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## Higher Education Lags Behind the Times in Vietnam

### Outdated thinking in the classroom hampers the country's reform efforts

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Hanoi, Vietnam

When the American War — as it is known in Vietnam — raged, every college student here was required to know how to fire a rifle and throw a grenade. Today the war is long over and memories of that terrible time are fading.

Yet Nguyen Phuong Thao, a literature major at Vietnam National University at Hanoi, is still required to spend several weeks of every year on the campus's mock battlefield, staggering under the weight of a Soviet-era rifle and crawling through the dirt, tossing fake grenades.

Ms. Thao, who was born 10 years after the last American troops left Vietnam, has no idea who the enemy is. But like all university students, unless she can hit a target with a grenade carved out of wood, she will not get her degree. "If you don't pass, you don't graduate," she says.

Ms. Thao is willing to suffer through annual military training and battle-strategy courses. But she resents having to take two years of classes on subjects that range from Ho Chi Minh thought to the history of the Communist Party. She attends one of the country's premier universities, yet nearly all of Ms. Thao's textbooks are from the 1950s, and she says most of what she studies has little to do with the fast-paced world she lives in.

Two decades after embarking on a policy of *doi moi*, or renewal, which gave a green light to the free market, Vietnam is one of the fastest-growing economies in the world.

Colorful advertisements for cellphones now outnumber posters of rapturous farmers standing arm in arm with Ho Chi Minh. When Bill Gates, chairman of Microsoft, visited Hanoi in April, he was given a rock star's welcome by thousands of university students, not to mention government leaders, who broke away from an important party conference to shake his hand. And Vietnam, after a hard-won battle to get the United States' approval, is scheduled to join the World Trade Organization next month.

Yet Vietnam's higher-education system is in a time warp: 20, even 30 years, out of date. Economists point to the fact that the country does not have a single university considered to be of international quality. It lacks a credible research environment, produces few Ph.D.'s, and is locked in Soviet-style pedagogy. Students still sit through lectures about the evils of capitalism. And in class, America is referred to as "the enemy."

Development experts warn that Vietnam's remarkable growth rate of 8.4 percent cannot be sustained

unless it can produce the skilled labor a modern economy needs. Several industries are already scaling back production because they do not have enough engineers to design the products customers want.

"We can't separate higher education from the country's economy," says Cao Hao Thi, dean of the School of Industrial Management at the Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology.

### **Cow's Milk**

As a developing nation, Vietnam faces the same problems in its higher-education system that vex other countries in Southeast Asia: low teaching salaries, rote learning, ill-equipped and crowded classrooms. But what is really holding the country back, says Dang Van Thanh, a lecturer at the University of Economics in Ho Chi Minh City, is that the country is hobbled by outdated thinking.

For decades, while China was sending its people to Britain and to the United States, most Vietnamese went to the Soviet Union or the Eastern-bloc countries to do graduate work. When that system collapsed in the late 1980s, Vietnam brought its people home. No restrictions on foreign travel exist today, but neither families nor the government can afford to send many students abroad for a college education. Vietnam sends just 3,600 students to the United States each year.

The Ministry of Education and Training remains one of the last vestiges of the Communist central-planning system. Some call it the most unreformed of all the country's ministries. Party members in Hanoi, not professors in the field, determine what should be taught and how. The Communist leaders dictate curriculum and, in some cases, which textbooks are used. The officials have final say over who is hired and who is fired, even at private universities.

"When the government organizes a meeting of the 230 university rectors, no one speaks up," says Mr. Thanh, a 23-year veteran of the higher-education system. "If they do, they will pay the price, and they are afraid."

Ten years ago, members of a select group of universities were allowed to set their own curricula and design their own budgets. They were told they could make all their hiring decisions. Yet in most cases, the academics, fearful of making decisions, still defer to the central government.

"There is an old Vietnamese saying," says one former ministry official, who asked not to be identified for fear of upsetting those in power. "Once you get used to breast-feeding, you can't get used to cow's milk."

(A senior official in the education ministry was interviewed about higher-education reform and asked to respond to criticisms. *The Chronicle* has chosen not to publish his comments after the official threatened the newspaper's translator if he was not allowed to review the article before it was published, a condition which violates *Chronicle* editorial policies.)

Pham Phu, who sits on the prime minister's reform-leaning National Commission for Education, can and does speak out. A former member of the National Assembly and a senior professor, Mr. Phu has reached a stage in his career where he no longer has to watch his back.

