

American Colleges Raise the Flag in Vietnam

Interest in partnerships with local institutions is high, but so are the bureaucratic hurdles

By MARTHA ANN OVERLAND

Hanoi, Vietnam

More than 30 years after the U.S. ambassador was airlifted from the embassy rooftop in Saigon with the flag tucked under his arm, a new American flag is going up in the city. This one won't be flying over the embassy. The Stars and Stripes, as well as the Texas state flag, are going up at the Saigon Institute of Technology, the only Vietnamese college to offer an American-accredited two-year degree.

"They've come a long way since 1975," says Gigi Do, director of international initiatives at Houston Community College, which offers six associate-degree programs in cooperation with the institute, in Ho Chi Minh City.

When her family fled Vietnam after the war, Ms. Do thought she would never see the country again: "And now it's 2009, and we are flying the Lone Star flag over their building."

Houston isn't the only American college to take note of the opportunities in Vietnam.

Hundreds of institutions, American and others, have signed memoranda of understanding with Vietnamese counterparts. Dozens offer joint or dual-degree programs. American colleges are helping the Vietnamese design curricula and teaching materials.

And interest is still growing. In Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon), a recent conference sponsored by the U.S. government attracted 100 participants from American academic institutions interested in doing business in Vietnam.

"This was an eye-opener to me," says Michael W. Michalak, U.S. ambassador to Vietnam, referring to the large numbers of American partnerships in the country.

Despite the continuing worldwide economic slump, "there is no pullback in interest, that's for sure," says Mr. Michalak, who has championed efforts to overhaul Vietnam's education system.

With one million students graduating from high school every year, and places for fewer than 20 percent to go on to higher education, Vietnam is promising ground for education prospectors.

And with China's education market considered saturated and India's barring foreign degree providers, Vietnam can look pretty enticing.

"People are trying to get a foothold here, just like Coca-Cola," says Bahr Weiss, an associate professor of psychology at Vanderbilt University, which this fall will begin offering a doctoral program in clinical psychology in conjunction with Vietnam National University in Hanoi.

Vietnam, acknowledging that its education system is broken, has hung out the welcome sign, particularly for engineering and computer-science programs, which teach the skills most in demand here.

The education ministry actively encourages joint ventures. Visiting foreign professors encounter far less red tape than they did just five years ago. A pilot program even allows some local universities to hire American institutions to redesign their curricula and train their faculty members to teach the material.

Vietnam, it seems, is the next big thing. Or is it?

Whether from inertia, frustration, or both, plenty of those signed memoranda are gathering dust on administrators' shelves. Joint degree programs, begun with great fanfare, have closed and quietly gone away. After the handshakes and the tea drinking, sometimes the only thing to show for months or years of negotiations are the photographs of smiling officials standing next to a bust of the country's revered leader, the late Ho Chi Minh.

Vietnam may have embraced free-market reforms nearly two decades ago, but its education system remains hobbled by Soviet-style decision making. Despite talk of granting more autonomy, the central government is still involved in faculty hires and sets the curricula at most universities. The lumbering bureaucracy makes even the smallest changes difficult to put into effect. Widespread corruption, from nepotism to kickbacks, has only made it worse.

Eyes Wide Shut

"It takes a lot of patience to work here," says Dennis F. Berg, a sociology professor emeritus from California State University at Fullerton. An academic-program adviser in Vietnam since 1991, he now teaches on a U.S. government-financed fellowship at Hoa Sen University, in Ho Chi Minh City.

In many cases, he says, the signing of a cooperative agreement is followed by the "deafening sound of silence."

Around 80 percent of international initiatives, he estimates, do not offer tangible results. "Our campus has put a lot of money into Vietnam, but we have little to show for it," Mr. Berg says. "Programs start up, and you turn around and they're gone."

They can be sabotaged by something as petty as professional jealousies. Mr. Weiss, of Vanderbilt, spent nearly a decade setting up the clinical psychology program. Just as Mr. Berg did, he learned to speak Vietnamese along the way.

Supported by a grant from the National Institutes of Health, Mr. Weiss put his time in getting to know the right people, securing permission to officially raise the program as a possibility, and getting the final approvals. Still, after all that, the venture almost didn't come about.

"People in a different department tried to scuttle the program," says Mr. Weiss, referring to a rival group at the Vietnamese university. "The challenges are that this is a country with limited resources, and people tend to fight for what there is, and people will block other people's successes."

It is not enough to sign an agreement. Those who have successfully navigated Vietnam's education system say newcomers can trip up because they fail to monitor every single aspect of the relationship.

"Foreigners don't pay attention," says Mr. Weiss. "I've seen so many projects wasted."

Ms. Do, of Houston Community College, cannot count the times she has had to fly in and sort out misunderstandings. As a speaker of Vietnamese, she insists it is not a translation issue. Sometimes it's something as simple as the local partner's overselling the program to students' parents.

That may not sound like a big deal, says Ms. Do. But unless Houston maintains the quality of its Vietnam program, it risks losing its own accreditation. Consequently, the community college sends department heads to Ho Chi Minh City every semester to sit in on classes. The college holds frequent teaching workshops for the Vietnamese lecturers.

