



Chapter 4

The Higher Education Reform Agenda: A Vision for 2020

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Introduction

Since 1987, when the *doi moi* reform process began, Vietnam has made significant progress in increasing the size and diversity of its higher education system. In terms of quality, however, the system is still not up to international standards. Significant deficiencies remain, particularly in the areas of governance, programmes, curricula, teaching methods, academic staff qualifications and physical infrastructure.

Recognizing a need for further radical reform of the system, the government promulgated Resolution 14 on the “Fundamental and Comprehensive Reform of Higher Education in Vietnam 2006–2020” (also known as the Higher Education Reform Agenda, or HERA). HERA presents a vision of what the higher education system should become.

This chapter addresses specifically a range of challenges facing the implementation of HERA. A perspective advanced is that, in an age of globalization, and especially now that Vietnam is a member of the World Trade Organization, the overriding challenge for Vietnam’s higher education system is that of improving the international competitiveness of the country’s professional labour force. In this regard, weaknesses in Vietnam’s higher education system serve only to undermine the nation’s capacity to achieve rapid global integration.

HERA’s Goals

The general aim of HERA is expressed as follows:

To carry out fundamental and comprehensive reform of higher education; undertake a process of profound renews in the area of the quantity, quality and effectiveness in order to meet all the demands of industrialization, modernization, global economic integration and society’s demand for learning opportunities. By 2020, Vietnam aims to have a higher

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education system that is advanced by international standard, highly competitive, and appropriate to the socialist-oriented market mechanism.

Further and more specific objectives are to:

- (a) complete the national network of higher education institutions, with decentralization of training functions and task; put in place qualifications mechanisms, at both sector-wide and local levels, that with both the government's cost-recovery policy in education and its master plan for socio-economic development of the whole country and of each region.
- (b) develop higher education curriculum that supports research and provides career orientation; ensure linkage among various curricula within the system; establish and develop quality assurance mechanisms and a higher education institution accreditation system; develop higher education institutions that meet international standards;
- (c) increase higher education enrolment to reach 200 students per 10,000 population by 2010, and 450 students per 10,000 population by 2020; reconfigure the sector so that 70–80 per cent of students enrol in professionally oriented programmes, and 40 per cent enrol in non-public higher education institutions;
- (d) train sufficient numbers of higher education institution staff and managers with strong ethics, sound technical qualifications, and advanced methodology and management skills; reduce the higher education student-to-teacher ratio below 20:1; ensure that by 2010 at least 40 per cent of teachers have master's-level degrees and 25 per cent a doctoral degree, and by 2020 these figures are 60 and 35 per cent respectively; and
- (e) increase, in quantitative and qualitative terms, the science and technology activities being carried out within higher education institutions; develop key higher education institutions into major scientific centers for the entire country; increase income from science and technology activities (activities and products) such that it accounts for at least 15 per cent of total higher education institution income by 2010 and 25 per cent by 2020.

Challenges for HERA

HERA faces enormous challenges, some of which relate to the difficulty a relatively poor country has in keeping up with the strong social demand for higher education, and others of which relate more to aspects of the system that simply do not function effectively. Both types of challenges are addressed in the following account.

Lack of Resources

Vietnamese society has made impressive progress during the past 20 years of renovation, but it is still a developing economy with limited availability of funds to

invest in its higher education system. As a result, the system has poorly equipped facilities, lacks sufficient space and has few financial incentives for the development of academic staff or for the renovation of academic programmes. More profoundly, there is a serious lack of sufficient teaching staff. During 20 years of renovation, the number of students increased almost tenfold, from about 135,000 to about 1.4 million. During the same period, the number of the teaching staff managed only to double. This mismatch provides an explanation for much of the decline experienced in the quality of the higher education system.