"It's not easy to change the thinking of these people," says Mr. Phu, who directs a joint M.B.A. program between the Netherlands' Maastricht School of Management and the Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology, referring to officials in the education ministry.

He says the government knows that education in Vietnam needs to be completely revamped. And Vietnam's impending membership in the WTO is intensifying the pressure. But practically every

reform proposal that is submitted — from increasing autonomy to raising tuition — is sent for further study or is quietly scuttled.

Mr. Phu says what Vietnam needs is new blood. The best and brightest have already gone to work for private companies, but he says there are thousands of highly educated Vietnamese living abroad who would love to return to their homeland to contribute. But with university-lecturer salaries capped at \$150 a month and a curriculum that is set by the government, he says, it is hardly a tempting career move.

"We won't see changes in my lifetime," he concedes.

Students and parents are increasingly frustrated. Tuition at public universities is cheap, but buys little. A degree is still considered a necessity, but it no longer guarantees a good job after graduation.

Cheating, practically unheard of 10 years ago, is rampant today. Students routinely pay professors for passing grades. Cellphones are used inside testing halls to get the answers. Since many courses have no relevance and students consider that what they are learning is useless, cheating is no longer considered the great evil it once was.

What students really want is English. The United States is now one of Vietnam's largest trading partners, and English is increasingly required to land a good job. Even though all university students must take a foreign language and most choose English — few graduates ever learn to speak it. That is largely because their professors cannot.

"My professors were teaching Russian before," says Le Quang Hoa, who is getting a degree in accounting at Vietnam Commercial University, in Hanoi. "They were all ordered to start teaching English, so none of them can actually speak the language."

Ms. Hoa, like many of her classmates, attends a privately run language institute in addition to taking her regular university courses.

To help serve Vietnam's education needs, the government has started to open the door to outside players, who are testing the waters of the potentially lucrative market — with its one million university and college students.

Per capita, Vietnam is one of the poorest countries in the world, but a growing stratum of wealthy Vietnamese are willing to pay for the best education that money can buy. Most of the newcomers to the market have been English-language centers and computer-training institutes. In the past, these institutions have been financed by foreigners, but have Vietnamese names on their documents.

Prohibitions against foreign investment have lifted only enough to interest one university to set up shop here. In 2001 the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology blazed a difficult path when it became the first wholly foreign-owned company in Vietnam to offer degrees. It runs popular programs in information technology, engineering, and business.

But because of the paperwork and a long list of requirements, including that foreign-owned universities also teach Ho Chi Minh thought and "Scientific Socialism," most interested institutions sit on the sidelines. There is money to be made in Vietnam, many of them believe, but not quite yet.

### **A New University**

Some reformers suggest that what Vietnam needs now is to build a top-tier international university.

They believe throwing more money at established universities is not going to fundamentally alter anyone's thinking. Competition from an entirely new institution, they suggest, would shake things up.

Phan Van Khai, Vietnam's departing prime minister, is one of those who supports the idea. During a visit to the United States last year, Mr. Khai met with officials at Harvard University to discuss the project. Newspapers back home all cheered the proposal. Anyone following the state-controlled media could be forgiven for thinking it was a done deal.

"Ha!" scoffs Bui Van, a former lecturer at Harvard's Fulbright Economics Teaching Program, in Ho Chi Minh City, who runs a reform-leaning Web site, VietNamNet, which backs calls for an international university. "Don't expect anything."

The ministry of education is the only agency with the authority to start a new university. The proposal that was submitted last year has gone nowhere.

Money is hardly an impediment, say the university's supporters. It is unlikely that Vietnam, the darling of the donor community, would have trouble raising the \$100-million needed to start breaking ground. The real problem is politics.

"The ministry hates the idea," says Mr. Van. "An international university says that everything they are doing is wrong."

Mr. Van says his readers are watching how this plays out. There is growing frustration over the fact that students spend years in universities but graduate with useless knowledge. "They are asking: Why don't we have a world-class university? Why isn't there more freedom? Why isn't the system merit-based?"

No one expects people to take to the streets. This is Vietnam, after all, not France. But there is growing unhappiness over too many promises and too few real changes.

"The leaders say we are a poor country, so we must wait," says Mr. Van. "Well, Vietnam is tired of waiting."

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