Policy makers' viewpoint on private tutoring

There has been much public debate about private tutoring in Vietnam. While some policymakers think that private tutoring has negative impacts on students, both on their academic performance and their childhood life, others believe that private tutoring can improve the quality of education. Therefore, while some argue that private tutoring should be banned altogether, others think that private tutoring should be encouraged, at least to some extent. The debates on private tutoring have been ongoing and heated, and they have been heard not just in the media, including newspapers and television, but also during the Minister of Education's presentations to the National Assembly.

The latest regulation at the ministerial level on private tutoring was issued by the Ministry of Education and Training in early 2007. According to this legal document, organizations and individuals can provide private tutoring only if they are granted a permit by the local authority, and it is forbidden to offer private tutoring to students who already study two sessions (two shifts) of formal schooling per day. Most remarkably, it is also stipulated that violation of the regulation can be prosecuted. This is, in fact, the first time that such strict punishment for abuses of private tutoring has been stipulated by the Vietnamese government. This also shows the Vietnamese government's determination to control private tutoring.

#### Remaining issues

While there has been some evidence collected on the consumers of private tutoring (i.e. students), not much is known about the producers of tutoring (i.e. teachers) in Vietnam. A number of questions remain unanswered about their profiles, motivations, and tutoring methods. For example, there have been anecdotes in newspapers in Vietnam that to raise income, some teachers force

their own students to take their tutoring classes. Students that do not attend these classes may suffer from bad grades or being blacklisted by their teachers. However, to date there is no data to support these claims.

Clearly, more understanding of private tutoring will help policy makers regulate this educational choice better. This should be all the more important given households' limited resources in developing countries such as Vietnam.

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#### Notes

The author is a post-doc consultant with the Development Research Group of the World Bank. The findings and interpretations in this article do not necessarily reflect the views of the World Bank or its executive directors.

This article is based on the author's own or joint work, either completed or ongoing, with other colleagues on private tutoring in Vietnam including:

- Dang, Hai-Anh (2007). "The Determinants and Impact of Private Tutoring Classes in Vietnam", in *Economics of Education Review* 26(6): 684-699 (Special Issue).
- (2008). *Private Tutoring in Vietnam: An Investigation of its Causes and Impacts with Policy Implications*, VDM Verlag Dr. Mueller Publishing House: Saarbrücken, Germany.
- (forthcoming). "Private Tutoring: A Review of Current and Little Explored Issues in the Context of Vietnam", in Janice Aurini, Julian Dierkes and Scott Davis (eds) *Out of the Shadows: What Is Driving the International Rise of Supplementary Education?* Springer Press.
- Dang, Hai-Anh and Halsey Rogers (2008). "The Growing Phenomenon of Private Tutoring: Does It Deepen Human Capital, Widen Inequalities, or Waste Resources?" in *World Bank Research Observer* 23(2): 161-200.

These publications have more detailed treatment of the issues covered in this article and contain all references for the numbers cited. I would like to thank Julian Dierkes for useful comments and Marie Lenstrup for editorial help on earlier drafts of this article.

#### Reference

- 1 Hai Duyen. (2010). "Chạy đua con học thêm buổi tối" (Racing to put children in evening tutoring classes). VnExpress. Accessed in November (in Vietnamese) at <http://www.vnexpress.net/GL/Xa-hoi/Giao-duc/2010/11/3BA227E0/>. The names of the students have been changed.

*Some poor families in Vietnam are reported to either borrow money at high interest rates or even take mortgages on their property in order to send their children to private tutoring classes.*



Right:  
The quality of facilities varies quite widely.  
Photo by Bich-Nga T. Nguyen.