It is difficult to see how this situation can be improved without a far greater investment of funds. It is difficult also, however, to know where these funds might come from. The National Assembly has on several occasions rejected attempts to raise more funds by increasing tuition fees or by seeking more contributions from students and their parents. In the absence of more funds, HERA's ambitious plan for further rapid expansion of the system will place enormous pressure on the system's quality. HERA sets a goal to achieve 450 higher education students per 10,000 population by 2020, nearly four times higher than at present. Academic staff numbers, if calculated on the requirement of a student/lecturer ratio not greater than 20, are already short by about 30,000 persons. With existing plans for expansion of the system, 170,000 new academic staff will be needed. According to the established standards, the system will by 2020 need more than 100,000 academic staff holding a master's degree and 60,000 staff holding a doctorate. This objective is unachievable, given existing levels of investment expenditure. In this regard, HERA needs to have a revised goal that places less pressure on teaching staff in higher education.

Lack of Dynamism in the Labour Market

Despite the high annual rates of economic growth being achieved by Vietnam, the labour market is not all that dynamic. Each year about 1.5 million new employment opportunities are created and 1.3 million people change their jobs. This means that, each year, only 2.8 million out of 42 million workers, or 6.5 per cent, contribute to job turnover (Pham et al., 2006). The opportunities for an infusion of new ideas through the employment of recent graduates are, therefore, quite limited.

The country is also faced with difficulty in providing highly qualified human resources for modern sectors of the economy, as well as for higher education itself. Vietnam has low-cost human resources, but its competitive capacity remains weak. A society with a low level of development sees little need for new knowledge, or for talented people and their initiatives, and, consequently, it does not feel a need to invest heavily in a system of higher education that produces the highly qualified researchers and engineers required for economic development. Compounding this problem is the fact that human resource utilization does not create enough motivation for higher learning at universities and colleges. Students and their families pay more for tuition fees and other expenses than graduates can earn in the years following graduation. Many students still see a university diploma simply as a ticket for joining the atate bureaucratic system. Higher learning is not, or

mostly not, perceived as serving the purposes of spiritual and skills preparation to be a leading part of human resources for the country's development. Human resource utilization has not, so far, created enough motivation for knowledge acquisition in Vietnamese higher education institutions.

Teaching

Teaching in Vietnam's higher education institutions continues to be conducted mainly in a traditional way, that is, lecturers present the material verbally to students and students record what they hear. Discussion is rarely used as a means of instruction or of learning. There has been some recent debate about how to improve this situation, and two aspects of the debate have become evident. The first relates to poor teaching facilities and to deficits in staff knowledge and skills about new teaching methodologies; and the second relates more broadly to the teaching and learning culture.

Few university lecturers have been trained in teaching and learning methodologies. Most learn by trial and error, drawing initially on their own experiences as students. There has been much debate about how to reform teaching methods and the curriculum in higher education. Pertinent issues concern ways of achieving more flexibility in the delivery of programmes and stronger motivation by students to learn. It is becoming evident that what is most needed is to reduce the pressure on students by giving them more time to absorb knowledge by discovery. There is also a pressing need to create opportunities for students to put newly acquired knowledge into practice.

Perhaps more challenging is the existence of a cultural resistance to letting go of traditional forms of teaching. Vietnam belongs to the Confucian culture zone, which is dominated by values that contrast with the self-expression and secular-rational values of the West (Inglehart, 1997). Although there is a tendency towards the adoption of emancipative values due to economic and human development concerns, there remains a strong hierarchy in social relationships. In the World Values Survey (2006), it was found that 88.9 per cent of Vietnamese respondents wanted their children to be hard working, 75.3 per cent wanted their children to be responsible, but only 16.4 per cent of respondents wanted their children to be creative, and only 33.4 per cent wanted them to be unselfish.¹ Vietnam is a country with a high "power distance" culture: people in higher positions of authority want their subordinates to conform. Teachers want their students to listen to them, and students prefer to assume a passive position in relation to their teachers. Students want teachers to provide them with the "correct answer" so that they can write it down and memorize it. They defer to the authority figure (the teacher) and expect him or her to know all the answers (Thomas and Inkson, 2003: 64). This style of teaching and learning is widespread in the school system and continues to have a place in higher education.

