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VIETNAM

Higher education must focus on flexibility

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A new book examines all aspects of Vietnam’s higher education system and calls for the development of flexible students who are capable of being socially, regionally and transnationally mobile, and a focus on employability and knowledge for the purposes of community development. ‘Does the higher education system in Vietnam address the demands of the nation and people within the global age?’ The answers to this crucial question are developed and discussed in a new book, Higher Education in Vietnam: Flexibility, mobility and practicality in the global knowledge economy, published as part of the Palgrave Series on Studies in Global Higher Education.

The weakest education sectors in Vietnam at present are higher education, vocational education and training and university research.

Yet in the age of the global knowledge economy, these sectors should play the central role in human capacity building, providing knowledge and skills essential to the independent development of the country. Education, training and research are integral to national development and global modernisation.

At the same time, they should ensure a modernisation with Vietnamese characteristics and draw on the nation’s traditional strengths.

Challenges

‘Doi Moi’ is a flexible and practical response of the Vietnamese government to the challenges of national development, releasing the talents of families, communities and corporations to build the national economy in the common interest and hastening the process of technological change and economic modernisation.

But is there a corresponding capacity for production, innovation and response in the education sector?

Unless it is deeply reformed, the education system will not do this. Education and research are public goods. Their effects go beyond the context of education and affect personal, social, cultural, political and economic life.

When the quality of education, learning, knowledge and research in Vietnam are lifted, then the environment in which everybody lives will be transformed.

Although there is a good tradition of teaching in Vietnam and a strong commitment to education in many families, and these factors contribute to a relatively strong national performance in the 2012 PISA comparison of school student achievement (OECD, 2013), there are problems in basic schooling in Vietnam.

The education system is less strong at the levels of upper secondary education than basic education. And it is weaker still in higher and vocational education, where much training is not relevant to the needs of the economy and scientific research and social research of genuine world standard are minimal, even in the country’s leading universities.

There are widespread concerns that the higher education sector is out of tune with the
demands of the market economy, the society and the globalised world.

Many of the beliefs underpinning the higher education curriculum are rigid and outdated, isolated from education reforms in other countries and the international currents of knowledge, new technologies and the needs of the country itself. The development of soft skills and the attributes of students are not given sufficient emphasis.

Graduate employability is a concern facing graduates, universities and policy-makers as well as the entire society. More than 162,000 university graduates are unemployed at present, according to the International Labour Organization.

Work-integrated learning as part of both the formal and informal curriculum is minimal. Many students are not provided with the opportunity to gain relevant work experience in their field of study.

Institutions of higher education are often inefficiently governed and trapped in red tape. At every level, education is top-down and bedevilled by a burdensome hierarchy: this is tradition without flexibility.

It is common practice that students are used to studying without much critical reflection and without learning knowledge that is challenging. Most students find it hard to think creatively or to respond flexibly to emerging challenges.

**Underfunding**

Universities and colleges are severely under-funded, not just compared to richer countries but also compared to other emerging nations for whom education has been a larger priority for national government in recent years than it has been in Vietnam.

Professionals working in tertiary education are not sufficiently paid. We cannot expect them to be the great teachers and creative, practical researchers we want them to be – and we know they could be – until they are free to give all their time to the work and until it is no longer necessary for them to work in extra paid jobs in order to make enough for their families to live on.

Vietnam follows the Soviet model of higher education under which universities and research institutions are treated as separate bodies. This model is increasingly inadequate to meet the scientific, economic and social needs of countries today.

Universities are more than just teaching and training institutions. They are supposed to produce knowledge that helps develop the nation, especially in a knowledge economy, which the countries of the whole world are moving towards, including Vietnam.

Both Vietnam’s national tradition and modern challenges emphasise the need for flexibility, practicality and mobility as core national virtues.

Therefore, the book argues for a system of higher education and tertiary training that enables the development of flexible, practical and mobile citizens; one that is also founded in a flexible, practical and mobile view of knowledge; so as to best equip Vietnam for the challenges of an ever-changing world.

**Flexibility**

Many of today’s higher education students will change jobs frequently during their lifetime
and some will move between very different industries, sectors and roles.

In the market-oriented economy, amid Vietnam’s changing social and employment structures, new professions, hybridised professions or transformed professions are always emerging.

The challenges of modernisation and economic development in the global setting require flexibility and adaptability; and people trained in specific occupations often find themselves working in new areas after graduation.

At the same time deep specialist knowledge, and the capacity to acquire complex contents and new skills for contextual use, can be equally important. It is essential that government, universities and industry together ensure that sufficient specialists are trained in fields important for the functioning of economy and society.

Flexibility in education is about people and their capacity to learn to flexibly and adaptively work on their own behalf. This requires the progressive transformation of classrooms at all levels in Vietnam into learner-centred environments that help students develop their skills, especially soft skills, and attributes rather than just their content knowledge.

Teachers should be nurturers of not only creative thinking but also the humanistic development of students.

It is vital that the tertiary education system prepares students not only for the solely instrumental purpose of participating in the labour market but also for the social goal of contributing to the community – while at the same time fulfilling their personal aspirations.

The best tertiary education structure for Vietnam is one that nurtures the development of flexible students who are capable of being socially, regionally and transnationally mobile, and who develop multiple identities – while at the same time these students not only cherish their personal agency but also retain and evolve their Vietnamese heritage.

