

Changes in Higher Education: Together We Create the Perspective of Our Future

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Today, the wealth, or poverty of a nation depends on the quality of education. And the whole world is engaging with the enormous changes in education. From the revolutionary changes in education in developed countries such as Finland, the United Kingdom, Japan, and the United States to some controversial education practices in Asian countries. Thus, it is the author's intention to present a brief overview of a few changes in education in some advanced countries in order to deduce the common points and then look back to the reality in Asian countries.

Changes in Higher Education—Differences from the World

With a history of nearly 800 years, the teaching method in the United Kingdom has affected the educational system worldwide. "Teaching students how to think, not what to think." The UK's educational system has always focused on developing the independent working ability and creativeness inside each student. Teaching in the UK is not only teachers' providing information but students are also encouraged to read documents, do researches, and raise questions about topics discussed in class. Besides, there is "unbundling" in higher education in the UK, from the curriculum to teaching methods and assessment.¹ "Unbundling" means that the professional activities of the universities can now be provided by many organizations and individuals with even better conditions than those of traditional universities thanks to the support of technology. This change is also a motivation for universities to innovate and recreate their education services and products.

The most impressive thing for me after two months in Japan is education. In Japan, the education content and methodology emphasize the subjectivity of learners; taking their living experience seriously, and focusing on learning how to solve practical problems.² In the light of this "learning by problem solving" approach, the activities of knowledge "cramming and imparting" are excluded. And the result is, in this country, students do not either passively, unconditionally accept what teachers tell them or consider this as the absolute truth but to search for the information from different sources with the help and guidance of teachers, then to turn it into their own knowledge. That is why we may assert that the education methodology in Japan has shifted from a mere "knowledge transferring" to the formation and development of cognitive capacities for learners.

¹ Saad Rizvi, "Doi thoai giao duc toan cau Ket noi chau A—Chuan bi cho giao duc dai hoc dap ung nhu cao the ky 21," (2013) Pearson, UK.

² Vuong Q. Nguyen, "Nhat Ban cai cach giao duc nhu the nao," *VnExpress*, May 13, 2014, <http://vnexpress.net/tin-tuc/goc-nhin/nhat-ban-cai-cach-giao-duc-nhu-the-nao-2988237.html>

The appeal of American universities is found in their diversity, richness, flexibility, high adaptability, and strong bonds with the reality of production and society. The highlights in the education and training methodology in the United States is that: the US education simultaneously sets out very specific goals while focusing on the responsibility of the teachers and the assessment of teaching quality.³ According to the US Department of Education, one of the new standards in teacher training to be emphasized is the ability of teachers to come up with the innovations to attract more people to their classes, thereby improving the quality of their teaching thanks to the support of the community.

Researchers on education and society have recently brought their attention to changes in the education of Finland—a success story in Europe. According to the plan for mainstream education reform on a national scale approved by the end of 2014, this new approach will be introduced to all schools in Finland from May 8, 2016.⁴ “It’s a new way of combining teaching and learning based on the requirement of each course and learners’ competency.” Besides, it should be said that all cities in Finland—with their autonomy in education—could develop innovative teaching methods which can be different from those of other cities.

Perhaps, each change may need much time to review and test its correctness. However, it is undeniable that the change of the world is being accompanied by the transformation of education in future in general and tertiary education, in particular. As has been acknowledged by many thinkers in the world, “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world” (Nelson Mandela, 1993). Thus, we need to determine which direction we are heading and take our responsibility for the future of Asia in light of this declaration.

Reality of Higher Education in Vietnam and Other Countries in Asia

Although there are differences in political systems, ideologies, history, development priorities, and other issues, Asian countries need to share a common key for a better future: higher education. Asian countries face common issues such as technological development, depletion of natural resources, environmental degradation, changes in the labor market, aging population, urbanization, and the issue of rising unemployment and growing inequality. In order to address these social issues, higher education should be considered as the core to developing and contributing to the strengthening of Asia’s future.

From the Reality of Vietnam Higher Education...

In the past few decades Vietnam has done a remarkable job of increasing the overall numbers of students receiving a higher education. However, the quantity is not enough, to compete

³ H. V. Lam Le, “Nen giao duc My va mot so van de goi mo cho giao duc dai hoc Viet nam,” Conference summary report “Giai phap nang cao hieu qua quan ly giao duc dai hoc va cao dang Viet,” Hồ Chí Minh, 2010.

⁴ Thao Nguyen, “Ca the gioi cuon theo doi moi giao duc,” *VietNamNet*. April 12, 2015, <http://vietnamnet.vn/vn/giao-duc/231600/ca-the-gioi-cuon-theo-doi-moi-giao-duc.html>.

successfully in a highly dynamic, connected, and technologized world, as quality is what truly matters. This is the common problem found not only in Vietnam but also in others countries in Asia.

According to the latest data from the Ministry of Education and Training of Vietnam, there are 272 universities and institutes (including 170 public universities, 60 private universities, 5 with 100% foreign capital, 37 scientific research institutes). The total number of university lecturers is 72,792 people while the total number of students is 1,767,879. The number of high school graduates enter university is about 41%, about 23% in vocational colleges, about 13% in vocational training centers. The majority of students study in the fields of economics and engineering.⁵ However, there is a noticeable shift in training programs. While traditional training programs are still relatively slow in change due to administrative procedures, advanced training programs are increasingly being chosen by more students. High quality engineering training programs, engineering training programs, advanced bachelor programs, and advanced programs are developed by many universities. In addition, universities have more than 500 international training programs with universities in the world.