¹ The World Values Survey was undertaken by the Institute of Human Studies in 2001 and 2006, with assistance of The World Values Survey Association.

Culturally, this is a serious problem that prevents students from being successful in an information society where each member needs to be able to think critically, solve problems and learn throughout their lives. Interactive pedagogy is the only way to help students deal with professional challenges in the future. Students need to learn ways of thinking and learning that enable them to discover knowledge independently. Changing the learning culture in universities is a difficult task. It needs time and will require considerable effort on the part of academic staff, administrators and the system of higher education as a whole.

Governance

The most serious challenge relates to governance. The efficacy of higher education has been hampered by the resilience of an outmoded and extremely conservative management mechanism, known as “centralism”. This issue relates to accountability. Higher education institutions require government agencies to provide more autonomy, but most universities are not well prepared for accountability. Some initial steps have been taken towards decentralization in the administration of Vietnamese higher education, but the process is slow because of the absence of a clear schedule and the inertia created by the long existence of centralized mechanisms in higher education management (Pham, 2004). Fear of change has stalled previous attempts to reform from the top down and has constricted the space available for educators to respond to local needs and innovate at the grassroots.

The most complex and important issue in reforming higher education in Vietnam concerns the future relationship between the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) (and other line ministries) and higher education providers. It is widely agreed that the “controlling” behaviour of MOET with respect to higher education institutions has been counter-productive because it has resulted in excessive conservatism and adherence to outdated management and pedagogical practices that discourage innovation by higher education institutions.

At the lower level of governance are questions about the functioning of individual higher education institutions. To ensure that higher education responds to social needs, some commentators have advocated a regional system of governance whereby higher education institutions are accountable to a regional board of governors that ensures that the higher education institutions are meeting their general and specific obligations. However, one could easily imagine this type of system falling into the same problem of a top-down control mechanism. Perhaps more important is to move towards a system whereby higher education institutions are accountable directly to a governing board (or board of trustees in private higher education institutions), rather than to MOET or to regional boards of governors (London, 2006).

Research

Another challenge in terms of quality relates to research and publications by academic staff. Internationally, the prestige of a university depends greatly upon

publications in international journals. The number of international publications produced by Vietnamese scholars is very small. Each year, Vietnamese scholars publish about 80 articles internationally (Institute of Scientific Information, 2006). These publications are mainly theoretical and mostly in academic areas such as physics and mathematics. Publications in the social sciences and humanities are almost non-existent. Publication in the technological areas is modest. The citation index is low, with around one to two citations for each article. The low citation rates suggest that publications by Vietnamese scholars do not interest international researchers. This situation reflects a weakness in research activities in Vietnam.

The lack of prestige of universities in Vietnam goes well beyond their poor research performance, however. A recent public debate in newspapers and the media has shown up the extent to which there is public disappointment about the quality of higher education programmes in Vietnam. Universities are responsible for more than simply training highly qualified specialists for socio-economic development. They also have an important role to play as the vanguard in intellectual exploration, the generation of knowledge and the inculcation of democratic values. As Rhodes (2004) notes, higher education makes a diffuse contribution to the public good through, for example, cultural enrichment, professional training and certification, the provision of opportunities for lifelong learning, the inculcation of democratic and civic values, the provision of opportunities for social mobility, the pursuit of fundamental research and advanced technology, the provision of advanced medical care and public health, support for agricultural development, the creation of material resources and the conservation technologies and economic development. Ideally, all higher education institutions should promote some of the issues listed above. In Vietnam, however, they are too narrowly focused on professional training and certification, to the neglect of their other roles. It is not surprising that the public is generally disappointed in them.

