

THE ROAD AHEAD FOR THE HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR IN VIETNAM

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Abstract: Vietnam's higher education sector, which has expanded dramatically over the past 20 years, has now reached a point where it is ready to become more research-oriented and better networked internationally. There are, however, aspects of the sector that remain desperately in need of further reform. This paper provides a contemporary review of the state of the higher education sector in Vietnam. It is written from the perspective of the sector's need to become more research-focused and more internationally engaged. The paper identifies specific challenges for the sector. It also presents a glimpse of what the future of the sector might entail.

Keywords: Vietnam, higher education, universities, academic culture, academic identity, policy challenges

Introduction

Vietnam has been the site of a remarkable economic transformation over the past 30 years. Sustained high rates of economic growth, together with a firm national resolve to eliminate poverty, have enabled the economy not only to achieve 'lower middle income' status on the World Bank's global classification of national economies, but also to reduce its poverty rate from almost 60% in the mid-1980s to less than 14% currently (World Bank, 2013; 2017). With continuing strong economic growth, and with a continuing determination to eliminate poverty, Vietnam will almost certainly attain 'high income' status on the World Bank's classification system by 2035 (World Bank, 2016).

Over this period, the higher education sector in Vietnam has also made extraordinary progress. The size of the sector has been increasing at a dramatic pace since at least the early 1990s. The gross enrolment rate in tertiary education (mainly comprised of higher education), which was very small in the early 1990s, and which in 1999 was only 10.59%, reached 28.84% in 2013 (UNESCO, 2017). There are now more than 2.2 million higher education students in Vietnam, and there are as many as 442 universities and colleges (Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), 2016). Improvements in the quality of the sector are evident. An intensive building program since the early 2000s has resulted in significant improvements in the quality of higher education infrastructure. Research productivity is now also showing strong improvement, especially in the natural and applied sciences. And there has been a marked improvement over recent years in the qualifications profile of members of academic staff. However, many challenges remain. Vietnam aspires to have a more research-oriented higher education sector; but to achieve this goal there will need to be an intensification of the pace of reform.

Our purpose in this paper is to identify those aspects of the higher education sector where more rapid progress is urgently required. The paper begins with a brief review of the sector's history. Aspects of the sector that are delaying its development are then identified and discussed. These include: governance, funding, research and research training, academic standards, graduate

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unemployment, internationalisation, and conditions of academic employment. Finally, a glimpse of what the future might hold for Vietnam's higher education sector is briefly sketched.

The paper builds on a developing literature concerning the higher education sector in Vietnam (see, for example, Dao and Hayden, 2015; Harman, Hayden and Pham Thanh Nghi, 2010; Hayden and Ly, 2015; Pham Thi Ly and Hayden, 2015; Tran Thi Ly et al., 2014). The paper focuses primarily on the public higher education sector, which accounts for about 86% of all higher education enrolments (MOET, 2016). The private higher education sector remains mainly teaching-oriented. Though there are exceptions, private higher education institutions tend not to be as well regarded in Vietnam as their public-sector counterparts.

The Sector's History

Confucian academies, first established in the 11th century, played an important role in Vietnamese society for almost 900 years. They provided an educated class from which mandarins responsible for the country's governance could be selected (MOET, 2004; Pham Minh Hac, 1995). They also, as London (2011) explains: "... imbued much of the country's population with respect for intellectual tradition and certain methods of learning" (p.8). However, these academies catered for a social elite, and they were extremely narrow in terms of their curriculum.

The academies began disappearing during the late 19th century. By the early 20th century, they were replaced altogether by a French colonial system of *Collèges*. These new higher education institutions, established to serve the needs of the colonial administration, were also selective and exclusive, but, unlike the Confucian academies, they admitted female students, though in small numbers. The focus of their training programs also aligned much more appropriately with the contemporary technological and cultural needs of Vietnamese society. Over the first quarter of the 20th century, institutes specialising in areas of business, medicine, pharmacy, engineering, the arts, and so on, were established, first in Hanoi, and later in Saigon (Pham Minh Hac, 1995). Following the Second World War, with the French losing control of Vietnam as a colony, these institutions also disappeared.

