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Universities and colleges in Vietnam are currently in the midst of a nation-wide educational renaissance. Each day there are news items in the print and online media challenging the educational status quo and opining on the need for the classroom adoption of interactive instruction, encouraging the upgrading of subject-specific curriculum, introducing and then enforcing

pursuing the development of international partnerships with higher education institutions throughout the world and most particularly in the U.S. There appears to be a quiet consensus that valuable knowledge and experience can be transferred to Vietnam's universities and colleges from their global partners.

International partnering is not a new or unique concept in Vietnam. A quick review of the websites from some of the more

Chicago represent just a few of the many accredited universities in the United States which have some level of partnership with universities in Vietnam.

What is the motivation for international partnerships? Perhaps that question should be in plural form rather than singular because there appear to be many varied reasons why Vietnamese universities choose to form partnerships. Partnership is perhaps an inappropriate term to describe these alliances or collaborations since partnership has certain legal definitions implying a financial arrangement. Whereas an alliance or collaboration are more neutral terms indicating respectively "a formal agreement" created "for the furtherance of the common interests and aims of the members" or "to work jointly with one or a limited number of others in a project involving composition or research to be jointly accredited". Without attempting to personally

substitute the popularly used term partnership with either alliance or collaboration, it should be clearly understood that for the context of this discussion the definition of partnership will not possess any legal association.

According to the American Council on Education, most of the Global Partnerships established by American universities and colleges are "academic partnerships focusing on student and faculty



A PRIMER ON FORMING PARTNERSHIPS WITH U.S. SCHOOLS

(The Benefits and Dangers of Educational Partnerships)

higher academic standards and improving the organizational effectiveness of educational institutions. The pressure of expectation has been and will continue to influence all areas of university and college campuses throughout Vietnam. How educational leaders will respond to all of the challenges before them is an evolving discovery, with one notable exception. University administrators are proactively

notable universities in Vietnam will confirm that some level of partnership (i.e., Memorandum of Understanding) has been agreed upon by both parties. California State University, Long Beach, University of Missouri, St. Louis, University of Hawaii, Western Michigan University, University of Arkansas, Texas A & M University, San Jose State University, University of Iowa, Ohio State University, and Loyola University,



exchange and collaboration around teaching and learning, research, and development issues". "Institutions benefit from partnering with each other, at home and abroad, and with corporations, non-governmental organizations, and community groups to enhance their quality and capacity" (American Council on Education, Global Partnerships). Many American universities have discovered the value of broadening the academic view of curriculum and expanding the regional perspective of the campus in the hopes of preparing a more culturally aware graduate. This includes establishing global sites for student travel study as well as developing programming that will attract international students to an American campus. Internationalizing the campus is often a goal of institutional partnerships as well as a response to many campus mission statements.

The Institute for International Education (IIE) has suggested that the establishment of branch campuses is another reason why American universities partner with international universities. In this scenario there are intellectual rewards for academic participants ranging from greater faculty contact with different cultures to exposure to new ideas. There is also a financial component which is attractive to participating faculty and ultimately to the participating American university. However the financial advantages available to the American institution should be immediately obvious and well documented in any memorandum of understanding. The IIE has noted that the advantages for

the international host university sponsoring an American branch campus are numerous. some of which follow (McBurnie and Ziguras. 2010).

- Building local capacity and education infrastructure

- Reducing the outflow of domestic students, and the associated financial and brain drain

- Attracting foreign students who can contribute to intellectual richness as well as revenue, and may in turn stay on as skilled immigrants

- Unquantifiable spin-offs such as technology transfer and the demonstration effects of foreign models of research, teaching and administration that can be adapted locally to build good practice

Peking University in Beijing, China has established more than 250 partnerships with academic institutions from around the world. Even though many of these partnerships were arranged for non-academic reasons there are a few which are very active and most helpful. Lin Jianhua, Peking University's provost has stated that, in brokering new alliances he seeks out institutions that might help Peking University establish programs in areas where it is weak. The University of Michigan provided faculty members for a new joint institute in social-science research. Last year the Georgia Institute of Technology and Emory University worked with Peking University's College of Engineering to unveil what they say is the first U.S.-China joint Ph.D. program. And the University of Southern California may collaborate on

professional programs in education and social work (Chronicle of Higher Education. June 16, 2010).

Doo-Hee Lee, a business professor at Korea University has stated that Asian universities tend to be focused upon local issues and seek out increased credibility from within the country. The consequences of such an inward focus is a lack of global awareness and their standards reflect that practice. "Western universities still set the standards, and Asian universities are always falling behind" (Chronicle of Higher Education. April 15, 2010). Partnering with Western universities promises added value for Asian universities as they attempt to become more international in perspective and also seek to employ administrative and operational systems which promote quality.

It appears that one of the main reasons why universities in Vietnam establish academic partnerships with U.S. colleges and universities is to provide their matriculated students with greater educational options. Participating in instruction delivered by an American professor and potentially receiving a degree recognized by a U.S. university is a widely accepted career benefit for a local student. Those schools which are able to develop a functional partnership where programming is made available to their students also understand the marketing advantage of working with American universities.