Foreign Languages

The lack of proficiency of graduates in foreign languages is a particular hindrance to international integration and the improvement of quality in Vietnamese higher education. Graduates from Vietnamese universities generally are not able to use foreign languages in their work unless they have taken extra studies in a foreign language course. The need for more teaching and learning of foreign languages in Vietnamese universities is a matter requiring serious attention.

Areas Requiring Renovation

Higher education in Vietnam faces many challenges. There are also policy contradictions and there are sizeable gaps between some of the goals expressed and the actual capacity of higher education institutions, individually and collectively,

to achieve them. HERA establishes ambitious objectives for modernization of the higher education system by 2020, but whether these goals are realized will depend on having feasible strategies, policies and plans of action. In the following section, some of the more significant areas for reform will be discussed.

Higher Education Governance

Governance is a complex concept. Generally, governance refers to the coordination and ordering of social activities. Any system of governance consists of formal as well as informal principles, norms and institutions. Hence, in discussing the governance of higher education, we refer to the principles, norms and institutions that guide the organization and operation of higher education (London, 2006). Traditionally, the governance of higher education has been associated with the notion of hierarchical control, usually by the state. Recently, the governance of higher education has tended more to involve top-down guidance or steering – a more cooperative model of coordination, involving both state and non-state actors. The governance of Vietnam’s higher education continues to be far too much in the traditional mould.

The need for change is long overdue. In future, higher education institutions in Vietnam will have to operate with more autonomy and accountability in training, research, human resource management and finance. Controllism needs to be abolished. State ownership will be vested in governing councils. Higher education institutions will be supervised by the community, as well as by civil groups, especially professional associations. State agencies responsible for higher education, such as MOET and other line ministries, will focus on strategic issues and policy development, quality assurance, and the improvement of the legislative environment and regulations at the system level.²

In this new model, the state will need to govern higher education institutions through a buffer mechanism that provides for a balance between the public interest and the interests of individual higher education institutions, as was suggested by a World Bank Task Force report on higher education in developing countries (The World Bank, 2000). The buffer mechanism will need to include representation of the state, higher education institutions, the private sector and other stakeholders, including academic staff, students, employers and the community. In order to retain the appropriate influence of the state, and to help insulate higher education institutions from excessive external interference, several councils need to be established to fulfil buffer functions, including the following:

- a Higher Education Council, that allows for consultation with the government on matters such as structure, scale, finance and quality;

² Resolution no. 14/2005/NQ-CP, dated 2 November 2005.

- a Research Council, responsible for research funding and assessment of research results; and
- a Professional Council, or Professional Associations, with expertise across each of the subject areas of higher education, that engages in auditing newly established academic programmes and accrediting current programmes.

At the university level, as suggested by the World Bank Task Force (The World Bank, 2000), several councils will need to be established, such as a governing council and a faculty council. The governing council, or council of trustees at a private university, should be an independent body that acts as a buffer between a higher education institution and the external bodies to which the institution is accountable, such as the state and other sponsors. This council should represent the institution to the outside world, and at the same time represent the outside world to the institution. A governing council should usually be responsible for policy approval and long-term planning and monitoring the implementation of approved policies and plans at a university. A faculty council is a representative body of faculty members and should be responsible for making decisions about selected matters of academic policy, such as the programmes offered, curricula, degree requirements and admission policy. Delegation of power to the faculty council promotes shared governance by limiting the extent to which higher education institutions are run on a top-down basis.

To make these councils function effectively, the government needs to clarify their jurisdiction and operational guidelines. For instance, if the Research Council is responsible for allocation of research funds on a competitive basis, it must respect and follow bidding procedures to ensure transparency and public disclosure of results. The Council must also have full power over the allocated resources with respect to sanctioning institutions that do not observe the set procedures.

