

The Hidden Hazards of Higher Education Advice and “Aid” from the U.S.

In recent years some efforts have been made to bring U.S.-style structure and organization into higher education in Vietnam. Fulbright University Vietnam opened in Hồ Chí Minh City eight years ago, and USAID currently has a joint project with Vietnam National University. But the American models of university governance that U.S. officials and government agencies want to export to Vietnam are deeply flawed, and for that reason the advice of those government officials cannot be trusted. The following two major flaws would have a deleterious effect on higher education in Vietnam:

- The large U.S. universities are administered by vast, sprawling, expensive bureaucracies. This is one of the main reasons why universities in the U.S. charge very high tuition to attend. The money US universities receive from government funding and rich alumni could not cover the cost of their massive bureaucracies. Tuition fees are a major revenue of universities, and over the last 20 years the cost of tuition and fees has increased twice as fast as the consumer price index that measures general inflation. I am a member of the "academic staff" at the University of Washington, along with all other teachers and researchers here. According to Wikipedia, there are 5,803 of us, and there are 16,174 "administrative staff," who are responsible for running the university's huge bureaucracy. The university website estimates the annual cost of tuition and living expenses for a first-year student to be about 35 thousand USD for a resident of Washington state and 64 thousand USD for an out-of-state or foreign student, who pays much higher tuition. And my university is a public university; private universities are more expensive. For example, Stanford University in California estimates the cost per year to be about 88 thousand USD for both in-state and out-of-state students. For comparison, the average American has less than 20 thousand USD in lifetime savings.
- American administrators and the governing boards of trustees tend to see a university as a business with the students as customers. This leads them to use a backwards incentive system, whereby faculty are incentivized to lower academic standards at the undergraduate level so as to satisfy the weakest students. This has led to “dumbing down” of courses (reducing their content and making them easier) and massive “grade inflation” (raising students’ marks without any increase in students’ performance).

The descriptions of projects developed by U.S. officials to improve higher education in Vietnam read like a typical slick advertisement from a U.S. company selling a product. It's not possible to judge what the actual effects of their programs will be from the information given, because there is not nearly enough information to answer certain basic questions.

Typically the central promise of these U.S. projects is to improve "university governance," strengthen "administrative capacity," and help a university to deploy a "performance management system." The first question that should come to mind is: How many people will the university need to hire in order to carry out this "university governance" and "performance management"? Is it true that increasing "administrative capacity" means greatly enlarging the administration, without increasing teaching staff — and substantially increasing the ratio of administrators to professors and instructors? This seems like a recipe for a major enlargement of bureaucracy at Vietnamese universities.

At this point another question is: Who will pay for this greatly expanded university bureaucracy? Who will pay to construct the buildings needed to house the bureaucracy's offices? What will the source of funding be to pay the salaries of all the new non-teaching employees? Will the Vietnamese government agree to pay for it? Will the government ask for a World Bank loan that will saddle Vietnam with new debts for decades to come? Will the students pay, in the form of high tuition costs? In that case, only the wealthier families will be able to pay for a university education for their children.

One thing that's clear is that very little money to pay for any of this will be flowing into Vietnam from the U.S. Both private donors and government agencies in the U.S. are rarely inclined to fund universities in other countries, not even the branch campuses of U.S. universities. And the initial costs of constructing an American style university campus — or of increasing the size of a university campus to accommodate the enlarged administration recommended by the Americans — are enormous, to say nothing of the ongoing expenses to maintain it and pay salaries. Fulbright University Vietnam (FUV), which opened with a lot of fanfare in 2016, keeps postponing construction of its planned campus. Apparently the FUV governing board has no idea where to get the large sums of money necessary to construct and run their university. Because of special circumstances related to the U.S.-Vietnam normalization agreement of 1994, in 2014 the U.S. Congress gave 20 million USD to start FUV. But Congress is not going to give any more, and it should have been clear from the beginning that a new campus would cost much, much more than 20 million USD.

I know of only one time in history when the U.S. government, in coordination with private foundations, generously funded the creation of a high-quality university in a developing country. The time was the early 1960s. During an official visit to the U.S, the Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru asked President Kennedy if the U.S. would fund a new engineering university in Kanpur. In the geopolitical context of the Cold War, it

was of strategic importance for the U.S. to move India (the largest non-aligned country in the world) closer to the West and farther from the Soviet bloc. Kennedy knew that if he said “no” to Nehru’s request, Nehru would turn for help to Soviet Prime Minister Khrushchev, and Khrushchev would agree. So Kennedy said “yes.” And the Indian Institute of Technology in Kanpur became one of India’s leading universities. But that was a different era, and there is no reason to think that something similar would happen today.