Independence in 1954 was achieved at the cost of a political division between North and South Vietnam. In the North, a Soviet model of higher education was introduced. This model involved the establishment of teaching-only, mono-disciplinary institutes and colleges focused on training personnel for appointment to technical and managerial positions within government ministries. In the South, the French model of higher education was revived, though American-style community colleges and comprehensive universities also began to be established. Higher education enrolments grew more strongly in the South than in the North. By 1975, there were 150,000 higher education students in the South, compared with only 55,700 in the North (Pham Minh Hac 1995, p.55). Private higher education institutions were permitted in the South but prohibited in the North.

Reunification of North and South Vietnam in 1975 under a Communist Party government meant that the Soviet model was adopted nationally. Private-sector institutions in the South were abolished, and discipline-specific research institutes, detached completely from the higher education sector, were established across the country.

In 1986, with Vietnam's economy nearing a state of collapse, the Communist Party of Vietnam took the momentous decision of abandoning Soviet-style centralised economic planning in favour of a socialist market system. The economic reform process, known as *đổi mới*, which also made provision for the return of private ownership of land and capital, created the conditions needed for rapid economic recovery.

Reform of the higher education sector began in earnest in the early 1990s. In a landmark Prime Ministerial decree (Decree No. 90/NĐ-TTg), issued in 1993, a process of moving away from the Soviet blueprint was initiated. This development was even more remarkable for the fact that, at the time, many Vietnamese academics were trained in Soviet Bloc countries and spoke Russian rather than English. Two national universities and three regional universities were established over

the period from 1993 to 1995 by means of mergers. Importantly, these institutions were authorised to provide a comprehensive range of study programs and to engage in research. Approval was provided on a trial basis for the existence of 'non-public' higher education institutions, that is, institutions owned by community organisations rather than by the State. Other significant changes included that the guarantee of State employment for all higher education graduates was removed; a national qualifications framework involving four-year degree-level programs for universities and three-year diploma-level programs for colleges was adopted; and tuition fees for higher education programs were introduced.

The next significant development was the adoption in 2005 of the Higher Education Reform Agenda (HERA), a framework for reform of the sector through to 2020. HERA proposed a raft of changes, important among which was a commitment to remove line-management control of public higher education institutions by different government ministries and instrumentalities. HERA also proposed a significant expansion in the number of higher education enrolments, the creation of a tier of 'research-oriented' universities, and a significant increase in the proportion of academic staff members holding a PhD qualification. HERA also signalled the need for a stronger commitment to research and to internationalisation in public universities.

An unexpected provision in HERA was a commitment made that 40% of all higher education students should be enrolled in private universities and colleges by 2020. Given the Communist Party's traditional opposition to private higher education, and the extent of regulatory neglect up to that point of the needs of private higher education institutions (Hayden and Dao, 2010), this commitment came as a surprise. By 2015, however, less than 14% of all higher education students attended private-sector higher education institutions (MOET, 2016).

Since 2006, all new private higher education institutions have been required to be 'fully-private', meaning that they are privately-owned corporate entities. They receive no financial support from the Government, though recently the Government has indicated that it might provide some financial assistance for institutions which have clearly been established on a 'not-for-profit' basis. Most private higher education institutions are at a disadvantage in competing for students with public higher education providers because the cost of attending them is often two to three times higher than the cost of attending a public higher education institution. A small number of private higher education institutions have become extremely expensive to attend. These institutions have cultivated a reputation for being international in orientation, and they are also usually well connected with large private corporations in Vietnam.

A more recent development has been the adoption in 2012 of a Higher Education Law. This Law is significant because it acknowledged for the first time the distinctiveness within the education system of the higher education sector, and because it also brought together in one legal document much of the regulatory detail that had been approved incrementally by the Government over the previous two decades. The new Law prescribed that there should be a multi-tiered higher education sector, consisting of research-oriented, application-oriented and profession-oriented higher education institutions. It reinforced the need for public higher education institutions to have governing boards, referred to as university councils in the case of public universities. These councils were intended to become responsible for setting institutional objectives and strategies, developing guidelines for organisational structures, recruiting staff and implementing staff training programs, and approving guidelines for the utilisation of institutional finances, property, facilities and equipment. However, they were not given authority to appoint rectors, nor to set tuition fees for full-time degree programs.

Impediments to More Rapid Progress

If Vietnam is soon to achieve a more research-oriented and globally competitive higher education sector, then there are some pressing challenges that need to be addressed. Seven challenges are presented here as being among the most important.