In Vietnam, a controversial issue in discussions to date concerns the relationship between MOET and higher education institutions. It is agreed that the centrally controlled governance by MOET is no longer appropriate. In recent documents, MOET has stated that it will concentrate on policy issues, including policy making and policy monitoring. According to de Rooij (2005), this is not about taking power away from an education ministry, but is instead about freeing the central ministry to focus on strategic matters. De Rooij suggests six important roles for an education ministry in a decentralized education system. These include the following:

- cooperation with other ministries in a way that does not obstruct change;
- well-developed monitoring and evaluation capabilities; decentralization and autonomy should not mean MOET loses power but that MOET can focus on strategic issues;
- the development of quality enhancement systems;
- awareness-raising activities on the importance of higher education, including systems and institutions to guide students at local level for further training opportunities; awareness raising will also help facilitate the link between education providers and employers;

- establishment of a support for high-quality institutions for training teachers and professors; and
- promotion of variety and flexibility within higher education, orchestration within and between regions; diplomas should have national not just regional value.

Internationally, there is increasing agreement that ministries of education should occupy a stewardship or orchestrating role in the field of higher education. Ministries provide broad policies and regulations and ensure accountability, but do not interfere directly in the administration of higher education institutions. MOET must allow higher education institutions sufficient autonomy to respond to their own specific needs, provided that higher education institutions meet quality standards. MOET also has regulatory roles and roles in providing “public goods” for the enhancement of higher education. This would include developing systems of quality assurance, helping to set up (but not directly overseeing) an academic accreditation board, and sponsoring programmes, processes and events that promote the development of higher education overall.

At the institutional level, higher education institutions, as Rhodes (2004), the former President of Cornell University, states, have five fundamental powers not to be eliminated, modified or reduced. These include the following:

- the power to select, amidst, instruct and certify or graduate students in fields that are represented by the institution;
- the power to select what to teach and how to teach;
- the freedom to study, explore and publish on any topic;
- the power to accept funds and create partnerships; and
- the autonomy of the institution and the independence of its governance.

Rhodes is emphatic that the erosion of any erosion of any of these responsibilities threatens the idea of university.

The Vietnamese system of academic promotions has for too long been divorced from merit. The country now urgently needs a clear career advancement system that is transparent and resistant to the arbitrary exercise of authority. Grants and promotions should be based on academic output, not on family connections and/or corruption.

Another issue of governance relates to finance. Creating transparent, logical, flexible, clearly understood rules for budgeting and accounting has enormous influence on the operation and performance of higher education institutions. Step by step, the government must allow higher education institutions to be financially autonomous, as well as being accountable. In the testing phase, a few universities have been chosen for the application of financial autonomy and accountability. These universities will be allowed to balance their financial revenues and expenditures on the basis of autonomy and accountability in matters such as academic and human resource issues.

Finally, it is time for a change in terms of views held about the differences between public and non-public providers. The question for discussion is about the

mode of funding and the changing roles of these two sectors. Assuming that quality is assured, the public and private sectors of higher education are equally important in a society. As a matter of principle, all students should pay tuition for their higher learning, or have someone pay for them. Regarding state funds, the issue here is about the kind of funding provided for students and the areas for which funding is provided. State funds should be provided for areas that promote public benefit. In contrast, students should cover their own educational expenses in cases where individual benefits are greater. The state should provide policy-granted students³ with partial or full scholarships, as well as for students from low-income families with loan schemes.

Programmes, Curriculum and Teaching

The development of higher education programmes and curricula may be viewed in a number of different ways. Higher education may be seen as a tool for achieving certain goals, such as enhanced research capacities and human resources for socio-economic development in the face of global competition and instability. Higher education may also be seen as providing intangible but equally important social benefits, through the generation and dissemination of knowledge, development of an informed and engaged citizenry, promotion of community values and unity. The World Bank Task Force (2000) pointed to the following aims of higher education:

- produce a body of students with a general education that encourages flexibility and innovation, thus allowing the continual renewal of economic and social structures relevant to a fast-changing world;
- teach students not just what is currently known, but also how to keep their knowledge up to date, so that they will be able to refresh their skills as the economic environment changes;
- increase the amount and quality of in-country research, thus allowing the developing world to select, absorb and create new knowledge more efficiently and rapidly than it currently does; and
- provide increasing number of students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, with specialized skills, because specialists are increasingly in demand in all sectors of the world economy.