As higher education advances in Vietnam, institutions in education must further develop their capacity for self-organisation, progressively moving away from top-down and line-managed structures towards local organisations responding directly to their immediate environment and to the agency of stakeholders within those organisations – even while working within the framework of national policies and objectives.

Systems and structures should be especially flexible and responsive to changing needs. What really matters is the goals that they address and the people they serve.

There is nothing sacred, fixed or unmovable about structures and processes of government, management and institutional education. Structures, rules and processes should change over time in response to need.

However, this is a new way of doing things and not everyone is ready. To build capacity in flexible local management the country will need to develop and implement extensive training programmes.

**Practicality**

Learning occurs and is mediated in social contexts and its applications are also context-bound.
Even while building capacity in students for autonomous learning, teachers in higher education foster an understanding of the social and economic contexts in which learning will be used and developed, including the history and traditions of the country, the diversity of its people, the world of work and cities and regions and the larger global setting.

It is in these varied environments – and often in more than one at the same time – that what students learn will become practical knowledge. Deep contextual knowledge enables graduates to become more socially responsible people and contribute to collective organisation in villages, workplaces, urban environments, institutions and government.

Higher education is worthwhile for its own sake, but above all it has practical social objectives.

The purpose of institutional forms of education is to develop in people the capacity for lifelong self-learning and the effective application of learning in daily life so that they can live fulfilling lives while contributing to the common good.

Therefore the core of higher education is knowledge: its transmission and sharing, its acquisition and use, its creation and development.

Yet the curriculum, pedagogy and assessment should be planned and enacted in a manner that places emphasis on not only developing students’ knowledge but also strengthening students’ capacity to translate knowledge and theories into real-life and real-world situations.

In an effective higher education system, work experience, work-integrated learning and other applications of knowledge are built into the processes of formal education in all programmes.

This points to the need to develop the capabilities of professional educators. The quality of faculty is a key limitation in higher education.

Not enough people working as professors and lecturers are doctorally trained. Not enough faculty go on learning during their working lifetimes. Not enough faculty have working experience of and close links to other sectors such as industry and government.

Not enough faculty are globally competent, as partly measured by skills in English and internet use. Not enough faculty perform to the level consistent with their skills and talents, as is shown by the low level of output of published research.

Faculty selection is an equally serious drawback of the system. A common approach to faculty selection is to retain top graduates to work at the same university in which they were trained. This is thought to harness ‘home-grown’ talent but it precludes intellectual regeneration.

In many other cases, faculty selection is not transparent and relationships tend to matter more than candidates’ academic profiles. Selecting, developing, resourcing and regulating faculty quality – and providing better incentives for young people and for ongoing professional development – are keys to a more practically-oriented higher education system.

**Mobility**

In this more global era people all over the world travel for the purposes of learning. Ideas flow freely across borders, even more freely than people.

The national interest lies in facilitating the flow of people and being open to new knowledge,
while at the same time attracting mobile talent into the country, and ‘Vietnamising’ the wisdom that people acquire abroad.

Vietnam’s diaspora is a broad and deep resource for the country. It is vital that incentives and opportunities are organised, and barriers lowered, so as to make better use of overseas-trained people, to draw effectively on their knowledge and skills.

People flows are in both directions. Vietnam needs more talent from abroad and it needs its home talent to be able to go abroad and learn and develop. People who are educated overseas can make an important contribution to the country in future.

But in order for them to study abroad, their qualifications acquired in Vietnam must be recognised abroad. At present qualifications acquired in Vietnam lack sufficient international standing.

The country needs a coherent system of qualifications and skill standards in higher education, including vocational education and training, and robust systems of quality assurance applying to local institutions and foreign institutions operating in Vietnam.

Further, equally important to global mobility of qualifications is the effectiveness of global communications. Advancing English language competence is a key issue and an area where Vietnam is lagging behind its regional neighbours.

It is especially important to build capacity in conversation, which has been a long-standing area of weakness, but language learning needs and methodologies are necessarily diverse and purpose-driven, and there are also continuing widespread needs for enhanced reading and writing skills, including technical language.

To enable the higher education system to enhance quality, catch up with regional and international developments and augment human capacity building for the country, it is important to facilitate staff and student mobility, expand international cooperation and support transnational research and technology exchange.

It is also crucial that the government and institutions develop transparent, coherent and systemic approaches to making the best use of the resources and insights that existing internationalisation activities – including international cooperation, transnational research and technology mobility – can bring to tertiary education.

The book concludes with a look at the implications for modernisation with Vietnamese characteristics.

To be effective in the global setting of higher education, Vietnam needs to combine openness and engagement with partners abroad, with a strong sense of (evolving) national identity and strategy.

This double stance, one of self-determining global engagement, enables the country to benefit from new ideas and approaches developed abroad while at the same time adapting and changing them to fit with Vietnam’s traditions, values and long-term process of national development.

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* Higher education in Vietnam: Flexibility, mobility and practicality in the global knowledge economy will be published by Palgrave Macmillan on 23 September. The book is authored by Ly Tran, Simon Marginson, Hoang Do, Quyen Do, Truc Le, Nhai Nguyen, Thao Vu, Thach Pham and Huong Nguyen.

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