

Economics and business faculty development in a transition economy: the case of Vietnam

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The economic and social transformation of Vietnam over the past two decades has impacted dramatically on the country's educational requirements and systems. This has fostered both a need for skilled faculty and a call for changes in teaching methodology. The purpose of this paper is to report on the state of faculty development in a number of economics and business programs in Vietnam based on the experiences of non-Vietnamese and Vietnamese faculty members who have taught in Vietnam over the past decade and a half. The information is drawn both first-hand, based on the author's participation in a number of projects, and well as from in-depth discussions with faculty, administrators and students. The results suggest that a) institutions should consider implementing work integrated learning that combines classroom teaching with internships, study abroad and co-operative education; and b) faculty development should not only emphasize transferring knowledge, but there is a need to implement a sea change in traditional teaching and learning methodologies (*Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education*, 9(1), 15-23).

Key Words: Education, Vietnam, Faculty Development, Economics and Business,

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).

The economic and social transformation of Vietnam over the past two decades has impacted dramatically on the country's educational requirements and systems. In the field of business and economics, for example, more emphasis is now placed on market economics and the number of students desiring to study subjects related to these disciplines has progressively increased. This has fostered both a need for skilled faculty in these areas and a call for changes in teaching methodology.

No longer can the rote learning method of education, which has been the standard for centuries, continue to turn out passive learners and "passive recorders" who lack critical thinking skills (Nguyen, 2002). If Vietnam is to achieve the lofty goals of the prophetic words quoted above and inscribed on a plaque hanging inside Hanoi's Temple of Literature, the first university in Vietnam and for centuries the principal center of learning, it is imperative that Vietnam establish an indigenous self-sustaining business and economics profession. This will not only enable it to continue its transition to a market economy, but also assure the economy which emerges has attributes that the domestic population finds desirable.

One important component in accomplishing this task is to place priority on faculty development, particularly teaching and training in the practice of modern business methods. This will aid in addressing many of the challenges the labor market faces today, as the business community continues to find that very few graduates of Vietnamese universities

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have the skills necessary to enter the workforce without substantial additional training (VietnamNet, 2008).

In addition, areas of emphasis include class organization, evaluation of students, in-class presentation skills and all aspects of curriculum design and presentation. Faculty and administrators must also fully comprehend the importance of academic integrity and the negative consequences of corruption and plagiarism.

The purpose of this paper is to report on the state of faculty development in a number of economics and business programs in Vietnam based on the experiences of both non-Vietnamese (Western - educated) and Vietnamese faculty members who have taught in Vietnam over the past decade and a half. The information is drawn both first-hand, based on the author's participation in a number of projects, and well as from in-depth discussions with faculty, administrators and students.¹ The results suggest that a) institutions should consider implementing work integrated learning that combines classroom teaching with internships, study abroad and co-operative education; and b) faculty development should not only emphasize transferring knowledge, but there is a need to implement a sea change in traditional teaching and learning methodologies.

REVIEW OF PREVIOUS STUDIES

There have been relatively few studies of economics and business education in Vietnam. In an earlier investigation of economics education, Gottshang, McCornac and Westbrook (1996), suggest a strategy to expand Vietnam's indigenous economics training capacity consisting of four main components: (a) locally-based programs to provide short-term (i.e., year-long) training for Vietnamese economics faculty; (b) locally-based masters degree programs; (c) programs for overseas training of PhD economists who would create the long-term foundation for fully-qualified training and research programs in Vietnamese universities; (d) programs supporting collaborative research on policy-related issues in Vietnam.

Locally based programs would be conducted in conjunction with foreign faculty who would not only transfer academic knowledge, but provide practical training in teaching methodologies. Vietnamese faculty would have to opportunity to participate in both team teaching and student teaching as a form of cooperative education.

It was also recommended faculty development target relatively young faculty for investments in human capital, because they will remain in the educational establishment for a longer time. Evidence suggested that that younger faculty do in fact integrate new materials into their coursework more quickly and it is expected that as young faculty earn advanced degrees and acquire more responsibilities, the rate of curriculum reform will increase.

¹ The author first went to Vietnam in 1994 to participate in the Ford Foundation-ACLS market economics training program at the Hanoi National Economics University. He returned in 1995-1996 to work in both the Ford Foundation-ACLS program and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) sponsored MBA program at NEU. From 1998 to 2002, the author taught at the NEU business school, the Fulbright Economics Teaching Program in Ho Chi Minh City and served as a consultant to the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). During the summer of 2004, the author taught economics in the NEU-Washington State University MBA program and in 2005 was a visiting lecturer at the Hanoi University of Technology.