The above statistics show that more and more universities, joint ventures and other universities are trying to change this situation by providing a higher quality education for Vietnamese students. Although for a nation of one hundred million people, these programs are only a few drops of water in the big lake, we believe such droplets can play a role in stimulating change.

To the Common Problems in Higher Education in Asia

- **Can't Keep Up with Fast-Changing World**

Nowadays, higher education systems need to prepare current and future youth for the Fourth Industrial Revolution. But it is clear that following the traditional methods of transferring skills by means of higher education isn't working anymore. It is because of the skills needed to work today change so fast that no higher education system can keep up with the constant need to reinvent the way in which young people can work and live together. Most importantly, the radical changes in our society mean that young people need new kinds of skills, many of which are not even fully understood or codified for learning. Today, the new fluencies people need include emotional intelligence, intercultural sensitivity, creativity, problem solving, empathy, adaptability, and resilience. And most of them are not offered in the traditional programs of the current higher education system.

⁵ Ministry of Education and Training, "Chien Luoc Phat Trien Giao Duc Viet Nam 2009–2020 [Vietnam Education Strategy 2009–2020]," December 30, 2008, http://planipolis.iiep.unesco.org/sites/planipolis/files/ressources/viet_nam_education_strategy_2009-2020_viet.pdf.

- **Relationships in the University**

Relationships are essential everywhere in the world. But in Asian countries, personal connections and networks are still influencing many aspects of academic life. For instance, Asian universities tend to retain excellent students to become faculty members in the future. These faculty members are often influenced by their past relationships, and their knowledge often goes the traditional way. This may hinder new thinking and innovation in teaching methods while the ties between an ex-student and his or her advisor might shape closed-culture in the faculty and inhibit change or foster factionalism.⁶

- **Academic Freedom and Promotion Policy**

Most universities in Asia do not really have academic freedom. As for the approval mechanism existing in many countries, where power is concentrated in the Ministry of Education and Training, trainers tend to follow rules and think less about policies. In addition, many systems in Asia do not provide formal protection for academic freedom or incentive policies for productivity and encourage long-term implementation.

- **Teaching Methods**

Teaching and research often follow quite traditional methods. There are very little interactions between students and professors. Lecturers often simply repeat their presentation and do not give enough time for questions or discussion. Students are often passive and silent, and rarely ask questions. There have been many criticisms upon this type of traditional teaching as it does not contribute to fostering students' independent thinking.

The Future of Higher Education in Asia

We can imagine the future of higher education in Asia as follows: Most countries in Asia—with some notable exceptions in Japan, South Korea, and Singapore—continue to lead in the number of students enrolled. China, South Korea, Singapore, and several others have invested heavily in Higher Education, with the top universities improving significantly.⁷ Other countries such as India, Indonesia, Vietnam, and most of the poorer Asian countries have a very long way to go. The struggle is a long struggle and will require not only resources but also deep learning practices. But building world-class universities is essential for Asia to continue to grow. And to do so, it is clear that changing the model of Higher Education is a matter that needs to be carefully and thoroughly considered.

⁶ Philip G. Altbach, "The Asian Higher Education Century?" *International Higher Education*, no.59 (Spring 2010), Center for International Higher Education, Boston College.

⁷ Ibid.

The Promise of Liberal Education in Higher Education in Asia

While some prefer focusing on professional education, there are those who believe it would put students at a disadvantage in this rapidly changing world, where traditional skills taught at school can soon become out-of-date. In light of this, many people consider liberal education a new path, as the skills developed through liberal education are universally applicable.

This brings us to the most important point of what a liberal education is all about. In contrast to tradition way in higher education in Asia where students have to choose a fixed major when entering in their first year, students in a liberal education have a chance to explore different areas of knowledge during their first two years before settling into their chosen focus of study. Even after choosing a major (in arts, humanities, social sciences, or science) by the end of their second year, they still have plenty of opportunities to take elective courses that allow them to continue to expand their range of knowledge and interests in other subjects. Through such an educational program, students are able to learn broadly and draw connections among different disciplines. As a result, students emerge from their undergraduate education not only with specialized knowledge in a specific area, but also with the ability and interest to relate to many different fields of knowledge, which they can continue to learn and study later.

The 21st century is considered “Asian century,” and even though education is facing many challenges, it will affect the region’s future. The ALFP 2017 program was themed “Seeking Our Commons in Asia: How Can We Create Visions for the Future?” and it was completely consistent with the theme of APEC 2017 “Creating New Dynamism, Fostering a Shared Future.” In the world of globalization and volatile, Asia has always been a dynamically developing region with large populations and its undeniable political importance in the world. The future of Asia will greatly depend on the cooperation and sharing opportunities among countries along with the implementation of its regional development strategy. From my personal point of view, educational reforms aimed at improving knowledge and understanding of the community are important factors that affect our future.

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