Governance

Governance remains a highly problematic area for the sector. Indeed, it is one of the most problematic areas for the sector. As has been documented by Dao and Hayden (2015): “In Vietnam, public universities and colleges are not generally able to make their own decisions, especially about matters that are fundamentally important to them as academic communities” (p.323). They cannot, for example, exercise autonomy in making important decisions about organisational, financial, staffing and research matters; and a culture of academic freedom remains far from having been established.

The culture of centralised State control that was a feature of the Soviet model continues to affect the public higher education sector, even though the Higher Education Law and subsequent regulatory instruments have expressed the importance of individual public higher education institutions being able to function more independently. The Government is pressing rectors of public universities to establish university councils, but the response to date has not been enthusiastic. Many rectors of public universities are not convinced that university councils will ever be permitted to exercise a significant level of autonomy; and many are also concerned that the authority of the position of rector could be compromised by the introduction of a new accountability framework at the institutional level (Master Plan for Vietnam’s Higher Education System 2012, pp.78-79). Importantly, though, having a university council is now one of the quality accreditation criteria that public universities must address as part of the national quality accreditation process, and so the pressure on rectors to establish university councils is intensifying.

The fundamental challenge is the removal of line-management control of public universities by different government ministries and instrumentalities. These authorities control the flow of funds to individual universities. More importantly, they control the appointment of rectors. The accountability felt by rectors to the ministries and instrumentalities responsible for their appointment will remain a significant obstacle to the development of the autonomy of university councils.

Funding

Public universities and colleges receive block grants from whichever ministry or public instrumentality is responsible for their line-management. The size of these grants is affected principally by student enrolments and the number of staff employees. About 2% of the funds for public universities are earmarked for use in supporting research. The block grants are made on a rolling three-year basis, with public higher education institutions able to carry forward any unallocated funds for up to three years. Public universities and colleges, other than those providing teacher education – which is subsidised by the Government, also receive income from tuition fees, which generally account for about one-half of their revenue. The larger research-oriented universities may also receive income from research and the sale of technical services remains small, but this source of income is relatively small. These universities have also been able to earn income from the delivery of non-formal programs, but the importance of this source of income is declining because of pressure on these universities to focus more on research. Private universities and colleges, in Vietnam, which account for only 14% of all higher education enrolments (MOET, 2016), rely almost entirely on tuition fees. They receive no public funding.

Vietnam’s public higher education sector needs to be better funded, and the funding mechanisms employed, especially concerning the provision of support for research, need significant upgrading (Pham Thi Ly 2013, pp.144-145). As a ‘lower middle income’ country, Vietnam experiences severe capacity constraints on its ability to fund its public higher education sector. All the same, expenditure from all sources on higher education has been increasing significantly since the early 2000s. For example, expenditure on higher education increased from 0.36% of GDP in 2001 to 1.0% of GDP by 2012 (Communist Party Central Committee (CPC), 2012). Expenditure on science and technology has also increased. In 2013, it accounted for 0.87% of GDP. By 2020, it is expected to account for 2% of GDP (Ministry of Science and Technology (MOST), 2015).

These percentages are broadly comparable with benchmarks for the region (World Bank, 2017), but they are not sufficient to provide public universities with the quality of teaching and research infrastructure required to become globally competitive. As documented later in this paper, the salary levels of academic staff members at public universities remain low when compared with cost-of-living estimates.

The option of increasing tuition fees has been explored and recommended in a review funded by the World Bank concerning the higher education system's governance and regulation (Master Plan for Vietnam's Higher Education System 2012, p.57). The tuition fee levels charged by public universities in Vietnam are not widely considered to be excessive, but there exists a strong measure of political sensitivity about allowing them to increase too rapidly. One reason for this concern is that the affordability of supporting a child through an undergraduate degree at a public university is relatively limited for families on average and below-average levels of household income. For example, Nguyen Ngoc Anh (2012, p.269) has calculated that the cost of supporting a full-time student at a public higher education institution in Vietnam is equivalent to about 40% of an average household income.

The funding mechanisms for public higher education institutions are slowly evolving, with more encouragement now being given to individual institutions to manage their own budgets. In the past, public funds were allocated for specific purposes and for specified periods of time. The situation now is that public universities and colleges are permitted to make their own spending decisions, though within a framework of 'expenditure norms' that are controlled by the State.

