that our parents send us on a monthly basis. Entering the university gates we carry more worries and difficulties than other students. We’re always aware of what we have and will have to do for our lives.

Thankfully, the Merali University Scholarship Program has created conditions for us to study better and reduce the difficulties we face in life. On behalf of the girls who are lucky enough to receive the scholarships today, I promise to study hard, become a useful citizen for society, and strive to be worthy of the support of the Shirin Pandju Merali Foundation for poor girls like us.”

—Nguyen Thi Thuong

Merali University Scholarship Program

In October 2011, The Asia Foundation, with support from the Shirin Pandju Merali Foundation, launched a five-year project to enable 100 women to pursue undergraduate studies at three prestigious colleges and universities in Vietnam. Generous donations support academically gifted female students from poor backgrounds to continue their education at university level. This university scholarship program is unique in supporting students majoring in the natural sciences and technical fields, where women are traditionally underrepresented.

WHO ARE THE MERALI SCHOLARS?

Merali Scholarships for undergraduate studies are awarded to young women from low-income families who have demonstrated academic achievement and a commitment to learning. Scholars are chosen from students admitted into select universities, recognized by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) for their academic excellence. The Asia Foundation works closely with its local partner, the Center for Education and Development (CED), and with the management of these universities to select students who meet the criteria as scholarship recipients.

The Class of 2011

• 40 Vietnamese women enrolled in four-year B.S. degree programs in the sciences at Hanoi National University;
• 40 women enrolled in five-year B.S. degree programs in information technology, biochemistry, and other engineering majors at Hanoi University of Technology; and
• 20 women enrolled in five-year B.S. degrees in civil engineering at National University of Civil Engineering in Hanoi.

Why do we target these girls?

In Vietnam, rural and lower-income families have much less access to higher education than urban girls from higher-income families. Students in the Northwest, the Northeast, and the Mekong River Delta regions are less likely to gain admission to universities. Students from poor and remote areas also struggle to bear the financial burden of education at a well-known college or university. In addition to tuition, students must pay for books and materials, transportation, and other personal expenses away from home. Earning a university degree remains but a dream for most students from poor families. Although the government has committed to
promoting access to higher education among the poor, many thousands of students across Vietnam are being left behind every year.

As in many other countries across Asia, cultural practices and traditions in Vietnam value girls and women less than boys and men. Vietnamese girls are more likely than boys to be kept out of school, as rural families that cannot afford to educate all of their children.

Traditionally, they will educate their sons before their daughters. This disadvantage to girls and women throughout their lives perpetuates a vicious cycle of illiteracy, poverty, and ill health in families and communities, hindering Vietnam's overall development.

WHAT DOES THE SCHOLARSHIP INCLUDE?

The Merali University Scholarship Program includes tuition, educational supplies, and books. The Asia Foundation's Books for Asia program also selects collections of books relevant to the subjects the scholarship students field of study for distribution to the universities where the girls are studying.

WHAT IS THE ASIA FOUNDATION'S ROLE?

The Foundation determines the program strategy and oversees the scholarship program monitoring, implementation, and impact. The Foundation provides regular technical assistance and advice to local partners to ensure efficient management. For example, the Foundation carefully reviews all reports to ensure the program is complying with grant agreements, and also provides reporting templates, support, and guidance to the partners on program and financial reporting requirements.

The Foundation has a dedicated and experienced program manager on the ground who ensures successful implementation of the scholarship program. Dinh Kieu Nhung is the Office and Educational Resources Program Manager in the Foundation's Vietnam office who manages the University Scholarship Program. Ms. Nhung holds a B.A. in English language from Hanoi University and studied at the Harvard University of Foreign Trade. Since joining the Foundation in 2000, Ms. Nhung has managed a variety of programs and provided extensive technical and capacity building support to the Foundation's local partners. In addition to managing the scholarship programs, she oversees The Asia Foundation's Books for Asia program, which distributes thousands of new books to schools and libraries throughout Vietnam, and facilitates educational exchanges. Ms. Nhung and other Foundation staff meet regularly with its partners throughout the scholarship cycle to review selection criteria, individual scholars' progress, program challenges, and steps to improve the program each year to ensure maximum impact.

WHAT ADDITIONAL SUPPORT IS PROVIDED TO ENSURE SUCCESS?