But the eagerness with which some Vietnamese institutions pursue partnerships with American universities suggests that there is an

intentional omission of associated academic standards. In many cases these are the same academic standards that a university in Vietnam would follow when establishing a new educational program on their campus. The resulting problems (and there will be problems working with unaccredited colleges and universities) create embarrassing public relations issues for the local university and cause participating students to lose both time and money. On June 25, 2010 the Thanh Nien Daily ran the following headline, “Foreign Diploma Mills Plague Higher Education”. In the body of the article it stated that, “Unaccredited foreign institutions have flooded Vietnam’s education sector, giving out sub-standard degrees of little value”. Professor Pham Quang Minh from the VNU-HCMC was quoted as saying that “joint education programs with foreign partners were booming in a bad way. The unwelcomed come, the welcomed don’t”.

Professor Quang’s frustration is obvious but there are many highly accredited colleges and universities with valued reputations for academic quality in the U.S. who are willing to work with universities in Vietnam. But there must be a higher level of diligence on the part of the university partner in Vietnam to thoroughly examine the qualifications of the American partner. Some unaccredited American colleges and universities are very persuasive and aggressive in their approach to developing partnerships. Invariably their desire for revenue gain and their promotion of degree programs

which can be completed without knowledge of English and in a very short period of time are negative indicators of program quality.

There are two U.S. organizations, The Council on Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) and The U.S. Department of Education (USDE), each of which provide an online service that a Vietnamese university can use in order to determine the accreditation of an unknown institution of higher education: CHEA http://www.chea.org/pdf/2009_2010_Directory_of_CHEA_Recognized_Organizations.pdf; USDE <http://ope.ed.gov/accreditation/>

The Council on Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) “is an association of 3,000 degree-granting colleges and universities and recognizes 60 institutional and programmatic accrediting organizations”. CHEA is an organization which is dedicated to the mission of “self-review and peer review for improvement of academic quality and public accountability of institutions and programs”. The U.S. Department of Education does not have any governmental authority to accredit any university or college within the country. Even though the U.S. Department of Education does not have the authority to monitor or even review the quality standards of an college or university it “does recognize accrediting bodies for the accreditation of institutions of higher (postsecondary) education.”

Accrediting agencies recognized by the Secretary meet certain criteria. The institutions accredited by those agencies meet

standards that address the quality of an institution and its programs. An accrediting agency that meets the Department’s criteria for recognition is determined to be a reliable authority in measuring the quality of education or training provided by the institutions it accredits in the United States and its territories. Agencies that meet these criteria are placed on the Department’s List of Nationally Recognized Accrediting Agencies

The state government within each of the 50 states in the U.S. is responsible for the organization, structure and legal standards for all institutions of higher education within its borders. Some states are very firm in the quality expectations for the colleges and universities within its jurisdiction while other states are less concerned with centralized quality control. It may be possible to check the websites of the educational agencies in the state in which an unknown college or university has been licensed. Some states are now listing unaccredited diploma mills by name which allows the public the opportunity to identify colleges and universities which should be avoided.

Why is it important to work with accredited U.S. institutions of higher education? In a very recent publication (June, 2010) by CHEA entitled “Value of Accreditation” there is detailed information presented as to why potential Vietnamese partners should insist that a U.S. college or university is accredited by a responsible agency (as noted by USDE or CHEA). “Accredited status means that students and the public can expect that a school or program



lives up to its promises. It means that a student can have confidence that a degree or credential has value.” Accreditation also has an additional value for local students who are spending their families money and their time with a U.S. based college or university. “As part of the accreditation process, institutions and programs must demonstrate that they meet the accreditation standards requiring that they provide quality education. And, they have to demonstrate truth in advertising--that the information presented about the education they offer is accurate”.

Most if not all colleges and universities in the U.S. have an institutional web site. This site should list the agency which provides the institutional accreditation as well as which program specializations are recognized by specific accrediting agencies (e.g., The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business--AACSB, Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology--ABET). If an institutional web site does not list an association with any accrediting agency that is the first warning sign that the school is unaccredited. And if the school web site lists an accrediting agency which is not recognized by USDE or CHEA it would be prudent to avoid any partnership agreement with that institution.

There are two other private sector annual reports, sponsored by well known publishers, which also provide informational tools to assist in the quality review of a potential college or university partner. *The U.S. News & World*

Report (<http://www.usnews.com/sections/rankings>) provides an annual ranking of the best colleges and universities in the country. There may be some debate as to the specific ranking of various schools but as a general rule any college or university which is listed in the annual review would pass the initial test for quality and accreditation. *The Princeton Review* (<http://www.princetonreview.com/college-rankings.aspx>) publishes an annual book as well as an online listing noting the top colleges and universities and how they rate according to numerous (more than 60) categories. Some categories are based upon quality determinants and other categories may be more obscure, such as best campus food. While *The Princeton Review* does not include every accredited or top-notch college and/or university which would be worthy of a partnership, it does provide a listing of some of the better schools with selection criteria and rankings determined by student opinion.

Also note that just because an American college or university is not a well-known public or private institution of higher learning it should not automatically be eliminated from partnership consideration. There are hundreds of very good, even elite educational institutions in the U.S. that are not well known outside of their geographical region but are highly accredited and valued schools. Because of this, a simple online search using the information from CHEA and/or USDE should be a first step in determining the accreditation and qualifications of a potential partner.

If you have any questions on identifying a quality U.S. educational partner please feel free to email me your question at jensen410@hotmail.com and I will do my best to provide you with an answer. If I cannot provide you with a timely response I will forward your question to an academic colleague who may be able to provide you with better information ●

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