Reporting on curriculum reform at the Hanoi National Economics University (NEU), McCarty and Fink (2001) noted that during the second half of the 1990s the university had undergone dramatic changes. Noteworthy developments were the increased emphasis on teaching market economies and, albeit less quickly, changes in the method of teaching to adopt more of the “Western model” of library-focused and research-based learning. Nevertheless, reform was only slowly being implemented and major problems remained in most business and economics programs.

In the *Evaluation Report of the Swiss-AIT-Vietnam (SAV) Management Development Project* (2002), it was advised that faculty development programs should focus on both teaching methodologies and methods and respond to the identified needs of faculty and educational managers (deans, vice rectors, etc.). Specific recommendations included offering short (half-day and one-day) and practice-oriented courses so that a larger group of potential beneficiaries can be attracted to attend and acquire knowledge and skills to improve teaching practice. Courses should also equip participants with new knowledge and skills which can be used directly in teaching case studies, including Vietnamese case studies, stimulating group work to improve student learning and curriculum development to upgrade courses. The staff of the participating universities in Vietnam who have undergone training would then be utilized as trainers, in the Vietnamese language, for other faculty.

Napier and Mai (2003) describe the trials and tribulations of a decade long cooperative program between the Hanoi National University Business School and the Boise State University – an American based institution invited to offer its MBA program in Vietnam as part of a Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency funded project - to develop university teachers. This capacity building program included activities such as joint teaching, training, mentoring by foreign faculty, research and cooperation in creating and building the NEU Business School. In addition, the degree seeking faculty members were required to participate in internships with such companies as Boise Cascade, Hewlett-Packard, and JC Penney.

The authors reported that this type of relationship was generally well accepted by NEU faculty members who were keen to learn about new teaching technologies (other than ‘chalk and talk’) such as case studies, student projects, discussion and participation, alternative approaches to student papers, exercises and simulations. Foreign faculties also helped to transfer modern training methods to NEU trainers focusing on team teaching and student centered learning. It was concluded that valuable lessons for the NEU have come from cooperation with Boise State and other universities.

McCornac and Chi (2005) observed the overwhelming need for foreign faculty to assist Vietnam in its transition to a market economy. Based on a number of offered propositions, this paper provides a top 10 list of suggestions regarding pedagogical approaches and techniques for teaching in Vietnam to enable instructors to better cope with cultural factors and challenges that may be faced.

In a major analysis of *the State of Undergraduate Education in Computer Science, Electrical Engineering, and Physics at Select Universities in Vietnam* (2006), researchers reported problems similar to those found in the business and education sector. These include:

- Ineffective teaching methods: lectures, presentation of factual knowledge, rote memorization, little use of homework, not much faculty-student interaction;
- Lack of qualified teachers;

- Low level of academic preparation of teaching faculty;
- Lack of skills of faculty in modern teaching practices and research;
- Lack of up-to-date knowledge by faculty in their fields with regard to curriculum and course content; and
- Faculty overworked and underpaid for an acceptable teaching load and, therefore, lack the time necessary for teaching preparation, availability to students, and research.

The recommendations for improving undergraduate teaching and learning are presented in terms of professional development. These are similar to that found in the studies cited earlier and focus on three themes:

- The establishment and funding of national, regional, and/or local centers of teaching and learning excellence with experienced staff and both written and electronic resources to provide pedagogical, instructional, and professional development support;
- Targeted workshops and other training activities by recognized professionals, who have general skills in pedagogy and instructional design and development as well as specific expertise related to teaching particular content areas and;
- Opportunities to go abroad to observe first hand the use of active learning and other effective pedagogical practices.

MAIN PROBLEMS TO BE ADDRESSED

Vietnam is a country strongly committed to higher education, dating back to its Confucian roots (Kelly, 2000). With the adoption of “doi moi”, Vietnam’s education system has undergone significant change moving away from the former Soviet model to demands of a market-oriented economy. Article 35 of the current Constitution (issued in 1992) stipulates: “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” (p. 7).²

These developments, notwithstanding, characterizing Vietnam’s system of higher education today, however, is not as straightforward a task as one assumes (Tran, 1999). Although a number of aspects of university patterns now follow that of the United States and the United Kingdom, Vietnam is still pursuing Marxism-Leninism, and universities are still called upon to instill this philosophy in their students.³

Furthermore, Vietnam’s educational sector is beset with a severe supply and demand discrepancy. The low salary of faculty has both discouraged new entrants and encouraged current faculty to leave the field. Increasing enrollments are putting strains on universities already limited in both human and physical resources, Vietnam’s higher education system can supply only about 20 percent of the demand and the quality of education remains problematic (Vu, 2004). The shortage of skilled faculty is particularly acute in the fields of economics and business where increasing opportunities available in the private sector have resulted in an ongoing loss of career teachers who quit to pursue more profitable jobs.