Public higher education institutions are now also free to set tuition fee levels for the delivery of 'non-regular' training programs, that is, part-time training programs undertaken by students who may not have qualified for admission to a full-time training program. An effect of this policy, however, is that it is the country's leading public universities that are best able to attract large numbers of 'non-regular' students, which potentially diverts their focus from striving to meet official expectations that they should become internationally competitive 'research-intensive' universities (Lam Quang Thiep 2012, p.265). In 2015, 'non-regular' enrolments accounted for about 15% of all higher education enrolments (MOET, 2016).

Research and Research Training

Vietnam's research performance is poor by international standards. Bibliometric indicators, using the Scopus database, show how the gap in publishing performance between Vietnam and two of its neighbouring ASEAN member states, Thailand and Malaysia, has been widening since 2001 (Scimago, 2017). Vietnam produces a relatively small number of peer-refereed international publications per one million of population (Pham Duy Hien 2010, p.617). Contributing significantly to this problem is the fact that so few PhD-qualified academic staff members publish at an international standard. In 2014, for example, there were about 14,300 PhD-qualified academic staff members in Vietnam, but only 3,955 peer-reviewed publications were recorded in that year (Scimago, 2017). This problem is especially pronounced in the humanities and social sciences.

The implications of weak research performance are widely evident. Scimago ranks only four institutions in Vietnam as being noteworthy producers of new knowledge that has a technological impact, compared with 14 universities in Thailand that are recognised for these attributes (Scimago, 2017). Vietnam also scores poorly when compared with Thailand and Malaysia as a knowledge-based economy. Vietnam's performance in 2015-16 on the World Economic Forum's *Global Competitiveness Index*, and its performance in 2012 on the World Bank's *Knowledge Economy Index*, fell well below the performance levels achieved by Thailand and Malaysia (World Economic Forum 2016, p.xiii; World Bank, 2017).

Various constraints limiting Vietnam's research performance have been identified. One is the low proportion of academic staff members holding a doctoral qualification, which in 2016 was only 21.4% (MOET, 2017). Another is the modest level of national investment in research and development.

Yet another is the extent to which academic staff members at public universities in Vietnam see their role as being mainly concerned with teaching. Lam Quang Thiep (2012) reported, for example, how academics at major public universities in Vietnam identified more with undergraduate teaching than with postgraduate teaching or research.

The way that research is funded is also problematic. As Pham Thi Ly (2013) has documented, the mechanisms employed to allocate these funds within public universities are “bureaucratically fragmented and cumbersome” (p.142). The National Fund for Science and Technology Development (NAFOSTED), which became operational in 2008, has introduced a new approach to research funding, that is, one based on the rigorous assessment of grant applications for merit by employing peer review procedures. NAFOSTED now plays a significant role in fostering research in public universities, but less than 5% of the national research budget is allocated to NAFOSTED (MOST 2015, p.84). NAFOSTED’s budget urgently needs to be increased. Its funding mechanisms might also require further review because at present they strongly favour research in the natural and applied sciences (MOST 2015, p.88). In assessing grant applications, NAFOSTED gives weight to international publications, but the interests of researchers in the humanities and social sciences are more likely to focus on matters of national or even local interest.

The poor quality of postgraduate education in Vietnam is also a constraint on the development of the research capacity of public universities. To overcome this problem, the Government has been investing heavily since 2005 in the provision of opportunities for academic staff members to obtain a PhD from abroad. The Government has also funded 37 ‘advanced programs’ across 23 universities, involving accredited international partners. These programs, together with various other related initiatives, are intended to produce greater research and research training capacity (MOET, 2015). The positive impact of the Government’s commitment is already being experienced: the proportion of academic staff members holding a doctoral qualification increased sharply from 11% in 2012 to 21.4% by 2016 (MOET, 2017).

The large number of research institutes is another challenge needing to be addressed. In 2011, there were over 1,600 research institutes of varying kinds operating in Vietnam (CPCC, 2012). Of these, only 55 were recognised by the Ministry of Education and Training as being eligible to provide PhD training (MOET, 2012). While some research institutes, including the Vietnam Academy of Science and Technology (VAST) and the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences (VASS) are large and multi-disciplinary, most research institutes are small and mono-disciplinary. Links between research institutes and universities are rarely formalised, and so the benefits of collaboration with public universities are not fully exploited.

Academic Standards

Quality assurance is gaining momentum within the higher education sector in Vietnam. Most higher education institutions now have Centres for Quality Assurance. These Centres have responsibility for monitoring and evaluating academic standards and assessment practices within their institutions. All higher education institutions are required to complete an institutional self-assessment report, which is then followed by an external review and accreditation process. There are 10 quality standards and 61 quality criteria that have been identified by the Ministry of Education and Training as having to be met by individual higher education institutions (MOET, 2007). For the external review process, four accreditation centres have been established since 2013.

