

A Look at Nonpublic Higher Education in Vietnam

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Vietnam has a population of over 80 million. The country's promise and potential are embodied in its young people, the generation born after 1975; about 65 percent of the population is under the age of 30. The decree on family planning, issued by the government early in 2003, sets no limit on the number of children couples can have. Though the birthrate has remained stable at 2 percent per year, this change in policy will likely lead to an increase in the birthrate for the foreseeable future. Vietnam has been successful in universalizing primary education and aims to make lower secondary education universal in the next 20 years. Demand for upper-secondary education will increase, which will then place additional strain on an already overburdened higher education system.

Overview of Nonpublic Higher Education

In 1986, after a decade of poverty and starvation caused by a half century of war, a U.S.-led trade embargo, and failed policies, the government implemented sweeping economic reforms known as *doi moi*. The private sector, previously forbidden in a Marxist-Leninist economy, was encouraged to develop, albeit incrementally. It soon became apparent that the spirit of the economic reforms also applied to universities and colleges as a way to meet the rapidly growing demand for tertiary education. From 1991 to the 2001–2002 academic year, the total number of higher education students in Vietnam jumped from 190,000 to nearly 1 million. Added to this number are about 200,000 freshmen—a 7 percent increase over last year—of which 24,500, or 12 percent, will attend nonpublic institutions.

The first nonpublic higher education institution, Thang Long University, was founded in 1989 on an experimental basis by a group of intellectuals. By 2002–2003, there were 23 nonpublic higher education institutions in Vietnam, of which 16 were “people-founded” universities, one a semipublic university, two people-founded colleges, and four semipublic colleges.

There are two different types of nonpublic educational institutions in Vietnam. Semipublic facilities are owned and operated by the state and a public authority at the central, provincial, district, or communal level, while people-founded institutions are owned and managed by nongovernmental organizations or private associations such as trade unions, cooperatives, youth organizations, and women's associations. There may soon be a third type of nonpublic institution, which will be owned and operated by private individuals.

The first and only foreign-owned university campus, established by the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (Australia), opened in fall 2003 in Ho Chi Minh City. RMIT University Vietnam offers undergraduate programs in computer science, information technology and multimedia, software engineering, and commerce, as well as graduate programs in leadership and management, tertiary teaching and learning, and business administration. A new campus (Saigon South), which will accommodate 3,000 students, is currently being built at a cost of \$15.5 million through loans from the Asian Development Bank, the International Finance Corporation, a benefactor, and RMIT.

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Nonpublic institutions have proven to be an effective alternative means of increasing access to higher education. They account for more than 20 percent of the total number of higher education institutions in Vietnam and accommodate ten percent of the nation's students. Majors are offered in English, business, management, computer science, and technology. The majority of students at nonpublic institutions come from wealthy families. The admissions criteria (i.e., the total score on three exam subjects) are usually not as demanding as those at public universities. In many cases, for example, the total score is only half of what is required by the public institutions.

Current Issues, Challenges, and Recommendations

The Second Regional Seminar on Private Higher Education, organized by the UNESCO Asia and Pacific Regional Bureau for Education in June 2001 in Bangkok, identified several problems related to people-founded higher education in Vietnam—such as a lack of long-term strategic planning, insufficient

administrative oversight, and a shortage of policies that are specific in nature and issued in a timely fashion.

There is not yet a well-developed legal infrastructure that defines the precise relationship between nonpublic institutions and the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET). Since 1993, when the first nonpublic university was officially established, MOET has issued only one regulation on people-founded institutions. The fifth draft of provisional regulations on semipublic and private institutions was discussed at a meeting held in December 2002 at the ministry. The draft consists of numerous conflicts and inconsistencies between chapters and articles such as those on mission and ownership. Participants were resentful about prematurely discussing the draft in detail, comparing the current state of affairs with “putting the cart before the horse”—in reference to regulations on higher education in Vietnam that do not yet exist.

The lack of a regulative framework and an accreditation system has adversely affected public confidence in the nonpublic sector. Administrators at a number of nonpublic universities and colleges have abused their power, taking financial advantage of both students and their parents. The Taiwan Asian International University (AIU), for example, which was established in cooperation with Hanoi University of Foreign Languages in 1995, turned out to be a hoax. After five years of operation, AIU left more than 2,000 students and their families with no place to go after losing hundreds of thousands of dollars. This led to the removal of MOET vice minister, Vu Ngoc Hai. In another incident, Dong Do University recruited twice as many students as capacity allowed.

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Clearly, there is a pressing need to require nonpublic institutions of higher education to be subject to routine auditing and to submit transparent annual financial reports. In addition, there should be healthy competition between public and nonpublic higher education institutions for government grants. While public institutions are encouraged to carry out entrepreneurial activities to increase their revenue, it is unfair to leave nonpublic institutions on their own while in fact they are easing the burden of excess demand on the state.

Given the dismal state of nonpublic higher education, the government should establish a special task

force that would consider relevant experience of other countries. Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, and Indonesia have a long history of private education. China, Vietnam’s role model in some respects, recently passed a private higher education law that could serve as a useful guide. Instead of holding more conferences on provisional regulations with heated debates that are often unproductive, Vietnam must take a much more practical and proactive approach in order to learn from other countries’ successes as well as their mistakes—in the finest tradition of comparative education. ■

Private Higher Education in China: A Contested Terrain

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Private higher education in China has been a contested terrain with regard to control and autonomy. Private universities are calling for a loosening of government controls. Government officials argue that the private sector requires vigorous supervision and control. Both sides can cite convincing reasons, but neither can convince the other.

Private universities have been complaining that the government has maintained too much control over everything, giving them little autonomy. For example, institutions cannot decide what programs to offer or how many students to admit, and they cannot issue their own degrees. They are also critical of the government pulling the carpet from under them: the government in recent years has allowed public universities to set up private colleges—called second-tier colleges—that use state property and rely on the reputation and resources of public universities to run profit-making education businesses.

Today, there are 300 second-tier colleges, and the number is increasing fast. The first such organization was formed by Zhejiang University. Called City College of Zhejiang University, the college was jointly owned by Zhejiang University, which sent in its administrators and teachers; by the Postal University of Hangzhou, which offered its campus as the site of the college; and by the local government, which provided one-third of the funding. Government officials consider second-tier universities to be an effective way to expand opportunities. In Zhejiang, more than 33 percent of higher learning opportunities are provided by the private universities and second-tier colleges. Private universities, however, see this