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Questions also need to be asked about the “performance management system” that the U.S. wants to export to Vietnam. Whose performance will be evaluated, how will it be evaluated, and by whom? What methodology will be used? For example, will research productivity be measured by the number of papers, by the sum of the page-lengths of all the papers, by a citation index, by letters from peers assessing the quality of the research, or by other means? Will the methodology depend on the field? Will it be different in mathematics than in medicine? How will the performance management system cope with the different traditions, practices, and standards in different fields? What will the procedure be if there is controversy and disagreement about the methodology? Will there be a process for appeals in cases when researchers feel that their performance has been evaluated unfairly? How will performance be evaluated in controversial areas in such fields as economics, history, sociology, and political science? How will researchers' activities that fall outside the usual realm — such as outreach to the public and to schools — figure into performance management? Will the performance management program measure all departments by the same set of criteria? Do the people promoting USAID’s type of performance management claim that the same methodology can be used for programs in art, music, history, computer science, chemical engineering, and business? How will the performance management system account for the cultural differences between Vietnam and the U.S.?

Finally, what is the evidence that a performance management system imported from the U.S. will function better in Vietnam than the current practice?

The USAID material advertising its programs also talks a lot about “learning outcomes.” It promises to “increase learning outcomes” and also to “improve the employability of graduates.” But it’s not clear how USAID measures learning outcomes. Does it use high marks in courses as evidence of learning (which of course would incentivize grade inflation, as in the U.S.)? Does it use some kind of standardized testing? Who will be relied upon to judge how much the students have learned? People outside or within the field of study? Professors or administrators? Or the students themselves?

In the U.S., administrators tend to have misplaced confidence in student course evaluations — that is, questionnaires that ask students their opinions of their instructors. However, a 4 December 2023 article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* by senior editor Len Gutkin examined studies of student course evaluations and concluded that the theory that quality of teaching can be measured by students' evaluations is "garbage science." Some studies, including a particularly careful one conducted at the U.S. Air Force Academy, found that students learn *less* from teachers whom they rate highly than from those whom they don't like so much.

There is a close correlation between student rating numbers and leniency in marking. The pressure to get high rating numbers is particularly strong on contingent faculty — those hired on an annual basis to teach the lower level courses ("contingent" means that they have zero job security) — and so the common practice of relying heavily on student ratings to evaluate instructors puts extreme pressure on them to inflate marks.

Back in 1990, I wrote an article titled "Are student ratings unfair to women?" for the *Association for Women in Mathematics Newsletter*. By then there had already been studies that showed that, given descriptions of teachers that are identical except for the name, students tend to rate a description higher if the teacher has a male name than if the teacher has a female name. I concluded that administrators should be cautious about how they use student ratings, because it is illegal and unethical to evaluate employees based on data that discriminate against women. Len Gutkin's article points out that students' anti-women biases have been consistently documented in more recent studies as well. Although most of the academic professions have made progress in reducing the amount of discrimination against women and racial minorities, the heavy reliance on student evaluations of instructors remains an obstacle to the advancement of groups that have historically been victims of discrimination and mistreatment.

Once again, we need to ask whether additional numbers of non-faculty (staff and administrators) would have to be hired to evaluate learning outcomes in the way recommended by USAID. If so, how much will this increase bureaucracy and costs at Vietnamese universities?

Does the phrase "improve the employability of graduates" suggest that academic programs that lead to high-paying jobs will be preferred over academic programs that lead to jobs in the state sector, such as most positions in basic science research? Will a program in business or management be prioritized over mathematics, chemistry, and physics?

Despite my doubts about the value for higher education in Vietnam of official U.S. programs of “aid” and advice, I believe that there are some useful ideas that Vietnam can import from my country. We’ve had some success in incorporating applications into our math courses and getting away from traditional narrow, formalistic approaches to teaching math. We’ve developed multidisciplinary programs of study for our students. We have some nice math applications and enrichment materials that are available as textbooks, workbooks, or YouTube videos — at no cost or little cost.

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Vietnam has deeply rooted traditions in many scholarly areas, including mathematics. I believe that the only time in history that a revolutionary guerrilla movement anywhere published a math book was in Vietnam during the French War, when the Việt Minh published Prof. Hoàng Tụy’s geometry textbook. I wish that the U.S. had as widespread respect for education and for teachers as you have in Vietnam. Clearly the mathematicians, scientists, and scholars in Vietnam are fully capable of developing appropriate systems of university governance and performance management without the flawed advice of USAID.