Formation of Men and Women of Talent in Vietnam: An Urgent Need to Upgrade Vocational and Higher Education

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Abstract

This paper reports on the current state of vocational and higher education in Vietnam and finds that there are a number of deficiencies that affect business and the economy negatively. To address this matter, it is suggested that policymakers place an emphasis on such things as upgrading faculty qualifications, curriculum development and cooperative programs with the business and industrial sectors. If Vietnam desires to continue on its development path, it must choose the proper educational strategy to produce graduates with the skills and qualifications needed to survive in the new global environment.

Keywords: Vietnam, Higher Education, Vocational Education, Reform, Faculty Development

Introduction

One of the more memorable experiences in Vietnam is a visit to Hanoi’s Temple of Literature, especially during graduation season, as newly-minted scholars come to celebrate their achievement. Particularly inspiring is a reading of the lofty goals of the prophetic words of Emperor Dai Bao inscribed on a plaque hanging inside the temple, the first university in Vietnam and for centuries the principal center of learning.

“Virtuous and talented men are state sustaining elements: The strength and the prosperity of a state depend on its vitality and it becomes weaker as such vitality fails. That is why all the Saint Emperors and clear-sighted Kings didn’t fail in seeing to the formation of men of talent and the employment of literati to develop this vitality.” Nien Hieu Dai Bao (1442)

These goals, notwithstanding, the current state of Vietnam’s vocational and higher education sectors leaves much to be desired (Goyette, 2012; Hayden, 2010; London, 2011). The educational system can no longer rely on the established learning method of education, which has been the standard for centuries and creates passive learners and “passive recorders” who lack critical thinking skills.

In a comprehensive study of Vietnamese education by the Harvard Kennedy School Vietnam Program (2010), for example, the authors concluded that “a broad consensus has emerged in Vietnam that higher education is in need of deep and wide-reaching reform. This consensus extends from students and their families to public intellectuals and educators to policymakers at the highest levels of government. Vietnam’s national competitiveness increasingly depends on skilled human capital, which its higher education system is not delivering.”

Education in every sense is one of the fundamental factors of development (Ozturk, 2001). No country can achieve sustainable economic development without substantial investment in human capital as education raises people’s productivity and creativity and promotes entrepreneurship and technological advances. Thus, if Vietnam desires to continue on its development path, it is imperative that Vietnam establishes a high quality sustainable system of vocational and higher education that will meet the needs of the modern era. How best to accomplish this task is an issue that must be addressed.
Changes Following “Doi Moi”

Following the adoption of the policy of “doi moi,” generally translated as economic renovation, Vietnam’s education system moved away from the former Soviet model in an attempt to meet the demands of a market-oriented economy. And the priority to which the government purports to place on education is stipulated in Article 35 of the current Constitution (issued in 1992): Education is the first priority of the national policy and the government has specifically stated that education and training play a very important part in the human resources development strategy.

Unfortunately, the progress to date has not lived up to these expectations. The World Economic Forum’s 2013-2014 Global Competitiveness Report (2013), for example, ranked Vietnam’s university education sector 95th out of 148 countries recently surveyed, putting Vietnam behind countries such as Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei, and Thailand. Poor rankings were particularly found in both the quality of the management of schools and the availability of research and training services.

The 2014 Vietnam Development Report (2014) makes clear that a skilled workforce is central to Vietnam’s economic modernization. However, a challenge is the mismatch in the labor market in which employers struggle to find the right workers. There is a desperate shortage of workers with adequate skills, which hinders the activities of businesses. The survey reports that most employers attribute difficulties in hiring new workers to either the inadequate skills of job applicants (a “skills gap”), or to a scarcity of workers in some occupations (a “skills shortage”). Thus, there is not a lack of demand for workers, but rather the workers cannot match their skills with those in need.