To date, there has been no evaluation of the effectiveness of these processes. Concern has been expressed in the past that the processes are too heavily focused on inputs, rather than on outputs and outcomes (Nguyen Kim Dung, Oliver and Priddy 2009, p.130). Also of concern is that the processes focus exclusively on meeting minimum standards, with little room provided for assessing individual institutions on a ‘fitness for purpose’ basis. The processes are also constrained by limitations on the availability of quality-related data on key indicators, particularly globally acknowledged standards concerning students’ experiences of their courses, graduate employment outcomes, research higher

degree completions, and details of research performance and impact. Generating the data required to enable the quality assurance processes to function effectively remains a challenge for the sector.

Graduate Unemployment

Graduate unemployment has recently emerged as an issue of significance for higher education in Vietnam. According to the World Bank (2014, p.27), a slowdown in the rate of economic growth in 2013 and 2014 triggered the problem, and a steep increase in the number of recent graduates searching for employment has added to the slowdown's extent and impact. Between 2013 and 2016, the number of university graduates who were unemployed increased significantly from 72,000 to 115,400, with many redundancies declared in the business administration, banking, finance and accounting professions (Institute of Labour Sciences and Social Affairs, 2016). Meanwhile, the proportion of the labour force with a university qualification has risen appreciably from 5.7% in 2010 to 7.6% in 2014 (General Statistics Office of Vietnam, 2016). At a time of declining demand for graduates in certain fields, therefore, there is an increasing supply of graduates available.

Employers typically report that recent graduates do not have sufficient practical experience to be able to step into a role and perform it without the need for a long period of induction, and that recent graduates are often deficient in terms of their 'soft skills', variously understood to include social skills, communication skills, character traits and personal ethics (Dân Trí Newspaper, 2016; Tuổi Trẻ Newspaper, 2015a). These issues were canvassed in a World Bank (2014) report that identified 'skills lag' and 'skills shortage' problems in the labour market for graduates: the former referred to university graduates lacking 'work-ready' skills required to be immediately productive when they enter the labour force, and the latter referred to the lack of graduates with the skills required by employers. From the evidence available, it appears that, though higher education institutions are trying to respond to the challenge, their capacity to do so is constrained by the centrally-controlled nature of the curriculum and the prevalence across the higher education system of a reliance on traditional teaching methods (Thi Tuyet Tran, 2013). Student passivity about doing anything to help themselves is also a matter of concern (Thi Tuyet Tran 2013, p.642).

Increasing graduate unemployment rates, and calls by employers for graduates to be more 'work ready', are not unique to Vietnam. Similar trends are evident elsewhere in Asia (see the report by Bothwell, 2016). Of significance in the context of Vietnam is that the increase has been so sharp, and has occurred against a background of a generally low national unemployment rate. Recent figures published by the General Statistics Office in Vietnam show that in the first quarter of 2017, when the national unemployment rate was only 2.09%, the national rate of youth unemployment was a little over three times higher, while the rate of graduate unemployment was more than eight times higher. This situation is confronting for most of the population because of a national belief in the value of a degree as a passport to better employment and income-earning opportunities. It has also given rise to heated debate about the need for higher education programs to become more contemporary in terms of their training focus.

Internationalisation

International integration is a powerful force driving reform in the higher education sector in Vietnam. The Communist Party Central Committee (CPCC) of Vietnam has consistently affirmed the necessity of international integration, stating as long ago as 2002 that it wished to see "widening international collaboration in education; maximising projects funded by international organizations in education; opening various forms of cooperative . . . overseas providers' programs, organising on-shore study abroad programs" (CPCC, 2002). More recently, the 11th Party Congress in 2013 identified international integration to be one of seven guiding principles for the comprehensive and fundamental reform of the higher education sector, observing that: "education and training must meet the requirements for international integration for the country's development" (CPCC, 2013).

