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Commentary: What lies ahead? Considering the future of a 'new' Vietnamese higher education

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What is the role of colleges and universities in a rapidly changing world? The chapters in this volume discuss how Vietnamese higher e ducation grapples with this issue in the context of a nation's shift towards a market-based economy, under the helm of a government that holds on to its socialist identity. As noted in the introduction of this volume, the last few decades have seen the emergence of "new" players, discourses, and practices in Vietnam's postsecondary education, raising important questions as to what kind of higher education people want to experience, and from whom such change should come from. The chapters in Sect. 13.2, in particular, provide readers with a broad view of how these questions play out within different areas of Vietnam's higher education system, from the large public universities to community colleges and semi-elite private institutions.

In this commentary, I highlight two major tensions that underlie the authors' arguments: autonomy and privatisation. I argue that while the

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chapters in this volume contextualise these issues in line with Vietnam's unique circumstances, their discussion reflects broader dilemmas that have plagued education scholars and practitioners across the world. I end with a brief section on how we can compare the Vietnam case to other higher education systems, and what this contributes to what we know in the scholarship on higher education and globalisation.

13.1 Questions of Autonomy

One important theme that runs through the chapters in this section is the gradual decline of the Vietnamese state's monopoly of higher education and the meaning of this change for the purpose and delivery of postsecondary schooling. Vietnam is not alone in going through this massive shift, with neighbouring Southeast Asian nations also opening their education systems to private owners and foreign providers. Of course, the reasons behind the loosening of state control can vary across different contexts. In places like Singapore and Malaysia, state officials have allowed universities to chart their own development with the expectation that such independence will help them become "regional hubs" for international students and researchers (Mok, 2011). Such aspirations are less prominent among Vietnam's institutions. However, there are also common f actors that challenge the viability of states monopolising higher education: financial crises, pressures to "compete" in a globalised education market, and a growing demand for more access to postsecondary schooling (Deem, 2001; Naidoo, 2016).

As the state relaxes its grip, how then do we define the "autonomy" that universities should enjoy? In Chapter 7, Ngo argues against the tendency to valorise American higher education as the model for an independent academy. She emphasises that despite the rigidity of Vietnam's Soviet-style education, this system also promotes the empowerment and development of individual students—albeit in the context of working for the good of the nation and its government. I agree with the critique that those who push for liberal arts education in Asia can sometimes parrot Western discourses of liberalism, without acknowledging that American institutions themselves have also failed to defend the independence and autonomy of their own faculty and students. Yet, in some ways, Ngo's chapter can run the risk of making the opposite mistake: demonising American education and valorising Vietnam's current system. Marklein and Mai chapter (Chapter 11) provides a necessary counterpoint, portraying Vietnamese colleges and universities as much more dynamic institutions, taking on some policies on academic

freedom common in the United States, while rejecting others as inappropriate for the Vietnamese context. In some cases, less government intervention is not necessarily a good thing. Nguyen and Chau's chapter (Chapter 10) notes that in the case of community colleges, state involvement had been scaled back significantly over the years. Ironically, this approach compromised the potential of such institutions to serve the needs of the local communities where they are embedded.

As Vietnamese higher education grapples with such questions of autonomy, perhaps a possibility for future research is a further study of how the Vietnamese government has chosen to position itself in the context of a more loosely regulated system. Multiple sources that examine higher education governance in East Asia have pushed against the black-and-white view that states are either fully in control or are completely absent from the education market (see Mok, 2016). This volume provides an important initial step in theorising the role of the state in the fast-changing landscape of higher education in Southeast Asia. In many ways, Vietnam is similar to Singapore and Malaysia in that state agencies have sought to make themselves more "entrepreneurial" in order to compete in the global economy (Mok, 2011, p. 63). Yet, as education scholars are well aware, broad discourses of global competition and "world class education" get interpreted differently on the ground. The chapters in this section are the beginning of an important effort towards figuring out how this might look in Vietnam, reminding us that the move towards change need not be a zero-sum game.

13.2 THE PATH TO PRIVATISATION

Alongside the issue of autonomy is the question of how to manage the growth of private, for-profit institutions in Vietnam's higher education system. Studies based in Western nations such as the US and UK have tended to depict privatisation as an assault on the university, lamenting prioritisation of profit-making endeavours such as student recruitment and industry partnerships (Giroux, 2002; Molesworth, Scullion, & Nixon, 2011; Sidhu, 2008). While such critique is important, it is easy to forget that abstract terms like "neoliberalism" and "privatisation" manifest in different ways, depending on the particularities of context. The chapters in this volume make a compelling argument as to how privatisation has both benefits and costs for Vietnamese higher education, moving beyond its general abstraction as an "assault" on the university.

On the one hand, the authors in this volume argue that despite the problems of for-profit education, the presence of private institutions in Vietnam actually allows the higher education system to serve a wider population of students who would otherwise be unable to enter public universities. As Chau argues in Chapter 8, private institutions can provide new opportunities for Vietnam's emergent middle class, and initiate avenues for internationalisation. Using quantitative data, he demonstrates how a number of "semi-elite" universities can be as selective as public institutions, challenging the stereotype that private institutions merely recruit as many tuition-paying students as they can. Meanwhile, Pham's chapter shows how the rise of fully private universities also encourages the development of more student-oriented programmes. While her chapter acknowledges the problems of treating students as "customers", she also highlights the benefits of understanding student needs and innovating institutional practices in order to address these gaps. In many ways, the controls of state bureaucracies can often make it difficult for public universities to respond quickly to student and faculty demands.

