

Book Review

Phan, L. H., & Doan, B. N. (2020). *Higher education in market-oriented socialist Vietnam: New players, discourses, and practices*. Palgrave Macmillan. 393 pp. \$139. ISBN 9783030469122.

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Brief Overview and Organization of the Book

Building upon the existing higher education (HE) literature in Vietnam and other countries in the world, the book *Higher Education in Market-Oriented Socialist Vietnam: New Players, Discourses, and Practices*, edited by Phan and Doan (2020) provides a description of Vietnam's HE reform efforts since the economic reform of 1986. The book has four main parts divided into 21 chapters. Part I includes six chapters focusing on emerging issues in the HE reforms agenda, three ideologies shaping and informing transformations in Vietnam's HE, an overview of HE research development, and factors affecting academic performance, which are followed by a discussion on critical inquiries viewed through a policy analysis lens and concepts of modernity and reflexivity. Part II critically analyzes new players in HE sectors including community colleges, new discourses and values presented in liberal arts education and autonomy, and new practices through mergers and acquisitions (M&A) in Vietnamese private HE. Part II also covers a wide range of topics including social mobility, semi-elite private HE, community colleges and their relationship with decentralization in Vietnamese HE, and academic freedom. Part III mainly focuses on internationalization and English as a medium of instruction (EMI). Finally, Part IV summarizes the in-depth discussions and analyses presented in previous chapters through insightful commentaries focusing on Vietnam's HE future landscape.

Purpose and Central Argument

The purpose of this book is to provide a broad and comprehensive understanding of Vietnam's HE system from the economic reform in 1986 to 2019. With the collaboration of 29 contributors, this book updates and nuances "a number of themes that have been examined to varying degrees within the existing academic literature, such as neoliberalism and the privatization of higher education" (Phan & Doan, 2020, p. xiii), and discusses issues that have not been addressed in previous books about HE in Vietnam including institutional autonomy, research development in universities, university rankings, and so on.

Strengths and Weaknesses of the Book

This book differentiates itself from six previous books published since 1986 about HE in Vietnam (Harman et al., 2010; London, 2011; Nguyen & Shah, 2019; Nguyen & Tran, 2019; Tran & Marginson, 2018; Tran et al., 2014) by comparing and contrasting HE-related issues presented in different contexts including the Philippines and other Southeast Asian countries (Ortiga's commentary). Specifically, Chapter 13 of the book critiques that autonomy is quite popular in Southeast Asia where there is less monopoly from these countries' governments in HE. Countries like Singapore and Malaysia are reported to provide an open HE environment to attract international students and scholars, and Vietnam is not an exception. The increased autonomy of higher education institutions (HEIs) and presence of private institutions in Vietnam provide opportunities for more students to enter private institutions. Furthermore, the shift in the government's mindset towards an entrepreneurial approach makes Vietnam become a competitive player in HE. However, it is critical to note that the increase in M&A and the presence of dominant corporations pose challenges to Southeast Asian countries

including Vietnam and the Philippines. This book not only looks at the positive changes in HE reforms in Vietnam and compares them to other countries in the world, but it also critiques the negative side of such positive changes. Thanks to the contribution and collaboration of 29 contributors, the book covers a broad diversity of topics with one shared objective: writing a book about HE reform in Vietnam and its HE-related issues, and exploring Vietnam's HE reform from different angles and contexts.

The book also addresses the HE reform agenda in response to global and regional forces, with other interconnected issues including internationalization, autonomy, social mobility, community colleges, elitism, the development of research infrastructure, and academic freedom within the three ideologies informing Vietnam's HE: Confucianism, Socialism, and Neoliberalism. The discussion of each of these issues is presented logically with emphasis placed on the connections between them. For example, Chapter 11 describes institutional autonomy as shared governance that guarantees academic freedom and internationalization. Le's (2022) empirical study on the influence of institutional autonomy policy on the internationalization of Vietnam's HE supports the idea that a policy of autonomy in universities facilitates internationalization by removing ministerial barriers to promote international practices such as organizing international conferences, collaborating with scholars and researchers in the region and in the world, adopting international programs, and using textbooks published internationally. These practices, therefore, enhance the overall educational quality and international profile of Vietnamese universities. Le's study also draws on Neo-institutionalism or Neoliberalism as her theoretical framework to explore how autonomy related policy is executed in Vietnam. Neoliberalism is mentioned in the book as one of the three major ideologies that have contributed to both the development and fragmentation of Vietnamese HE due to the admixture of old and new practices in HE reform initiatives. This book, again, provides a detailed description and discussion on how Confucianism, Socialism, and Neoliberalism co-exist, contradict, and support each other. However, the interconnection of these three ideologies was discussed from articles that were published ten to 20 years ago (Hill & Kumar, 2012; Hursh & Martina, 2003; Unterhalter & Carpentier, 2010). Therefore, a more in-depth description of this connection under a constantly changing socioeconomic environment from the most recent articles should be provided as there have been significant changes in the past two decades.