² For more information on Vietnam’s educational strategy see Vietnam’s Education and Training Development till 2010 available on the website of Vietnam’s Ministry of Planning and Investment <http://www.mpi.gov.vn>

³ All of the Vietnam Ministry of Education and Training approved master’s programs in economics and business, for example, require a course in political economy (generally a course on Marxist-Leninist thought). These courses are always taught in Vietnamese and, based on conversations with students and most faculty members, are considered irrelevant.

A main factor affecting quality is the lack of individuals with terminal degrees or practical experience in the business world.⁴ In all MBA programs the highest degree obtained by the majority of faculty is the MBA with only a small percentage of the faculty completing a doctorate degree from an internationally accredited university. While some faculty members have or are pursuing doctoral degrees at Vietnamese universities, the quality of these programs is suspect.⁵

A workshop on higher education in Vietnam highlighted the need for comprehensive reforms such as requiring improvements in teaching staff, changes to teaching methodology, training syllabi, higher capital budget allocation; and the encouragement of scientific research.⁶ As one participant noted “the efforts to produce graduates with the skills and qualifications needed to survive in the new market-oriented workplace have not lived up to expectations.”

What is taught, and how it is taught, however, has and will continue to change over time. That is the challenge of transition. Transition, however, requires an idea or “vision” to provide the framework to focus on new skills, new subjects, and new methodologies. It also identifies old subjects and methodologies. It is important that the new replace the old, rather than maintaining a complex mix of both systems where neither is taught satisfactorily (McCarty & Fink, 2001).

Addressing the above issues is not only relevant to business and economics education, but imperative for all aspects of higher education, and the primary challenge facing educational policy makers in Vietnam.

COMMENTS FROM STUDENTS IN BUSINESS AND ECONOMICS PROGRAMS WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED BOTH VIETNAMESE AND FOREIGN TEACHERS

- The material covered is much more relevant to our needs than what was taught a decade ago;
- The quality of Vietnamese faculty needs to be improved;
- Vietnamese faculty rely on presenting material using PowerPoint slides and teaching out of the text;
- Questions regarding the ‘real-world’ are often ignored since it appears the Vietnamese instructor is not capable of answering such questions;
- Courses taught by Vietnamese instructors vary greatly in quality and quality standards do not seem to matter;
- Course taught by Vietnamese instructors are generally much easier than those taught by foreign instructors;
- The teaching style of foreign instructors differs from that of most Vietnamese instructors – there is much more interactive learning with foreign instructors;
- The standards of foreign instructors tend to be higher. There is more emphasis on understanding the material as opposed to memorization; and
- Foreign instructors are much stricter with regard to plagiarism and cheating.

⁴ In conversations with various administrators, the number one complaint was the inability to find faculty with practical experience.

⁵ See *The Envelope Theorem of Educational Quality* – Figure 1

⁶ A summary of the workshop appeared in Vu (2004) as *Higher Education in Vietnam: Not Attaining World Standards*.

OBSERVATIONS OF FOREIGN AND VIETNAMESE FACULTY BASED ON PARTICIPATION IN BUSINESS AND ECONOMICS PROGRAMS

- The level of standards in many of the programs is not strictly enforced. This is particularly true for the programs taught in Vietnamese;
- Students are often more concerned with memorizing the material than actually understanding the material. This is legacy of the Vietnamese educational system and efforts must be made to change the methods of both teaching and learning;
- Students often have the expectation that since they are paying for the program they are entitled to the degree not matter what their performance;
- In some programs there appears to be a 'no one fails' policy;
- Policies against cheating are not enforced on an overall basis. The degree of enforcement is often at the discretion of the instructor and some faculty members are quite lenient;
- The workload of most Vietnamese faculty is excessive due to the need to obtain adequate income. It is not uncommon for faculty to teach 25 to 30 hours a week;
- The low level of Vietnamese faculty salary provides a disincentive to improve the quality of teaching;
- The educational system in Vietnam is not yet sufficiently able to offer international standard education degrees without support from foreign faculty and organizations;
- Once foreign support ceases, both teaching and administrative standards regress. There is tendency to go back to what is familiar – that is, the way doing things based on the traditional Vietnamese education system; and
- Corruption is pervasive in the educational sector, particularly in how it relates to teacher behavior. Bribes for school entrance, exams, assessment, etc. are just a few examples of practices that exist.

Figure 1 shows *The Envelope Theorem of Educational Quality* that provides insight into problems that exist in the higher educational system in Vietnam.⁷

FACULTY DEVELOPMENT SUGGESTIONS TO IMPROVE ECONOMICS AND BUSINESS EDUCATION IN VIETNAM

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 MBA or PhD degrees in their particular field. Not only would faculty receive high-level training, they would be able to observe the workings of other economies and different teaching methodologies. This would be a form of cooperative education in that the work environment for Vietnamese faculty would be the classroom of the international institution. Hopefully the practical skills learned would be transferred to Vietnamese colleges and university and returning faculty members who fill positions within their departments and institutes would provide the resources for internal reform.