Higher education programmes in Vietnam include research and professional components. The aim is to increase training in professional programmes to meet the needs of human resource development. This change has resulted from market requirements for a more practical orientation based on the need for utilization.

³ Policy-granted students are referred to the students whose families or family members have some contribution to the society and the government provides them, according to certain policy, with some favours to recognizing their contribution.

In this case, practical skills are emphasized, and contemporary higher education programmes should provide students with skills for self-learning, flexibility and learning how to learn. HERA states a formula whereby 80 per cent of students would follow a professional education stream, and 20 per cent a research stream. Research programmes should be linked with research activities undertaken in the country and professional programmes should be based on the needs of professional employment and social requirements.

To ensure that students following professional programmes are appropriately trained, MOET and higher education institutions need to ensure that teachers have appropriate knowledge/skills and experience. They also need to ensure that institutions have close collaborative relations with the professional world and regularly conduct and disseminate survey results of employment needs; and that they develop and implement “industrial attachment” schemes that encourage students to take some time while at the university to work at an outside enterprise before returning to school for a final year. There is also a need to develop schemes that discourage non-merit-based hiring within government agencies and society more broadly, so that rewards for a professional education are not arbitrary. The curriculum should be developed to meet the needs of professional practice, providing students with abilities in business administration, financial management, information management, problem solving, foreign languages, Internet use and communication skills.

It is important to encourage or require higher education providers to equip students with more specialized knowledge. Over two-thirds of the Vietnamese population reside in rural areas and between 60 and 70 per cent derive their living in part from agriculture. However, agriculture accounts for only 20 per cent of the GDP and 90 per cent of the poor reside in rural areas. Specialized knowledge on agriculture provided for students, for example, could improve agricultural productivity, which could contribute to poverty reduction and sustainable development.

Higher education institutions have opportunities to use university curricula from developed countries. At present, there are 10 modern programmes, such as electronic-mechanic engineering, new materials, finance and banking, biological technology, electronics and communication, information technology, energy systems, chemistry, physics and plant protection, offered at nine key universities,⁴ which are faced with difficulty in staffing, facilities and language proficiency. The idea of building and developing a university with international standards in Vietnam is being pursued. At present, MOET is in the process of considering alternatives and looking for partnerships and finance for its realization. With experience drawn from building key universities, scholars have agreed that governance patterns based on autonomy and accountability are important for this kind of institution.

Renovation of teaching should focus on the provision of knowledge about learning, the promotion of students’ passion and desire for learning, and the utilization of

⁴ A key university is a university chosen among the best higher education institutions according to indicators set up by MOET such as quality of academic staff, facilities, research and teaching prestige.

information and communication technology. Renovation of teaching is linked with the utilization of materials and the use of online discussion opportunities, spending time for fieldwork and practical work. An Agreement signed by the MOET and Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) on using open courseware creates opportunities for teaching staff and students in Vietnamese universities to access progressive curricula and materials. Curricula and syllabi are developed on the basis of rich references, and students are provided with detailed study guides containing information on the subject taught, essay requirements, self-study and exercises. Opportunities for discussion are provided in the class and online.

As planned by MOET, credit programmes will be used in all higher education institutions instead of school-year programmes. The only challenge for implementation of this scheme is that of providing enough courses for students to select from every year – which will put pressure on the academic staff and could lead to financial shortages.

The improvement of programmes and curricula usually is accompanied by quality assurance measures, self-assessment and accreditation. Currently, each higher education institution is provided with assistance from MOET and other external agencies to use quality assurance procedures and instruments for quality improvement. MOET has set up a plan to have all higher education institutions accredited in the years to come.

