

Vietnam: New Legislation and Future Possibilities

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For more than two decades after “*Doi moi*,” (reforms relating to a socialist market economy) Vietnam’s higher education has expanded in many aspects. The number of colleges and universities has quadrupled from less than 100 to more than 400 in 2013. More notably, the system now accommodates 2.2 million students—10 times more than attended in the late 1980s. There are now 83 private institutions showing a significant movement when there were none right after “*Doi moi*.” Most of them are now operating as for-profit models.

With the expansion, the lack of a national legal framework to regulate the sector has caused many obstacles for the administration and sustainable development of higher education in Vietnam. This pressure urged the country’s National Assembly to issue the first Higher Education Law of Vietnam in July 2012. The law consists of 12 chapters with 73 acts. It covers the main issues of higher education—goals, organization and management of universities, research, international collaboration, quality assurance and accreditation, academic staff, students, and others.

KEY POINTS OF THE NEW LAW

The purpose of the law is to put together main guidelines for education of the Communist Party and related policies of governments, so as to create favorable conditions for higher education to improve and advance. This is the first time all key issues of higher education were fully considered and written down in a document subjected to reviews by a wide range of stakeholders and passed by votes of the National Assembly.

Basically, the law restates and describes pivotal matters of higher education in Vietnam, which had been stated in previous governmental documents. There are also new points that are declared for the first time. For instance, the models of Vietnamese national universities and regional comprehensive universities are legalized after two decades of existence. In regard to systemwide design, the law enforces Vietnam's system to stratify institutions into three categories: research-oriented universities, application-oriented institutions, and professional training ones. Given the complexity to characterize each category, it would be a challenge for the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) to successfully classify institutions.

To regulate the growing private higher education, the concept of private nonprofit institutions has been first defined to distinguish them with for-profit counterparts. It is also stated that the former will be supported so that they can rent cheaper land, receive tax reduction, and their staff can get governmental scholarships. These are good policies that encourage people to invest in nonprofit institutions. However, given the current economic hardship, hardly any wealthy people can be found who can make significant contribution for a new or a few existing nonprofit institutions.

For governance issues, a few acts deal with institutional autonomy and quality control. Even if the statements seem to be vague, it is affirmed that autonomy will be given based on capacity and quality assurance conditions of institutions. For curriculum development, the law declares that institutions will be given more freedom in curriculum design and management. Accordingly, mandatory curriculum frameworks are replaced by regulations on minimum knowledge, competences, and graduate outcomes. International experience shows that it is perplexing to define and measure student learning and outcomes so it might be easier to set the policy than to make it work in 400 institutions with millions of students.

For accreditation, all institutions are required to go through a complete accreditation process, coordinated by external accreditation agencies. At the first step, those agencies will be institutionalized by the MOET. In the future, it is expected that independent agencies will take the role, and it could form a whole new horizon for accreditation in Vietnam.

INITIAL IMPACT AND FUTURE POSSIBILITIES

A few months after the law becomes effective, some impacts have been noted and future possibilities are seen. Recently, the MOET has emphasized its governmental role by inspecting a number of institutions and programs. During the search, the MOET had discovered some problems and temporarily stopped many programs from recruiting students in 2012/2013. The ministry found that 161 graduate programs show the lack of academic staff to assure quality. Staff were then asked to supplement additional evidences for further consideration; and most of them are now allowed to recruit incoming students. After the

inspections, universities become more prudent than before with assuring quality for their educational programs.

The MOET also coordinated some follow-up activities to put the law into practice. It has coordinated workshops to ask for public opinions on institutional stratification. For accreditation, the MOET has recently assigned Vietnamese national universities to create two accreditation centers in both cities—Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh. Those two centers will coordinate accreditation processes for colleges and universities, other than their member universities. They are not totally independent; but this process illustrates a good sign for the future of accreditation in Vietnam, since it shows that there are now entities, other than the MOET, having capacity to share administrative responsibility.

Since higher education in Vietnam is growing fairly fast, the law itself seems to be insufficient. Indeed, legal documents need to be drafted and issued to guide the implementation of the new law. They should detail definitions, regulations, and guidelines on institutional autonomy and stratification, accreditation, internationalization, supporting policies for nonprofit institutions, and others. International experience shows that it might take many years and resources to effectively stratify a country's higher education system and thus is true to set up an effective accreditation system.

Last, but not least, one of the main purposes of the new law is to provide a favorable framework to improve the sector. With the new legislation, Vietnam should take actions to build capacity for academic staff and mobilize resources to support higher education.