

statements made by the Cambodian Higher Education Association (CHEA), a supposedly independent representative body for all institutions of higher education, denounced the leader of the opposition party. These statements were unrelated to higher education and in conflict with CHEA's bylaws. Another indication of how politicized the sector has become is the recent appointments of senior positions in the ministry and public higher education institutions according to a power-sharing formula between the two ruling parties that had little reference to competence and expanded an already bloated and inefficient civil service bureaucracy.

Alternatively, optimists tend to see how far higher education in Cambodia has progressed in such a short time. They see increased international linkages, cooperation, and assistance—such as investment by US Cambodian communities and the recent US\$3 million World Bank grant to higher education. They see as cause for celebration rising numbers of returnees from graduate study overseas injecting new ideas into the system, increasing competence in management and

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quality assurance in some private institutions, the annual Education Sector Review conducted this year for the first time without foreign technical assistance, a growing body of graduate research being produced by the better higher education institutions, the establishment of at least one private institution as a nonprofit university, diversification of course offerings and even preparation of an “open university” by one private university, and the very existence of CHEA and the ACC.

Then there are the unashamedly probusiness types, who have great faith in the belief that universities run as commercial enterprises, “like bread shops,” will automatically deliver quality or else fail as businesses, as evidenced already. They tend to see a majority of the private institutions being run by businessmen committed to educational quality and are dismissive of the public institutions as being so crippled by government control. On the other hand, there are those who see that the commercial drive to “pack ‘em in” in the private institutions is crippling their administrations and is encouraging them to accept unqualified students, employ under- or unqualified teachers, and pass students after minimal evaluation.

There are also the idealists who focus on educational quality and social justice. They see the dangers of a future in which higher education becomes a preserve of the rich and are concerned with such things as the low participation rate of women (33 percent) and the disabled; the number of government “scholarship” places for the brightest students, which are static in absolute terms but declining in relative terms and are still in fact unfunded; the inequitable access to higher education in

rural areas; and the effect of corruption on entrance procedures, the conduct of exams, and the issuing of degrees.

#### CONCLUSION

The state of Cambodian higher education is a tricky elephant to describe. There are many causes for concern but also for hope. The mismatch between higher education provision and labor force demands has produced an oversupply of poorly trained graduates that may have the potential to threaten social stability. The relevance and quality of many of the degrees being granted have produced serious concerns. Tension is rising between the aging political elite, increasingly desperate to cling to power by political manipulation, and a younger generation of more qualified and capable officers, who are concerned with a sustainable future for higher education and are increasingly trying to introduce merit into decision making. There is growing international influence, perceived by some as assistance and by others as a threat to local interests, as well as rapid expansion, diversification, and the start of more orderly development in a system experiencing understandable growing pains.

The immediate future of Cambodian higher education during this phase of rapid growth will be affected by the following challenges: assuring quality and equitable access while encouraging expansion and regulating a balance between commercial self-interest and public long-term benefit. ■

## A 2020 Vision for Higher Education in Vietnam

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Vietnam has recently adopted a higher education reform agenda that, if successful, will bring about a transformation of the higher education system by 2020. The agenda reflects themes in the experience of many less-developed economies seeking to mobilize their intellectual capital through a sustained investment in higher education. What is striking about Vietnam's agenda is its ambitiousness, but here-in also lies a threat to its success.

#### THE SETTING

Since the mid-1980s, Vietnam has vigorously pursued goals of industrialization and modernization. As a consequence, it is

now experiencing high annual rates of economic growth, low rates of inflation, a reducing incidence of poverty, a slowing down in the rate of population growth, and, most importantly, an increase in export income. It remains, however, a poor country and one that is heavily reliant on intensive agriculture to support its population of nearly 83 million. Its per capita income level in 2004 was only US\$550.

Vietnam's higher education system has undergone dramatic change during the past decade. High growth rates have seen enrollments increase from 162,000 in 1992/93 to 1,045,382 in 2002/03. At the same time, large multidisciplinary universities have become dominant in a system once characterized by small, specialized institutes and colleges. Fourteen universities, out of the more than 200 institutions in the sector, have been designated as "key universities." These universities are generally quite large, even by international standards, and there is an official expectation that they will lead the process of

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modernization of the higher education system, particularly by developing a strong research culture and capability. These 14 institutions enroll almost one-third of all higher education students, and they include the two national universities—one in Hanoi and the other in Ho Chi Minh City.

Problems remain, however. Only 10 percent of the relevant age group participate in higher education, mainly because of the lack of available places; young people from rural areas and poor backgrounds are less likely to be included among enrollments; management processes are severely constrained by an excess of regulatory controls; there is a lack of depth in leadership experience and skills within institutions; articulation arrangements within the system are poorly developed; legislative provisions for the rapidly expanding "nonpublic" (private) sector are weak; graduates are poorly prepared in terms of their range of skills and capacities beyond those required for narrowly academic pursuits; the staff-student ratio (about 1:30) is too high; teaching methods continue to be very traditional; the process of curriculum renewal is slow moving and bureaucratic; academic salaries are not sufficiently attractive to elicit a strong professional commitment; and most academics are not involved in research.

#### THE REFORM AGENDA

In broad outline, the higher education reform agenda envisages a system that by 2020 is three to four times larger than at present, better managed and better integrated, more flexible in providing opportunities for course transfer, more equitable, more financially self-reliant, more research oriented, more focused on the commercialization of research and training opportunities, more attuned to international benchmarks of quality, and more open to international engagement. A total of

32 specific objectives are proposed, addressing nearly every aspect of the system. Of interest here are those objectives concerning the "renewal of management."