Many of the early initiatives that focused on the internationalisation of the higher education system relied heavily on development aid in one form or other (Welch 2010, p.203). As Vietnam's economic capacity develops, future support for internationalisation will need to depend more on budgetary support from the Government, and will, therefore, need to be strongly aligned with Vietnam's plans for the development of human resource capacity and international competitiveness. The Government appears from all indications to remain strongly committed to international integration in the higher education sector, as illustrated by its significant level of financial support for Project 911, concerning the strategic training of lecturers at PhD level for academic roles in universities and colleges over the period from 2010 to 2020. In 2013, however, the Ministry of Education and Training expressed concern that "... the international integration in higher education lacks ... strategic direction ... There needs to be more quality assurance and accreditation processes over the partnership programs with international partners" (MOET 2013, pp.2-3). Whether anything has been done to date to apply quality assurance and accreditation processes to these programs remains unclear.

Conditions of Academic Employment

Higher education institutions in Vietnam are responsible for employing their own members of academic staff, and so employees of public higher education institutions are not civil servants. However, the conditions applying to academic employment at public higher education institutions are so tightly prescribed by the State that the absence of civil service status is not especially important.

The Higher Education Law of 2012 requires that academic staff members at public universities should teach, do research, and participate in professional development. Teaching refers here to the delivery of academic programs at the diploma, bachelor, master's and PhD levels. Article 15 of the Higher Education Law indicates that the teaching role also involves a commitment to self-improvement and to setting an example for students. Reflecting Confucian cultural values, Article 15 commits the State to providing the "... necessary material and spiritual conditions for teachers to fulfil their roles and responsibilities, preserving and developing the tradition of respecting teachers and honouring the teaching profession."

Research refers to the conduct and dissemination of scientific and technological investigations, both for improving educational quality and for contributing to the cultural, scientific and technological capacity of Vietnam. Article 18 of the Higher Education Law expressly refers to the service function of research, whereby priority should be given to research focused on the solution of problems relating to Vietnam's national and local socioeconomic development.

Professional development refers to attendance at courses intended to improve the capacity of academic staff members in terms of their political knowledge, their knowledge in an academic specialisation, and their knowledge of pedagogy, as prescribed by Article 55 of the Higher Education Law. Acquiring enhanced political knowledge about Marxism-Leninism and the thoughts of Ho Chi Minh is especially important in Vietnam for academic staff members seeking to achieve managerial and leadership positions.

In 2014, the Ministry of Education and Training mandated that all appointment levels, from assistant lecturer up to professor, should have the same workload allocation of a little over 50% for teaching, and 33% for research. This pattern is broadly in line with profiles for other national higher education systems, but the requirement for academic staff members to devote 33% of their workload allocation to research is not widely enforced in Vietnam. Compliance with this requirement is, therefore, extremely variable. The problem is that many academic staff members, because of the relatively poor salary levels available in the public sector, prefer to substitute additional teaching commitments instead of doing research. The additional teaching provides them with steady income.

Salaries for academic staff members in public higher education institutions are based on seniority, as regulated by the Government. Salary increments are awarded every three years, depending upon successful completion of assigned tasks, as assessed by senior academic managers.

In general, the salary levels available to academic staff members are insufficient to maintain a family, according to several sources (see, for example, Thanh Niên Newspaper, 2016; Tuổi Trẻ Newspaper, 2015b; and Tiền Phong Newspaper, 2016). For example, a young lecturer receiving a monthly salary of 4 million VND (about US\$200), living in a major Vietnamese city where the minimum cost of living is also about 4 million VND (Dang Quang Dieu and Hien Thi Thuong Dong, 2015), cannot survive on an academic salary alone. Many, if not most, academic staff members feel obliged to earn a supplementary income. Those employed at public higher education institutions readily find opportunities for part-time and casual employment at private higher education institutions. These institutions function on a business model that involves a heavy reliance on the employment of part-time and casual teaching staff. Academics also take on extra work outside the academy, such as in hospitality or consulting. A significant challenge for the sector is the need to improve the salary levels of academic staff members.

The regulatory framework for academic employment is also in need of attention. Public higher education institutions are burdened by multiple regulatory requirements issued by different Government ministries. These requirements are not always well integrated. For example, the Ministry of Education and Training issues regulations regarding academic workloads and responsibilities; while it is the Cabinet which issues a separate set of regulations regarding academic salaries and academic promotions; and then it is the Prime Minister who independently sets the standards for the award of professorial titles. There is, in other words, a lack of regulatory coherence.

There is an additional need to increase the proportion of academic staff members, especially female academic staff members, appointed to professorial levels. The proportion of all academic staff members at public higher education institutions who are appointed as professors or associate professors is very small by international standards, at only 0.8% and 4.8% respectively in 2016. The large majority (83%) of these senior academic staff members are male, and older than 50 years of age (MOET, 2017). Females account for 47% of all academic staff members at public higher education institutions.