The Asia Foundation, the Center for Education and Development, and representatives from the three universities have established a Project Management Unit to monitor the scholars' academic standing and provide support when needed. The PMU is responsible for monitoring scholars' attendance and academic performance as well as meeting with the girls and their families to work through any problems that arise during the school year.

The program publishes an online blog to help all the scholars connect with each other, share experiences, and provide encouragement. Scholars who attend same university meet each semester to share their experiences and encourage one another, and Merali Scholars from all three universities gather together once a year to network and build a sense of camaraderie.

WHAT IS THE PROGRAM ACHIEVING?

The Merali University Scholarship Program for Vietnamese Women is having a significant, positive impact on the lives of participating scholars and their families. The young women are grateful for the opportunity to pursue higher education that they and their families would have struggled to finance without scholarship support. This opportunity to further their education will enable them to gain better jobs, break the cycle of poverty, and contribute meaningfully to their own positive development and that of their families and communities.

LOW DROP-OUT RATES

In an environment where a significant number of students drop out, the fact that nearly every scholar completed the second year is a testament to determination to succeed. In addition, our university scholarship program supports students majoring in the natural sciences and technical fields, where Vietnamese women are traditionally underrepresented. These programs are heavily male-dominated and some scholars participating in this program are the only girls in their course. They are pioneers, but it adds stress. The universities report that in previous years many female students in the science faculties changed majors. This year, however, only one Merali scholar has switched majors and the remaining scholars remain committed to continuing their studies in their chosen science majors.

CHALLENGES

For most university-level scholars, transferring from an under-resourced rural school to an elite university is a dramatic change. The Merali University Scholarship Program targets the neediest students, reaching out to women who would benefit most from this life-changing opportunity. These students face more challenges than their urban-based peers who often have the option to live with their families while attending university. Most Merali scholars must find rented accommodation, often located far from campus; do not have the resources for additional tutoring; and must balance the demands of their studies with part-time work to cover their living expenses.

IMPROVING GRADES

Fifty-three percent of scholars improved their grades in the 2012-2013 academic year, moving from below average, to average, or even higher. Overall, there was a significant rise in the scholars’ grade point averages (GPA) from an average of 2.31 at the end of the 2011-12 academic year to 2.73 at the end of 2012-13. Further, 95 percent of scholars at the Hanoi University of Civil Engineering are now achieving results that are good or excellent (up 40 percent from last year). With the Foundation’s additional support, the number of below average scholars at Hanoi University of Technology has decreased from 53 percent to 25 percent, and the number of below average scholars at the Vietnam National University, Hanoi has decreased from 20 percent to 5 percent.

MEET THE SCHOLARS

Ms. Bui Dieu Linh, Chair of the Merali Scholars Club, Hanoi University of Civil Engineering

Linh comes from a family of six from Binh Phuoc province in the south of Vietnam. Her parents, who are gardeners, are still supporting four of their children. She was ranked “Good” last academic year and still maintains this ranking in the first semester of her second year. Linh shared: “We are very grateful for Mr. Merali’s generous support. I will try my best in the next semesters to be worthwhile of his support. My dream is to find a job at the Department of Construction of Binh Phuoc province after graduation to be able to contribute to the development of my hometown.”

Ms. Nguyen Thi Thuong from Hanoi National University

Ha comes from Nam Dinh province in northern Vietnam. Her father died when she was only five years old. Her mother is a farmer with a total income of $20 per month. Thanks to the Shirin Pandju Merali Foundation, Ha is now able to afford her university study – something her family would have not imagined possible before.

“We are very grateful to the Shirin Pandju Merali Foundation’s generous support for rural, low-income women like me to attend science and technology universities. I will try my best to improve my grades. My dream is to become a high school teacher after graduation.”

Ms. Nguyen Thi Thuong won a scholarship award ceremony.

“Each of us has different circumstances at birth. Some have a full and happy childhood, but many go through their childhood with a lot of difficulties and sadness. Perhaps not only me, but all the girls here today have overcome many difficulties on our journey of learning. On receiving notice of college matriculation, besides the joy of success after 12 years of study like any other students, we also had worries about the future. The restless nights of our mothers worrying about our lives. Our fathers striving to scrimp and save to support their children’s study in the city, where everything is more expensive. It is the result of their sweat and hardship.

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