Often, the types of skills employers require in various occupations are relatively similar, but these skills are not sufficiently taught, at both levels, at vocational and higher education institutions. A recent critique of vocational education by Professor Nguyen Xuan Han of the Hanoi National University (VietnamNet, 2014) succinctly summed up many of the problems in the Vietnamese education system. Albeit his observations were based on a survey specific to automotive mechanics, the results are generally applicable to all levels of Vietnamese education:

What Do Employers Want and Need?

• Critical thinking and problem-solving skills
• Initiative and (at least) leadership potential
• Creativity
• A positive attitude and passion for the work
• A strong work ethic
• Professionalism, defined as the skill, good judgment, and polite behavior that is expected from a person who is trained to do a job well
What Employers Lack?

The shortcomings of both vocational and higher education in Vietnam are highlighted in the results from an earlier survey of businesses in Hanoi which rated university graduates’ capability to adapt to the work environment (Kim, 2013). The new graduates who were employed by automobile maintenance companies lacked the

- Updated knowledge about the latest technologies.
- Practical Knowledge
- Working behaviors
- Foreign language skills
- Discipline
- Professionalism.

Current Focus on Hardware

How Vietnam can address the inadequacies of its educational sector best is not entirely clear. Nevertheless, a number of possible plans have been put forth. One of the more well-publicized efforts over the past few years is the Vietnamese government’s agreement in principle to construct four international standard universities with US$400 million loans from the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank. The hope is that at least one can reach the world’s top 200 by 2020, although few newly established universities have reached that level in such a short period (Pham, 2014).

Another opportunity is a US$190 million loan from the Asian Development Bank for the development of the University of Science and Technology of Hanoi. The project focuses on the establishment of a new model university focusing on teaching and research in science and technology with stronger university-industry linkages (WorldBank, 2014).

More recently, the World Bank has committed US$50 million to support the implementation of policies designed to strengthen governance, financing and quality of higher education by:

(i) improving the responsiveness of higher education and research and increase the quantitative capacity of the system;
(ii) enhancing fiscal transparency, sustainability and effectiveness of the higher education sector;
(iii) improving the quality of higher education institutions (WorldBank, 2013).

With regard to vocational and technical education (VET), the Asian Development Bank notes that VET is indispensable for addressing labor requirements, especially in countries which are transitioning to a market economy, such as Vietnam (Asian Development Bank, 2013). However, Vietnam’s vocational and technical education system has failed to meet the demand for labor. To attempt to alleviate some of the problems, the Asian Development Bank and other partners have been supporting a project to help improve the
system’s market orientation, upgrade rankings of key schools by developing curricula and instructional materials, improve equipment and facilities, and strengthen institutional capacity in the General Department of Vocational Training. This includes the establishment of a labor market information system for program accreditation and technical certification systems, improved access to education for women and minorities, staff development, and the private sector’s participation in the educational programs (Asian Development Bank, 2013).

The Human Resource Development Strategy of Vietnam for the period of 2011-2020 has as one of its many goals “to build up a system of advanced, modern and diversified human training facilities and an integrated and multi-level career structure among the national and international training institutions in different levels and to create high-quality vocational schools, of which five schools will meet the international standards by 2015 and more than 10 schools will be world-class schools by 2020.” However, conducting vocational training in Vietnam is not a simple task (Quynh, 2013).

**Need to Focus on Software**

The building of, or plans to build educational institutions, however, have focused primarily on expanding the “hardware”. But perhaps the Vietnam’s educational system really needs to focus on the how of addressing the severe shortage of “software” or qualified human resources such as teaching and administrative staff, as well as on teaching methods at all levels of the educational system.

The data in figure 1 show an increase in schools at the post-secondary school level, numbers of students enrolled and numbers of faculty teaching at such institutions. As can be seen, the rate of growth of the
number of faculty members falls far behind the numbers of students and even schools.

The shortage of qualified faculty is especially severe at the advanced level. In 2012, for example, only eleven percent of the country’s 84 thousand lecturers held doctorate degrees, down from close to fifteen percent just a little over a decade ago. The ratio of PhD-holding lecturers per student has also fallen from 0.5% (based on one highly qualified lecturer per 200 students) in 2000 to 0.415% in 2012 (Pham, 2013).

