

Today's News

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Vietnamese Leaders, on U.S. Visit, Discuss Ambitious Overhaul of Higher Education

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New York

At a forum here on Wednesday, Vietnam's president and minister of education outlined an ambitious plan to overhaul their country's troubled educational system, while a panel of American academics and scientists highlighted the importance of higher education to Vietnam's rapidly growing economy and suggested potential models for reform.

The forum, held at the New School, came on the second day of the officials' visit to the United States, the first by a Vietnamese head of state since the Vietnam War. The president, Nguyen Minh Triet, is scheduled to meet with President Bush later this week.

He and his education minister, Nguyen Thien Nhan, both said at Wednesday's forum that improving higher education was key to Vietnam's economic development effort.

Mr. Triet said he would appeal to President Bush for American support of that effort. "We want to learn from your experience and want your assistance and support for our endeavors in higher education," he said through a translator.

Two decades after opening up to a free-market economy, Vietnam has one of the fastest-growing economies in the world, yet its universities lag significantly behind those of other developing countries. Only 10 percent of Vietnam's college-aged population attends its overcrowded universities, and its tiny professoriate, most of whose members were trained in Russia or other countries in the former Eastern Bloc, is aging. And as only one-third of Vietnam's 160 universities offer doctoral programs, professors' numbers are likely to dwindle further.

The country produces 500 new Ph.D. recipients a year, Mr. Nhan, the education minister, said at Wednesday's forum. He said that by 2020, he hoped to bring the country's number of Ph.D.'s to 20,000, half of whom would be trained outside Vietnam.

The minister said he anticipated that 2,500 of those new Ph.D.'s would be educated in the United States and would form a core group of faculty members who would lead the country's efforts to create a tiered system of national higher education. At its pinnacle would be a new science and technology research university in Hanoi that Mr. Nhan said he hoped would open in 2008.

He also indicated that there were plans in the works to develop Vietnam National Universities, in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, into research institutions with Ph.D. programs and to establish a new binational university that would be jointly financed by Vietnam and the German state of Hessen.

Mr. Nhan also expressed hope that with the aid of international technology companies like Intel, Vietnam might persuade American universities to open technology-focused campuses in his country that would help it strengthen its science and technology curriculum.

"We hope that by 2020, a Vietnamese university might be one of the top 100 universities in the world," he said.

He gave few specifics, however, about how such an ambitious plan would be accomplished or whether the Vietnamese government would provide the necessary economic and regulatory incentives.

The panel discussion that preceded Mr. Nhan's and President Triet's comments enumerated some of the challenges such a plan would involve.

Henry Rosovsky, a professor emeritus of economics at Harvard University, underlined the importance of creating a merit-based organizational structure that would funnel talent upward within a hierarchical system of research universities. "Talent has to be recognized, recruited, and rewarded," he told the Vietnamese officials.

He added that a Vietnamese top-tier university that could compete with premier institutions of other nations would have to be developed organically as the outgrowth of social change in Vietnam. "It is unlikely to be simply a foreign import," said Mr. Rosovsky, who was a co-leader of a panel sponsored by the World Bank and Unesco that studied the role of higher education in developing countries.

David O. Dapice, an associate professor of economics at Tufts University and an economist at the Vietnam Program at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, said Vietnam's universities were not producing enough trained workers to satisfy the demand created by the country's rapid economic growth. To sustain economic development, he said, the nation must improve both the quantity and the quality of its graduates.

Vietnamese academics now lag in producing inventions and publishing, he said. He pointed out that in 2002, only two patents were filed by Vietnamese residents, as compared with 40,000 filed by Chinese in the same year.

Blair H. Sheppard, the dean-elect of Duke University's Fuqua School of Business, said that in order to succeed, Vietnamese universities would need to maintain strong relationships with institutions elsewhere, offer salaries that would attract faculty members with international training, and have institutional autonomy and accountability.

Bob Kerrey, president of the New School and a Vietnam War veteran, also spoke of the need for institutional autonomy and cautioned President Triet that strong universities sometimes find themselves at odds with their governments. "If you're going to have universities that are top tier," Mr. Kerrey said, "you have to permit critical thinking and dissent."

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