Private higher education institutions generally offer higher salary levels than public higher education institutions, but employment by private higher education institutions is typically offered on a contractual basis, which means that there is much less security of tenure. Few private higher education institutions support research, and so employment at a private higher education institution is typically limited to teaching and program administration.

The Future

In a recent doctoral investigation by one of the authors (Le Thi Kim Anh, 2016), the academic and organisational culture experienced by 30 academic members of staff from across a range of organisational and disciplinary settings at four leading, research-oriented universities in Vietnam was explored using a qualitative approach to the collection and interpretation of the data. Of interest were the issues, claims and concerns of the participants about the culture of their workplaces, and about the impact of this culture on the attainment of their academic aspirations.

The investigation pointed to the existence of a keenly developing sense of academic identity at Vietnam's leading, research-oriented universities. This identity was most strongly evident in the natural and applied sciences, where participants in the investigation manifested a well-developed sense of allegiance to global disciplinary communities. Participants from the natural and applied sciences reported a depth of engagement with global knowledge networks. They worked strenuously to reinforce this engagement through their publishing activities.

In the more individualistic research specialisms of the humanities, the desire for an affinity with global disciplinary communities was also widely reported, but research outcomes in terms of international publications were comparatively far less in evidence. Publishing in the humanities remained for the most part locally focused and intermittent.

Academics working in the applied social sciences, particularly teacher education, were the least globally engaged, reporting meagre links with international scholarly networks. Typically, in the field of teacher education, an understanding of the need to mark out intellectual territory through publishing research findings in peer-refereed journals was acknowledged, but it was an attainment that was also considered to be wholly out of reach in practical terms.

An important discovery was the identification of academic staff members able to be described as ‘cosmopolitan researchers’. There were academic staff members, coming mainly but not exclusively from the natural and applied sciences, who were highly productive as international researchers. Nearly all these participants had obtained their PhDs abroad, and most had also completed post-doctoral research programs at foreign research-intensive universities. Though constrained by limited funding support, and tending to be ‘inbred’ to an extent because of their inclination to return to the same university at which they had completed their undergraduate studies, they fitted neatly with Clark’s (1985, p.38) description of faculty members at leading research universities in the United States: where academic life was centred on research, teaching commitments were light, and professors enjoyed the rituals of their disciplines as well as high standing within their disciplinary enclaves. The ‘cosmopolitan researchers’ were, in other words, members of an elite group with a refined sense of academic identity within their international ‘club’. These were the kinds of scholars that the Government and individual ‘research-oriented’ universities will need to rely upon to provide Vietnam with a globally competitive higher education sector in the not-too-distant future.

The two other groups identified were the ‘local researchers’, that is, academics who were active as researchers but who published mainly or entirely in Vietnam, and ‘reluctant researchers’, that is, academics who preferred to focus on teaching and who were not inclined to engage in research. Humanities scholars were more likely to be ‘local researchers’, and the ‘reluctant researchers’ were mainly scholars from the social sciences (including teacher education).

Practical measures are required to nurture and support the development of a ‘cosmopolitan researcher’ culture in Vietnam’s higher education sector. The discussion in the earlier part of this paper has drawn attention to aspects of the sector that, if left unattended, will delay the development of this culture. In general, there is a need for public universities in Vietnam to have more capacity to act independently in cultivating the immense talent that they attract in the form of academic staff members and students.

Concluding Remarks

This paper has sought to chart a road ahead for Vietnam’s higher education sector as it responds to the need to become more research-oriented and more globally competitive. There are pockets within the sector that clearly have made the transition to global scholarly engagement, but much of the sector remains tied to the values and practices of the past. The sector has made extraordinary progress since the early 1990s, but seven aspects of the sector that now urgently require attention include: improving the governance arrangements for higher education institutions; improving academic salaries and simplifying the regulatory environment regarding academic employment; providing more financial support for research and channelling more of this support through NAFOSTED; addressing the conditions that underlie the problem of increasing levels of graduate unemployment; revitalising policies that will promote the benefits from increased internationalisation; and improving the conditions of academic employment, especially the salary levels of academic staff members.

The need to achieve significant cultural change in the academy in Vietnam is pressing. Given the pace of change in higher education systems globally, Vietnam’s higher education sector must take giant strides not only to make up ground but also to keep up with the pace.

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