First, the reform agenda proposes to confer legal autonomy on higher education institutions, "giving them the right to decide and be responsible for training, research, human resource management and budget planning." This objective builds on repeated expressions of government policy over recent years concerning the need for decentralization of decision-making authority within the higher education system.

Second, the agenda proposes to "eliminate line-ministry control and develop a mechanism for having State ownership represented within public higher education institutions." The implications of this objective are potentially far-reaching, though many unanswered questions remain. This objective especially raises the question of what future role will be played by the 13 or so ministries that currently have quasi-proprietorial responsibilities for individual universities and colleges.

Third, the agenda calls for developing a system of "quality assurance and accreditation for higher education; improve on the legislative and regulatory environment; and accelerate the State's stewardship role in monitoring and inspecting the overall structure and scale of higher education." These objectives also represent a major commitment to reform, though much of what is implied by them must be construed contextually. Official commitment to a national quality assurance and accreditation system is especially noteworthy—this being an area that is very much in need of urgent attention.

Fourth, the agenda proposes to "develop a Higher Education Law." There is a pressing need to codify in one law the many official decrees that have impacted the sector over recent years. Laws in Vietnam are not, however, designed to be definitive and absolute. The laws jostle with other influences, including the "will of the people," as expressed by the Communist Party of Vietnam, and firm regulatory control exercised by the state.

This reform agenda contains numerous other specific objectives that are of note. It proposes, for example, that by 2020 the nonpublic (private) higher education sector should enroll 40 percent of all higher education students (currently, the proportion is about 10 percent). It proposes also that public higher education institutions should regulate their own expenditure and revenue and should diversify their income streams by engaging in the sale of contract services and the commercialization of technological developments.

#### CONCERNS

What is missing in the higher education reform agenda is a strong sense of how its objectives are going to be implemented. The decision to remove line-ministry control from public higher education institutions, for example, though an extremely bold decision in the Vietnamese context, is not backed up with any detailed explanation about how this objective will be achieved.

There are also questions related to how some of the initia-

tives will be funded. The proposed growth of the system will place a huge strain on Vietnam's public finances, even if, as is proposed, much of the growth takes place in the private sector and is paid for entirely by tuition fees, supplemented by land grants and taxation concessions from the state. Even this prospect raises further questions: how are so many students going to afford private higher education? what baseline standards of quality will be applied to the private sector? what is the intended balance between “for-profit” and “not-for-profit” providers?

Another notable feature of the agenda is the lack of a sense of priority regarding of the objectives to be achieved by 2020. It is of concern that quality assurance and institutional accreditation, for example, are not close to the top of a priority list for the system. The experience of other countries in the region should be enough to alert Vietnam to the importance of strict institutional accreditation processes during a phase of rapid expansion, especially one that relies heavily on growth in the private sector.

Finally, it is difficult to see how Vietnam will achieve institutional autonomy in the higher education system, given the relative lack of an effective governance infrastructure across the system, and given also the precarious position of university rectors, whose authority it seems will remain forever circumscribed by Communist Party policies and processes and a state disposition to govern by means of tight regulatory control. Vietnam is not lacking in energy and commitment. Its 2020 vision for higher education may, however, be a case of trying to do too much, too quickly. ■

## US Institutions Find Fertile Ground in Vietnam's Expanding Higher Education Market

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Unscrupulous companies often make unsubstantiated and sometimes false claims about their products and tend to prefer uninformed consumers. Conversely, reputable ones provide accurate information and call on their customers to educate themselves about what they are selling—even encouraging them to engage in comparison shopping. In fact, one well-

known US discount clothing company has adopted this concept as its slogan: “An Educated Consumer Is Our Best Customer.”

Unfortunately, in the borderless world of international higher education, many institutions prefer that the whole truth not be known about the circumstances under which they were established and the nature and quality of the programs they offer. This goal is much easier to achieve once they begin operating in a foreign country. In a sense, these institutions are preying on “uneducated consumers” (students and parents) who yearn for the quality and prestige of a US education and degree at an affordable price.

### VIETNAM'S HIGHER EDUCATION MARKET

In Vietnam, the “education business” is booming, opportunities for expansion are vast, but reliable information and guidance are difficult to obtain. Demand for higher education is strong, and as the government has acknowledged, the current system is unable to meet it. According to a survey conducted by Vietnam's Ministry of Health, the General Statistics Office, the World Health Organization, and UNICEF, 90 percent of general students in Vietnam want to enter a university; in reality, only 10 percent fulfill their dream. In Vietnam, 30.7 percent of urban young people graduate from high school, while only 21.11 percent of their rural counterparts achieve that goal. Similarly, about 14 percent of urban youth graduate from university; that figure is 1.5 percent for rural areas.

Since the cost of higher education in the United States is prohibitive and there is no guarantee of obtaining a student visa, US degree programs offered in-country or through distance learning are attractive options for many students in Vietnam. Furthermore, because Vietnamese are brand name conscious, US institutions naturally have a competitive advantage in the higher education market. For many, “made in the USA” is synonymous with quality. Vietnamese universities, in turn, are actively seeking US and other foreign academic partners to develop these programs for the many tangible (e.g., quality academic programs, additional revenue, training future professors and researchers for the university) and intangible benefits (e.g., prestige, improved academic discourse) that accrue.

A growing number of US universities and colleges, most accredited but some not, are looking to Vietnam as a lucrative market for online and in-country education and training programs. Most of these institutions are well intentioned; their primary goal is to meet an urgent need and provide a quality education at the lowest possible cost.

Other US higher education institutions, however, see a golden opportunity to reap substantial profits from a market that has rosy long-term prospects. Those institutions are well aware that there are many parents who cannot afford to send their child for overseas study but can afford the price tag of an in-country degree program or would prefer that their child earn a foreign university degree at home. There are also many