Vietnamese Higher Education: In Search of an Identity

Hoa Tran
Hoa Tran is a consultant to UNICEF and other agencies. Address: 11 rue du Belevedere, 56400 Auray, France.

Since the adoption of Doi moi (renovation) in 1986, Vietnamese higher education has moved away from its former Soviet model. Characterizing the country’s system of higher education today, however, is not as straightforward a task as one might assume. Some changes suggest that Vietnam is taking on certain aspects of university patterns in the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and some parts of Southeast Asia. At the same time, the Vietnamese leadership maintains that Vietnam is still pursuing Marxism-Leninism, and universities are still called upon to instill this philosophy in their students. The contradiction within the education system between the official line and reality is creating an “identity crisis” in Vietnam’s higher education system.

Plus ça change . . .
In its first major change, the government policy responded to the substantial unmet demand for access by allowing universities to accept fee-paying students. Higher education is no longer a responsibility of the state alone; the majority of individuals are expected to pay their share. A university now enrolls both regular students, who receive full or partial scholarships, and nonregular students, who are fee-paying. With the dramatic expansion of higher education during the last several years, and given the significant revenues accruing to universities from nonregular students, their number has overtaken that of regular students. In 1997, out of a total of over 500,000 students, the nonregular/regular ratio was 51:49—and the trend continues.

Against the background of the global expansion of private higher education, changes in Vietnamese higher edu-
cation along the same lines seem inevitable. Coupled with the introduction of fees, was the government’s decision to permit the opening of private universities, which until not long ago were considered by Vietnam’s leaders a characteristic of capitalism. After nearly a decade of a generally open policy vis-à-vis the private sector, Vietnam now has 16 private universities in Hanoi and Hochiminh city, enrolling nearly 5 percent of the total number of university students. A number of these private universities have created a conducive environment to encourage student achievement and commitment. However, there are other institutions that were set up for quick profit making. Typically, these “fly-by-night” universities, lacking their own facilities, make under-the-counter deals to gain access to the facilities and staff of public universities, thus draining the resources of the latter. The issues of standards and quality control must be addressed if private universities in Vietnam are to become reputable institutions able to produce high-quality graduates.

Management style is another important change that has fundamentally transformed Vietnam’s system of higher education. Soviet-style central planning, the hallmark of Vietnamese universities until the 1980s, has been replaced by decentralized management. Universities now make their own decisions about all fundamental issues—including student enrollments and graduation requirements, program and curricula at both undergraduate and graduate levels, budget allocation, scientific research, international cooperation, the election of senior administrators, and faculty recruitment. Universities welcome their newfound freedom with great enthusiasm. But the delegation of power from the center to the universities has not been accompanied by an increased accountability on the part of the universities. The absence of adequate checks and balances has led to growing corruption and declining quality of instruction. Accordingly, the central authorities have decided to establish an accreditation mechanism in the near future. Part of a World Bank loan for education will be used for this purpose, and experiences with systems in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Thailand will be studied.

The switch from central planning to a market-oriented economy has led to discontinuation of the central system of job placement of university graduates. Moreover, government positions are now fewer in number, and almost all the good opportunities today are in the private sector. Consequently, in the resulting fierce competition for jobs, students are finding that a degree alone will not land them a good job. For that, they need an additional qualification. Those who can afford it are taking extra courses, the most popular being those in economics, informatics, and business management.

The market economy has brought many changes to Vietnam’s system of higher education. But alongside the positive aspects of this transformation, “money-mania” and corruption—the negative features of unfettered capitalism—have also appeared. They are seriously compromising Vietnam’s future.

. . . plus c’est la même chose?

Given the way it is currently provided, one could say Vietnamese higher education has a distinctly “capitalist” look. Yet political studies continue to be compulsory for all students. During their degree program, students in both public and private institutions are required to take 250 hours of classes studying Marxism-Leninism. While higher education is adapting in response to market demands, sustaining political studies is still a top priority for universities. While each private university makes its own decision about the courses it offers, all of them include political studies in their curricula. Thus, in this respect, the university system retains a certain Soviet style.

Vietnam is probably the only country in the world that both embraces market economics and adheres to Marxism-Leninism. How can an education system, guided by two contradictory philosophies develop in a consistent manner? The fact that Russia and the ex-Soviet republics have abandoned their former ideology does not seem to concern Vietnam’s leadership. According to the policy line set for the country, Vietnamese higher education is to keep to the path of Marx and Lenin while integrating into the nation’s socioeconomic system, which is guided by market principles.

Vietnamese higher education is hard to characterize at the present time. It has elements of systems found in “capitalist” societies while at the same time retaining an important ingredient of the old Soviet model. What academic system can reconcile such contradictions in its long-term development?

However, the crisis may be temporary. The Vietnamese are still experimenting with elements of models from other countries. Although the goals have been set for Vietnam’s higher education for the next 20 years—to serve the nation’s drive for industrialization and modernization—the principles of market economics are likely to be the modus operandi. The search for a suitable higher education model or a combination of models continues and bring more change. In the long run, Western-style higher education can be expected to prevail.