When a population of students feels underserved by their institutions, many may feel the need to seek education elsewhere. As early as 2007, Altbach and Knight (2007) cited Vietnam as an "emerging centre" for international higher education, given the entry of foreign education providers and branch campuses such as Monash University. In their chapter on Vietnamese international students (Chapter 12), Nguyen, Cao, and Pham discuss how other countries like Taiwan have aggressively sought foreign students for its own universities, providing lucrative scholarships and competitive rates to attract young people from neighbouring Asian nations. Their interviews show how Vietnamese students seek creative pedagogy and research experience, aspects that they often see lacking in Vietnamese institutions. If public institutions take too much time to fully change, perhaps the entry of private providers serves as a quicker way to provide a more dynamic set of higher education experiences, one that would prevent Vietnamese students from seeking their degrees elsewhere.

However, the chapters also highlight the problems of privatisation in Vietnam—which in some ways, looks very different from that of the West. Here, Pham's chapter (Chapter 9) on mergers and acquisitions provides an insightful discussion of what dangers can accompany Vietnam's more liberal education market. Rather than a heterogeneous group of education providers, Pham warns that Vietnam is seeing the growing dominance of corporations seeking to enter the education market. Large companies use their resources and state connections to buy up smaller colleges and universities—pushing out the community organisations which had once provided the "non-public"

options for university students. Again, such trends are not unique to Vietnam. The dominance of large companies can also be seen in the Philippine higher education, where businesses built on shopping malls and subdivisions now own colleges and universities as well (Flores, 2008). If universities can no longer have a monopoly over higher education, Pham's chapter raises the question of what other forms of monopoly we might see as state agencies relax their hold on postsecondary schooling.

13.3 WHAT IS NEXT FOR VIETNAMESE HE?

As higher education in Vietnam continues to change, it is interesting to think about what lies ahead for its academics, students, and administrators. Instead of strict government control, will Vietnam see the rise of a stronger neoliberal regime, where restrictions are less explicit yet also limiting in many ways? In general, education scholars based in the West have condemned the marketisation of colleges and universities as a displacement of "collective professional values" for commercial goals and profit-making behaviour (Ball, 2015, p. 259). Yet, as Ngo argues in his chapter (Chapter 7), Vietnam may still be grappling with the question of what these "collective" values may be. While acknowledging the shortcomings of Vietnam's previous system, Ngo cautions against the wholesale acceptance of an American-style liberal arts education—a campaign that has many supporters in the country. Ngo's chapter seems to argue that the embrace of such "new" approaches comes too quickly—bordering on the haphazard—with little reflection on how Vietnam's original system reflects many similar aims with that of the liberal arts model. In contrast, Chau's chapter laments that Vietnam's higher education system is changing too slowly. He underlines how state policies and the Vietnamese public unfairly stigmatise private colleges and universities as institutions of lower quality and status, thus diminishing their potential to address the unmet needs of Vietnam's growing middle class. In this sense, there is still much disagreement as to what direction Vietnam's colleges and universities must take, amidst the entry of new stakeholders into the system.

Perhaps, what is missing in this volume is an investigation of not only what will change, but also what might be replaced and sacrificed as Vietnamese higher education becomes more "autonomous" and "privatised". The authors provide an in-depth discussion of the potential benefits and possible dangers of Vietnam's shift towards deregulation and a more neoliberal higher education market. Yet, I also wanted to read more about how these changes

reveal themselves in the way colleges and universities operate, and how teaching and learning occur within the classroom. In doing so, we can identify what universities must fight to maintain in order to fulfil the purpose of higher education for the society it is meant to serve.

What seems clear is that education scholars are only seeing the beginning of Vietnam's transformation. As discussed by Pham in Chapter 9, the shift from the "non-public" to a "fully private" model only occurred in 2006. Shortly after, the state implemented stricter requirements for those seeking to establish universities, thus limiting the number of private institutions to only 65 schools in 2019 (see also Chau, Chapter 8). In many ways, Vietnam's higher education system is a far cry from the case of the United States—a notorious example of how privatisation and deregulation can lead to serious social problems such as the rapid increase of tuition fees and the stratification of colleges and universities based on students' entry scores (Chow & Leung, 2016).

Even within Southeast Asia, the Vietnamese higher education system seems comparatively less marketised compared to neighbours like the Philippines, where close to 88% of the country's 1906 colleges and universities are owned by private enterprise (Commission on Higher Education, Philippines, 2018). Unlike Vietnam, the Philippines' postcolonial state never invested heavily in higher education, choosing instead to focus on basic education services and leave postsecondary schooling to the private sector. When private institutions began to grow after World War II, many of these universities were established with good intentions: a desire to increase access for families who lived far away from urban centres, a need to provide alternative options for those unable to enter public universities, and for some, an altruistic effort to serve their local communities (Isidro & Maximo, 1973). Yet, as education grew into a lucrative business, these original intentions were easily discarded as pressures for financial viability and student demands placed pressure on for-profit institutions. Reading through the chapters in this section reminds me of the promise of private institutions, particularly in a context where state infrastructure is not strong enough to provide the mass higher education that current society demands. Yet, in my own work on Philippine higher education, I emphasise the need for more government control and regulation (Ortiga, 2018). As Vietnamese higher education moves towards a path that its Philippine counterparts have already taken, I wonder if there can exist a middle ground, where private providers and public institutions can provide a balanced market for higher education services.

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