One of the most valuable contributions of this book is its discussion of a critical, yet largely underexplored aspect of HE in Vietnam, research at universities from 1986 to 2019 (Chapter 4). This chapter differentiates this book from other previous works on Vietnamese HE. It provides an overall picture of Vietnam's universities since the Feudal period (between 938 and 1847), which focused mainly in teaching, to the present in which universities have changed their focus to both teaching and research, with a special attention on fostering research. In order to promote research in universities, a policy was promulgated in 1992 by the Chair of the Committee of Ministers, which combined both universities and research institutes into a single national Research and Development (R&D) system (Phan & Doan, 2020). Since this policy came into force, universities are expected to conduct research and apply the results of that research into practical applications.

The book also emphasizes the vision of the Vietnamese government through the establishment of three national projects on "*Training Scientific and Technical Cadres at Foreign Establishments with the State Budget*" (322, 911, and 89) as a strong commitment to promoting research. It also mentions that research productivity among researchers and academics is one of the main critical points needed in strengthening the research output of Vietnamese scholars and researchers. The authors call for a consensus and agreement from the Vietnamese government, scholars, lecturers, professors, and academics in the process of making research "a mandate, a culture, and a driver for HE development of Vietnam" (Phan & Doan, 2020, p. 81). Finally, four suggestions to the Vietnamese government to facilitate the development of research in Vietnam's universities were offered: (1) increase funding for university research, (2) restructure the state R&D system, (3) extend the application of a competitive funding mechanism to the entire R&D system, and (4) implement a comprehensive plan for developing the national academic workforce. The value of this chapter would have been strengthened had the author provided proposed solutions related to each of these suggestions. For example, it was suggested that the government should invest more in research in order to make full use of the research talent in universities (Phan & Doan, 2020). However, the authors did not suggest how or what should be done to increase research funding for universities.

Within the discussion of privatization, *Higher Education in Market-Oriented Socialist Vietnam: New Players, Discourses, and Practices* provides a detailed example of how Taiwan attracts international students by offering generous scholarships, a great evidence explaining why Vietnamese students select Taiwan as their study destination. It also explores the impact of Taiwanese's Southbound policy on Vietnamese students' decision to study in Taiwan. This is the

only chapter in the book that discusses students who are supposed to be the main customers of the HEIs. However, the book does not explore other important aspects related to students such as students' voice (Pham & Bui, 2019), learning experiences during the HE reforms, employability after graduation (Nguyen, 2011; Tran, 2012; Tran et al., 2022), and the employers' viewpoints in the job market (Tran et al., 2022; Van et al., 2012). These are among critical issues happening in Vietnam nowadays, which draws a lot of attention and debate from not only educators, researchers, but also from the public that should be explored further.

Contributions to the Field of Comparative and International Higher Education

Higher Education in Market-Oriented Socialist Vietnam: New Players, Discourses, and Practices contributes to the field of comparative and international higher education by providing a detailed picture of the HE system and reform agenda of Vietnam, an emerging and dynamic economy, through critical discussion and analysis of various issues in the higher education system of Vietnam. By addressing these issues in detail from a critical lens, and in a variety of relevant contexts, the book is currently the first among seven books about HE in Vietnam that has taken a detailed approach to the examination of many important aspects of Vietnam's HE system. The collaboration and contribution of 29 professors, scholars, and researchers around the world and valuable comparisons with HE systems in the Philippines, Brunei, Japan, Australia, and Trinidad and Tobago offer the reader invaluable insights into the current state of HE in Vietnam and the field of comparative and international higher education in particular.

This book does not address only a single issue as the previously published books about the HE in Vietnam nor the one published later about students' experiences in learning and teaching (Tran & Tran, 2021). Instead, the book presents almost every issue in the Vietnamese HE. Therefore, this book accomplishes its goal by comprehensively exploring Vietnam's HE system since the economic reform. Because of this, the book is for people interested in Vietnamese HE such as educators, teachers, lecturers, and researchers, who are teaching in universities and colleges both in Vietnam and other countries, especially those from emerging markets where the HE system has been through reforms, such as the Philippines, Indonesia, etc. It is also for policymakers, university leaders, department heads, and evaluators, who have been researching about Vietnam's HE to have a comprehensive of Vietnam's HE and its related issues so that these people are able to make right and timely decisions, which in turn, have a great impact on many people. By reading this book, undergraduates, graduates, and their parents are able to see how the HE system operates and how the HE reform works, then, they can provide timely feedback for policymakers and university leaders in their decision making process. This book is also for comparativists to provide an objective and comparative evaluation of different HE systems around the world.

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