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 is to conduct faculty training in Vietnam. This is the type of program pioneered by the Ford Foundation,

⁷ The envelope theorem in economics is a basic theorem used to solve maximization problems in microeconomics.

SIDA, and the Fulbright Program. Such programs involve foreign faculty teaming with Vietnamese faculty to offer advanced courses in economics and business fields. The benefits accrue not only to 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, curriculum 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 other economies and ways of doing business. 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 to true. A possible solution is to have faculty members intern with foreign corporations operating in Vietnam. This could be mutually beneficial in the long run as not only will faculty members be able to improve their skills, the instructors will better understand the needs of the business sector and universities will be able to produce higher quality graduates.

Improve Joint and Cooperative Programs

Over the past decade, a number of universities have undertaken cooperative or joint programs with foreign institutions. Most of the time, these arrangements involve short-term courses being offered by foreign faculty members coming to Vietnam from the partner institution and local faculty members from the Vietnamese institution. Students may also have either the requirement or option of taking a number of courses at the foreign institution.

Business and economic educators in Vietnam appear to come from two camps. The first is the young generation who has generally been more receptive to the changes in both the economic and educational system. These individuals have obtained the skills to function in a market economy and are often the most qualified teachers.

The irony is that it is these persons who are leaving the educational profession in droves, particularly those with business degrees, since private sector opportunities are more lucrative. Even if they remain in the educational field these individuals are in such demand to teach an excessive number of courses the quality of the courses suffer. It is often the case in which a highly qualified instructor will pay an underling to teach his or her courses since there are better opportunities in such endeavors as consulting.

The second group is generally older and was primarily schooled in Marxist-Leninist theory. These individuals are slower to adapt to the changing economy and have fewer opportunities in the market economy. Given the low salary level of educators in Vietnam, it is often necessary for professors to resort to selling grades or admission to certain programs. It is not uncommon for students to place cash in an envelope and hand it to the professor as a gift in expectation of a high grade in the class.

This phenomenon is not limited to the undergraduate level, but is prevalent at the highest degree granting programs. Senior professors, who are often in the second group discussed above, primarily staff doctoral degree programs.

FIGURE 1
The Envelope Theorem of Educational Quality

The success of these programs has been mixed, with a number only in existence to serve one or two cohorts. While financial costs, time commitment, as well as language requirements restrict the number of individuals able to enter these types of programs, the most likely cause of failure is lack of commitment by the two parties, particularly the home institution of the foreign partner.

Thus, it is highly recommended that such programs be expanded and improved to provide benefits not only to students, but local faculty members as well. One suggestion is that rather than foreign institutions sending faculty for short-term (often two weeks) courses, faculty members would be in residence at the local institution for a minimum of one year. They would be encouraged, if not required, to work with their local counterpart to transfer knowledge and teaching skills. This could be mutually beneficial, as the foreign faculty member would have to opportunity to conduct research in Vietnam.

Continue Reform of Higher 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 the higher education 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 institution level leading to increased accountability and quality.

While the concept of an "International Standard University" sounds intriguing, it is recommended that this be given a lower level of priority. The focus needs to be on developing software (the faculty) from within and not the hardware (buildings, facilities).

Faculty Mentoring

The success of the Fulbright Economics Teaching Program and, to a lesser extent, the Hanoi National Economic University Business School is an indication of the benefit of faculty mentoring. In both these cases, foreign faculty member were paired with local faculty with the foreign faculty serving as teaching and research mentors.

In addition to the transfer of knowledge in a given disciplines, the foreign faculty can be particularly helpful in conveying modern teaching methodologies and pedagogy. Emphasis will need to be placed on explaining concepts of plagiarism, cheating and academic integrity.

The foreign faculty member must fully understand the role of a mentor - that is one who advises or gives recommendations - and should not interpret mentoring as a one-way street and it does not imply the mentor must be in the position of authority. There is knowledge to be gained from both sides and it must be fully understood that educational system which Vietnam develops for the future will have Western and non-Western characteristics.

CONCLUSION

Predicting the future of Vietnam is no easy task, but the benefits of *doi moi* are clearly evident. The fundamentals necessary for a successful transition to a full-fledged market economy are gradually being put into place and there is the potential for Vietnam to eventually take its place among the developed economies.

Sustaining this development is perhaps the biggest uncertainty and will require continued improvements in its economic and business education. While Vietnam clearly has the capacity to support excellent, internationally respected economics and business education programs, the steps forward taken in the 1990's appear to have been followed by one step back in the early 2000s as funding in these areas has slowed down and the emphasis on quality has not been enforced. Taking a giant leap forward will only come about if both the Vietnamese and foreign community see that improving the quality of education is necessary for Vietnam to achieve sustainable development and the financial resources are provided to accomplish this goal.

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