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Reforms of the Vietnamese education system badly needed

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The Vietnamese Minister for Education Nguyen Minh Hien may have to vacate his post soon, if not at the end of June, then at the end of the current tenure of the country's National Assembly, at the end of 2007. The reason is he failed in his reelection bid to the Central Committee of the Vietnamese Communist Party. The election was held in late April 2006. Hien's departure would not be a surprise to most people. Over the last few years, he has been criticized severely in the Assembly for the failures of the education system, and he would be made to take responsibility for them. The criticisms have been that the education system does not produce enough qualified workers for the economy; graduates of the system are not equipped for the knowledge-based and globalised economy, as many university graduates find they often have to study for more specialized degrees before they can land a good job. The biggest criticism is that students are made to study too much – tuition classes, extra classes and the studying of extra subjects have been driving a big “Extra Study” industry. Teachers that utilize it as an opportunity for corruption have also abused this drive. Examinations have become, to a certain extent, a façade for unethical practices by teachers, and every year the secondary school leaving examination as well as the university entrance examination witness many instances of cheating. In fact a whole industry that helps students to cheat have sprung up.



(Picture above: One of the many corners of the streets around the Ministry of Education in Hanoi where suppliers of “Examination Floats” are sold to help students cheat.)

(Picture below: Students throw their “Examination Floats” away after the examinations, right outside the examination halls.) (Pictures from VNExpress.net)

Education must be one of the most if not the most difficult portfolio of any developing country. Not only do developing countries face constraints of finances, but also in countries with multiple ethnic groups and ethnic conflicts, education policy can become the prize in political football. In Vietnam’s case, finances and incompetence at reform seems to be the problems and the faults have been placed on the Minister’s head.

Blaming it all on the Minister may be unfair, because ultimately it is the whole governance system that has to respond, change, and reform. The Ministry of Education is basically a victim of political football. The devising and management of an education system is not independent of the policy context that the political philosophies as well as the tradition of governance impose. This is the story of the high walls barricading and preventing changes in the education system.

To begin with, the psychology of most parents if not all in Vietnam is that their children should study as much and reach as high a level as possible in the formal education system, preferably graduating from university and then getting a cushy job in government, or in companies, preferably foreign ones and multinational corporations to boot. This is the Confucian route. Given systemic corruption, government jobs can give good income if you hang around long enough and you can get more if you mix around with the right crowd. Many state enterprises are also perpetually making losses and there is no Nobel Prize for guessing why, as managers “mismanage.” There is also a Polytechnics University but the fact is skill workers are still very much lacking in supply. The Ministry of Education has been called upon for a number of years by experts to provide more avenues of technical training, yet the technical schools (called the Cao Dang schools) have not expanded rapidly to meet the needs of industrialization. This is a policy shortcoming that is regrettable in various ways, because more technical schools would not only absorb restless youths that fail university entrance examinations, if they can be persuaded that this is another road to success, but also provide the necessary human resources to assure investors of an abundant supply of competent technicians. In this regard, resources and strategic vision need to be applied and society needs to be persuaded that many roads lead to success.

What the Vietnamese call “preferring to become a Teacher than a Technician” creates intense pressures on the education system to allocate more resources to train theoreticians than to training people with hands-on skills. The competition for places in the universities is very intense, and at every level students and their parents compete for top places in class and in the top schools to make sure that this journey to enter the university will be much easier. Thus there is a lot of focus on mugging, to achieve high grades in examinations. Where possible, parents still prefer to send their children to universities. Over the past ten years the number of young Vietnamese that went overseas to pursue a university degree increased tremendously. It is very common to find parents spending one or two hundred dollars on tuition classes for their primary and secondary school going children. The tuition business is exemplified by the rush to learn English at the many English language centres in Hanoi, where even backpackers from the UK, Australia, and the USA on tours in Vietnam are often employed as teachers simply because they are native speakers. Over and above this is an increasing demand for post-graduate education. Local post-graduate education still falls short of western standards, with a clear gulf in quality between those trained in the West and those trained at home.

The policy necessities, of course, rest with the correction of the Teacher-Technician balance as well as broadening the education system. It could be argued that the balance needs to tilt in favour of training more technicians than teachers because skill workers are in acute shortage in this time of rapid industrialization.

It would therefore seem that the educational sector in Vietnam is ripe for reforms, not just in the allocation of resources but also in the values placed on streams of learning. More technical training to produce more technicians is a desirable policy goal that no longer can be ignored. The country definitely does not have adequate state resources in the short term to quickly push up supply of these very important human resources to sustain its industrialization. Bottlenecks will encourage foreign investors to locate their factories elsewhere.

Yet there are two more reforms that are desirable so as to address the desired change raising the standards beyond rote learning. Vietnam needs more schools that strive to imbue the creative streak among students. The market for such schools is huge, and the government has already allowed the establishment of privately owned primary and secondary schools, as well as commercial schools for post-secondary school training. Enormous opportunities thus are available to investors. A second opportunity is for a foreign investor to suggest to the Vietnamese government the installation of an independent examination system, very much like the arrangement that the Ministry of Education in Singapore has with Cambridge University. For global knowledge contents, at the secondary and post-secondary level, the external examiners would set the questions and mark the scripts outside the country. This would eradicate the current ills that plague the examination system, with questions set by the Vietnamese Ministry of Education being constantly leaked before the examinations, extensive cheating in examination halls, and the bribing of examiners. The foreign examiner stands a better chance if a local or overseas Vietnamese partner is also involved.

The views expressed here are the author's personal views.