



In-Service Training Courses and Degrees: Is It Time for Quality Improvement and Rebranding?

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***“The wisest mind
has something yet to
learn.”***

George Santayana

The educational establishment in Vietnam uses the term ‘in-service training’ (also synonymous with ‘evening classes’) to describe the educational program offered by numerous universities, which allows recent high school graduates to begin working while also earning a degree

during evenings and weekends. Generally the coursework for in-service training is the same as that which is offered in the regular/traditional university degree program and most often the instructor is the same. But for some reason in-service training has been and continues to be recognized as an inferior educational product and its reputation as a viable means of educating the working student is poor. Prof. Pham Minh Hac, former Minister of Education and Training, was recently quoted as saying that “the current training quality in evening classes is very low and management is not tight because of insufficient monitoring and assessment... and lecturers at evening classes

intentionally reduce the content of classes to enable students to earn higher scores” (Viet Nam News, January 10, 2011). The idea that in-service training/evening classes results in an inferior education is also based upon the perception that “schools always set lower requirements on in-service training students, because difficult lessons may keep students away, and schools do not want to lose students” (Hong and Kieu, December 15, 2010). The criticisms attached to in-service training have not been adequately developed in program assessments since only 100 out of 180 universities have completed the quality self-assessment reports (Tu, December 18, 2010) and most of



the written critiques have been anecdotal. Yet the devaluation of in-service training is a vexing handicap limiting alternative educational opportunities for qualified university students. It appears that the time is right for a quality realignment and a rebranding of in-service training in order to elevate the reputation of in-service training in the minds of the public as well as within the perspectives of business and industry.

In-service training is a viable option for meeting the future educational needs of employed students throughout the urban centers of Vietnam. The ability to enter the university immediately following high school graduation or after spending several years in the workforce is contingent upon many factors, including access and cost. Many graduating students may be academically eligible to pursue higher education but their lack of financial resources forces them to enter the workforce to earn money for their education (as well as to contribute to the finances of the family). Students who have academic ability, as

attested by their high school accomplishments, but have never previously attempted a university degree in favor of entering the workforce, represent an additional cadre of potential in-service students. Collectively these students need to have high quality educational options made available to them so that they can either rejoin the workforce with up-to-date skills or upgrade their occupational status in their present careers. In-service training provides these part-time students with educational opportunities that will positively impact their personal and professional lives.

There are additional groups of students who could greatly benefit from a quality degree program option through in-service training. Dr. Le Bao Lam, President of HCM City Open University has stated that “a lot of students of the school cannot finish their training courses because they choose majors unsuitable for them. Some students decided to give up school after a period of studying because they thought they made mistakes in choosing their major” (Phong, January 28,

2011). This group of students should not be penalized by discovering that their academic major does not match up well with their long-term interests and scholastic abilities. Re-entering the university through an in-service training program provides these students with the positive benefits of university education. As an added economic benefit students completing in-service training programs complement the numbers of university educated job seekers entering the Vietnamese workforce.

In order to fulfill its economic promise for the future, Vietnam needs to significantly improve upon the numbers of university graduates entering the country’s labor market. The ‘Winter 2011’ report from Vietnomics, a consulting firm that supports building partnerships between U.S. and Vietnamese businesses and organizations, supports the goal of increasing the numbers of educated employees by publicly noting what is needed to improve the country’s social infrastructure. “Vietnam’s two primary social challenges are health care and education. With one of the world’s most attractive demographic profiles, the country needs to improve its workforce training and education at all levels” (Vietnomics, 2011). This opinion is not unique to Vietnomics as it has also been strongly advocated by various governmental entities in setting agendas to achieve long-term educational and economic goals.

A continuously expanding educated workforce is a concept that has been espoused by the



inspired document titled, 'The Resolution on Comprehensive and Fundamental Reform of Higher Education in Vietnam 2006-2020'. The 'Resolution' document seeks to target university enrollment by 2020, at a level that is equivalent to 450 students per 10,000 population. This is a very hopeful forecast considering that the goal established for 2010 was 200 students per 10,000 population (Runckel, 2009). Being able to reach the 2020 enrollment goal will require additional financial and human resources being devoted to the upgrading of Vietnam's public and private universities. Many universities in Vietnam already are facing handicaps accommodating current levels of student enrollment and will need to expand their instructional capacity as well as their physical space requirements in order to enroll a million additional students. Another way to help meet the university enrollment goal is to increase the capacity of in-service training programs at all universities and elevate its reputation among the public as well as with business and industry.