The efforts have paid off. Though the annual \$1,500 tuition is more than 10 times as high as what Vietnam's state universities charge, in just five years the associate-degree program has grown from 400 to 3,000 students.

The Houston college itself benefits, too. Although Ms. Do won't divulge how much money it receives, she notes that the proceeds support faculty development and a scholarship program back home.

Academic Prospecting

Troy University, which offers programs in 11 countries, runs another joint program that is prospering in Vietnam. The curriculum for its master's program in business with Vietnam National University is the same as that offered in the United States. But about half of the professors are Vietnamese, a demographic that saves on costs.

Even though tuition is \$4,800 a year — four times Vietnam's annual per capita income — the Alabama-based institution is able to fill the courses it offers.

Much of the appeal of Troy to Vietnamese undergraduates is that it caters to those who failed to get into a Vietnamese university. The program is a second choice for most, says Vu Manh Tuan, one of its students. That is because the competition for the relatively few seats at the inexpensive public universities is cutthroat. Yet students are surprised how hard they have to work at the American curriculum in order to graduate.

"It's easy to get in, but it's not easy to get out," says Mr. Tuan, which is the reverse of what happens in a Vietnamese university.

Most of the partnerships, however, are not moneymakers. For all the talk of Vietnam being Asia's next economic tiger, it remains a poor country. A small upper-middle class has emerged that can afford to send its children to the more expensive joint programs, or even abroad, for a degree. But plenty of other students struggle to come up with the average \$130 annual tuition that the public universities charge.

Of course, foreign institutions understand that such ventures offer benefits like international exposure, which helps faculty members and students remain competitive. But colleges looking to make big bucks right away may be disappointed.

Gil Latz, vice provost for international affairs at Portland State University, which is helping Vietnam's education ministry develop a computer-science curriculum at the University of Science, in Ho Chi Minh City, says not all of the benefits can be measured in dollars. Portland's work in Vietnam is considered worthwhile even though "we do not seek to recoup our investment in time and money," he wrote in an e-mail message to *The Chronicle*. "That would be virtually impossible."

Quality Control

Most American universities looking to set up degree programs here are well established, accredited institutions that understand that going into business in a new country takes a major investment of time and money. Yet American academics both in Vietnam and back home are increasingly concerned that not all foreign ventures are on the up-and-up. Because of lax rules governing partnerships with foreign universities, unaccredited institutions are finding Vietnam easy pickings.

Mark A. Ashwill, director of the Institute of International Education's office in Vietnam, has watched the number of dubious distance-learning courses steadily rise over the past several years. These "rogue providers," he says, prey upon uninformed students who are desperate for an American degree.

"It's easy to set up shop and recruit students from overseas," says Mr. Ashwill. "For some it's their primary and most lucrative market. They are called rogue providers for a reason."

No moves have yet been made to regulate or toss out unaccredited providers in Vietnam, say several academic insiders. (The Ministry of Education and Training did not respond to repeated interview requests.) Mr. Ashwill can only warn Vietnamese officials who seek his advice to steer

away from forming partnerships with certain disreputable institutions. The problem is that students who want to transfer to the United States or use their degree to get a job may find that their qualifications are worthless.

The State of Oregon's Office of Degree Authorization, for example, has declined to recognize the degrees issued in Vietnam by Northcentral University, an online enterprise based in Prescott Valley, Ariz., that offers an M.B.A. program in cooperation with the Hanoi University of Technology.

Alan L. Contreras, administrator of the state agency, says that until the qualifications of the faculty members in Vietnam and the quality of the program are ascertained, the degrees will not be recognized in Oregon.

John A. Taylor, vice president of the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, Northcentral's American accreditor, says the university "does not have commission approval to offer any on-ground degree programs in the U.S. or abroad. To our knowledge, all of its programs are delivered online."

Le Hong Hai, the Hanoi university's deputy director for international cooperation, says as far as he knows, Northcentral is accredited to offer programs in Vietnam, and that is good enough. His university does not really consider a potential partner's reputation when making an international deal, he adds. Northcentral was chosen, he says, because of "its low cost, the academic requirements are not too high, and it is accredited."

Oversight of international academic programs has been a continuing challenge, says Mr. Contreras.

"We have been concerned for some time that U.S. institutions that operate overseas often have insufficient ability to determine what is really happening at the foreign site," he wrote in an e-mail message. "It is very hard to figure out what Northcentral actually does in Vietnam."

Overhauling a broken system is not easy, nor can it be done overnight, says Le Quang Minh, vice president of Vietnam National University in Ho Chi Minh City, who is an outspoken proponent of international partnerships.

"We are trying to be selective," he says "but in higher-education reform we have so many things to do."

Whatever bumps there are along the way, Mr. Minh has no doubt that working with and learning from foreign institutions, including America's, is the path Vietnam must follow. "The international programs have been part of the stimulus for change," he says. Change must reach not only the classrooms, he goes on, but also the leaders of Vietnam's system of education.

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