It must also be kept in mind that quality is a subjective issue and the term doctorate in Vietnam may be misleading. Many Vietnamese PhDs in general, particularly if educated domestically, are actually educated only to the Bachelor’s level on the international scale.

In an effort to address the faculty situation, the Vietnamese government has embarked on an ambitious plan to enable individuals to pursue advanced degree programs both in Vietnam and abroad, although the target to train 20,000 Ph.D.’s by 2020 appears to be unrealistic (Dat, 2014). The educational authorities appear to be counting on outside aid and educational partnerships to assist in this undertaking. A number of countries, including the United States, Switzerland, Finland, Belgium, France, and Japan are currently providing support for such endeavors. But since funding is a scarce resource for all parties, cost effective programs are advisable and only time will tell if the current methods of training faculty are economically beneficial.

At the individual institution level, a number of public universities in Vietnam are trying to implement various measures to attract good lecturers, such as offering incentives in the form of higher wages or cheaper housing. However, salary levels remain relatively low, while teachers are expected to work long hours and handle heavy teaching loads.

In addition to the shortage of qualified teaching staff, there is a need for comprehensive changes and reforms of teaching methodology and training syllabi designs, higher capital budget allocation and the encouragement of scientific research. Areas of organizing classes, the evaluation of students, in-class presentation skills and all aspects of curriculum design and presentation should be emphasized. Faculty and administrators must also comprehend fully the importance of academic integrity and the negative consequences of corruption and plagiarism.

Nguyen The Hung, a professor at the Hanoi Agriculture University notes:

“Vietnam’s education and training do not resemble to any other education in the world . . . When Vietnamese lecturers show the education curriculums to foreign colleagues, the foreigners say they cannot understand. The curriculums have been compiled by ourselves and we believe that they are the best. In fact, we do not have connection to the international education.” VietNamNet Bridge (2012)

In the area of vocational training the quality of the training programs has been improved, but vocational training continues to fail to produce the skills needed in the labor market, such as soft skills and teamwork skills. There is still a big gap between the capacities of Vietnamese workers when compared with other workers in developed countries in the region and around the world (VietnamPlus, 2014). The qualifications of a good number of the instructors are not up to the level required to compete in the market economy and

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the quality of trainees has not yet met the needs of high-skilled labor for manufacturing. In addition, the curriculum of vocational training has not been updated or supplemented regularly to deal with the changes in manufacturing techniques and technology.

In a study of vocational curricula in Vietnam, Le Hong and Fünfhaus (2014) found that even in the modernization strategies regarding skills development in Vietnam, technical competencies and transferable skills such as team work, communication skills and the ability to learn throughout one’s life (lifelong learning), are not emphasized properly. Rather, the teaching process usually still focuses on developing technical knowledge and especially practical skills.

Recommendations

Below are a number of recommendations policymakers should consider to address the deficiencies in the educational sector.

*Improve the Skills of the Faculty*

There are a number of programs currently in existence, each with particular benefits and costs. Ideally, all faculty members would be sent abroad to quality post-graduate programs to obtain advanced degrees in their particular field. Not only would faculty receive a high level of training, they would also be able to observe the workings of other economies, businesses, and different teaching methodologies. Such vocational and cooperative education programs would provide Vietnamese faculty with opportunities to experience work environments at the international institutions.

Hopefully the practical skills acquired could be adopted at Vietnamese vocational and higher educational institutions, so that returning faculty members who fill positions within their departments and institutes could be the sources for internal reforms. The study abroad option, unfortunately, is limited due to the high costs involved and is generally limited to a few selected individuals. However, the long-term benefits of this investment in human capital are expected to outweigh any short-term costs.

A less costly, but perhaps with a lower expected rate of return, is the option to conduct faculty training in Vietnam. Such programs involve foreign faculty teaming up with Vietnamese faculty. The benefits accrue to not only the participants in the program, but also to the faculty team members who often learn new and more effective ways of teaching. This can foster changes in teaching methodology and curriculum design, and address the significant problems of cheating and plagiarism that is rampant in the educational system of Vietnam (McCornac, 2008).