Academic Staff Development and Appointment

Academic staff quality is generally accepted as the most important determinant of the overall quality of a higher education system. Under pressure of expansion, higher education is now faced with a serious shortage of qualified academic staff. MOET has recently proposed a scheme to ensure an additional 20,000 academic staff with doctoral degrees by 2020. Even if this programme were to be successful, there would still be a shortfall by 2020 in the number of academic staff with postgraduate qualifications.

Achieving improvements in the quality of academic staff requires the development of effective and appropriate policies for recruitment, promotion and development. Recruitment needs to be undertaken in an objective way. As the World Bank Task Force on Higher Education in Developing Countries (2000: 68) stated, “Nepotism, cronyism, and inbreeding are powerful enemies of faculty quality.” The practice of rewarding length of service, rather than academic promise and performance, must be discouraged in Vietnamese higher education. Existing assessment and promotion systems do not encourage competition for better teaching and research. Evaluation of faculty teaching and research, using transparent and well-defined performance indicators, preferably involving qualified outsiders, will allow proper judgement of merit on quality and technical grounds, and will avoid conflicts of interest. The processes of promotion to associate professor and full professor levels need to be undertaken by higher education institutions themselves, with assessment by qualified professionals in the area of specialization. There is a need

also to create conditions that attract Vietnamese scholars from overseas to return to Vietnam to work in particular areas of teaching and research.

Research is a compulsory activity for academic staff. HERA states that at least 1 per cent of the state budget will be allocated to higher education institutions so that they can carry out stipulated research projects. Graduate students must be encouraged to become involved in research, under the guidance of their supervisors, and thesis or dissertation topics should be selected on the basis of the research themes being pursued by their supervisors. The establishment of research centers and the provision of research services must be encouraged.

HERA is also aiming at increasing student enrolments in parallel with quality enhancement. This can only be done by moving decisively and extensively away from a complete reliance on face-to-face teaching and in the direction of providing training programmes by distance learning with the support of information technology – as is already happening in other developing countries.

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed HERA and its challenges, and has given consideration to major areas for reform of the higher education system. HERA is clearly a very ambitious plan for higher education in Vietnam. The challenges faced are formidable, including an ineffective governance system, a serious shortage of finances and of qualified academic staff, outmoded teaching methods and an unproductive research culture. The gap between the level of expectations for the system and its current reality is huge. Of special concern is the need to change the culture of learning in higher education so that it is more concerned with allowing students to gain knowledge and less concerned with simply providing a diploma as a ticket for admission to the labour force. Achieving quality improvement in this dimension of university life will require priority to be given to the renewal of higher education governance, training programmes, curriculum and teaching methodology, and academic staff development and appointment.

In addition to the areas of reform mentioned above, facilities and infrastructures need to be upgraded to a certain level of modernity. Higher education institutions must, at least, be equipped with an effective Internet network, enough information resources, libraries, major laboratories and other basic equipment for teaching and learning. This can be done with investment from the government's budget, assistance by international loan projects or through cooperation with other partners on the market basis for shared utilization.

While international integration is not a stated aim of HERA, it is clear from various parts of the document, as well as from other policy statements, that international cooperation is viewed as a means of achieving the above aims. Promoting higher education reform involves increased development of foreign ties, increased interaction with foreign partners and increased integration through selective adoption of foreign ideas and practices. There are several provisions concerned with

encouraging foreign partners to establish higher education institutions in Vietnam, as well as to establish cooperative programmes with Vietnamese universities and for exchange of staff.

No country can ignore the forces of globalization, and the best way for Vietnamese higher education to improve its quality is by actively integrating with the international higher education community. International integration will improve the quality of higher education in Vietnam, and quality improvements in the system will enhance the prospects of even greater international integration. As stated earlier, the overriding challenge is, through a modernized higher education system, to find ways of improving the international competitiveness of the country's professional labour force.

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