*Implement Work-Integrated Learning for Locally Based Faculty*

A shortcoming of conducting training in Vietnam is the participant’s lack of real-world exposure to the field being taught. While significant knowledge can be conveyed from the visiting instructors, textbooks and other materials, the saying that ‘a picture is worth a thousand words’ rings all too true. A possible solution
is to have faculty serve in either a paid or unpaid internships with businesses and companies operating in Vietnam. Trade and trade and vocational occupations could serve in a form of apprenticeship to better learn necessary skills. This could be mutually beneficial in the long run as not only will faculty members be able to improve their skills, but these individuals will better understand the needs in the market for graduates in their respective discipline and hopefully gain the expertise needed to produce higher qualified graduates.

**Improve Joint and Cooperative Programs**

Over the past decade, a number of educational institutions have undertaken cooperative or joint programs with foreign institutions. It is highly recommended that such programs be expanded and improved to provide benefits not only to students, but to local faculty members as well. One suggestion is that rather than having foreign institutions sending faculty for short-term (often to cover two weeks courses), faculty members should be in residence at the local institution for a minimum of one year. Such arrangements could be modeled on programs such as the Fulbright Scholar program or faculty could be hired for fixed term positions. The faculty members would be encouraged, if not required, to work with their local counterparts to transfer knowledge and teaching skills. This could be mutually beneficial, as the foreign faculty members would have the opportunity to conduct research in Vietnam.

**Continue Reform of Higher Education and Vocational Education with a Focus on Conferring Legal Autonomy on Higher Education Institutions**

With strong encouragement from agencies such as the World Bank, Vietnam over time has diversified its educational system by authorizing the establishment of various types of institutions including those that are not funded by the government. These institutions - people-established, semipublic, foreign owned and private higher education institutions - can provide a new level of autonomy at the institutional level and increased accountability and quality for programs offered at these institutions.

**Integrate Backward**

An excellent example of how corporations seeking to invest in Vietnam can address the deficiency in the vocational sector is the case of Intel following its intention to build a massive chip factory in Vietnam that would employ 4,000 people (Horn, 2014).

Faced with the challenge of finding only a very limited number of students skilled in basic engineering despite these students' completion of locally based programs, Intel launched three initiatives. The first initiative offers scholarships for engineering students to attend colleges in the United States for two years upon completion of three years at university in Vietnam, so that they can receive a sounder, more rigorous engineering education. Secondly, Intel helped seed a master’s in engineering program in Vietnam. Thirdly, it became involved with the Higher Engineering Education Alliance Program (HEEAP) to work with vocational colleges and universities to address the following education objectives:
1. Modernize the curriculum and educational methods in Vietnam
2. Modernize the labs so that Vietnamese students can learn to apply what they have been taught.
3. Create the capacity in the programs to teach courses in the English language in order to enhance language skills of the students and to eliminate the need to translate manuals into Vietnamese.
4. Train the deans and rectors of the colleges and universities to help them be more strategic and forward looking.
5. Promote diversity in the programs to combat the fact that women are actively discouraged from engineering and vocational studies in Vietnam.

Conclusion

Late last year, Vietnam President Truong Tan Son sent a new school year letter to educators, students and their parents nationwide proposing joint efforts to further improve the quality of education. The Head of State challenged the education sector to strongly improve program management, educational programs, teaching methods, and teaching evaluations for quality assessment, to improve teaching skills and the quality of work among educational staff, and to advance the “Good teaching - good learning” campaign.

Whether the rhetoric will be followed by tangible results is too early to ascertain. Education in every sense is one of the fundamental factors of development and there is no doubt the formation of men and women of talent and education is necessary for Vietnam to continue its transition to a competitive market economy. However, if Vietnam is to take a great leap forward in developing its educational system it must choose the proper strategy of hardware and software development or human resources skills to produce graduates with the skills and qualifications needed to survive in the new global environment.

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