The low value placed upon an in-service degree, as collectively perceived by university educators, business and industry, and students, is a very limiting factor in making it a viable and legitimate educational option. Universities in Vietnam maintain the degree as currently established, with minimal incentives for quality improvement or rebranding.

The existing structure of in-service training programs allows universities to profit from student enrollment fees as well as providing an option for lecturers and professors to gain extra income.

Analysts say that universities nearly do not have any investments in in-service training, yet they still can make large sums of money. The schools only have to spend small sums of money on lecturers, and they do not have to spend money on curriculum and material facilities because they can use the curriculum and material facilities of the regular training classes for in-service training (Vietnam.Net, December 17, 2010).

If students are receiving instruction that is comparable with the instruction that is provided for traditional university students, there is nothing wrong with universities or professors financially capitalizing on the popularity of in-service training. But quality equalization does not appear to be an accurate characterization on the existing status of traditional university and in-service degrees. Universities that would like to expand upon the opportunities presented by in-service training would greatly benefit from a long-term commitment implementing quality improvement processes that would balance the quality of all degree programs--regardless of distinction. Simultaneous to the quality upgrade of in-service training programs, participating universities would also be well advised to initiate a rebranding which would eliminate existing

terminology (in-service training and evening courses) in favor of more positive descriptors.

From an educational administrators appraisal there is no appropriate reason why in-service training programs need to be inferior to traditional daytime university programs. Increasing the available options to obtain a quality degree is a benefit to the student, the university and ultimately to business and industry. The student would not have to face a future where a decision to attend university for a good education is solely dependent upon his/her immediate ability to pay. Instead, the part-time student would be able to afford the tuition for a university degree while working full-time. The university would gain valuable revenue without having to expand curriculum, build new classrooms or hire new instructors. Business and industry would have a segment of their respective workforce gain in knowledge and skills by participating in highly valued in-service training programs. Workers possessing new knowledge and advanced skills would be able to immediately apply them at their workplace without having to wait until graduation before seeing the benefits of their education. The organization sponsoring or encouraging its staff to enroll in part-time degree programs would gain a more confident and able employee--an individual who may invigorate the office environment with new ideas, improved systems or greater communication skills.

Universities that will commit to a quality improvement process for in-service training have numerous options and directions to consider. Many universities may already have valid internal quality assurance programs that could be used to advance the goal of elevating in-service training programs. Those universities seeking quality improvement but lacking a specific direction may benefit from the experiences of similar universities in the United States. Numerous universities in the U.S. have developed some form of alternative or extended degree program that is available to part-time students and convenient for working adults. These programs are built upon the curriculum of regular university degree programs with the understanding that they must adhere to all instructional responsibilities that are applicable for any comparable degree offering. For example, The University of Washington's Professional and Continuing Education division offers a Master's in Electrical Engineering which is the same degree as offered by the College of Engineering. The difference between the two offerings is not based upon academic quality but on the convenience of delivery as stated on the website for continuing education. "Our graduate and undergraduate degree programs are designed for busy adults, offering flexible formats with evening, online and even weekend options--ideal for working professionals" (<http://www.pce.uw.edu/degrees/>). Professional and Continuing

Education, as both a program home and program descriptor for undergraduate and graduate degree programs, carries no negative academic association and is not perceived in anyway to be inferior to the comparative graduate program offered by the College of Engineering.

The continued use of the terms 'in-service training' and 'evening courses' have become negatively associated with a very viable way of delivering needed education in Vietnam.

Universities in the West use a variety of terms to describe the same types of educational experience including, lifelong learning, continuing education, evening university, weekend college and extended education. The term in-service training is traditionally viewed as being a short-term non-credit training program for individuals in a specific industry (such as teachers, nurses or even engineers). For different reasons in-service training is not viewed in the West or in Vietnam as being a representative term to describe alternative degree programs for working students. Changing the term to reflect a more positive approach for students seeking quality degrees in flexibly scheduled formats is a necessary rebranding of an evolving educational product. If a university in Vietnam moves forward with a quality redesign of its part-time degree programs it should concurrently consider moving away from the publicly unpopular term of in-service training in favor of a new positive term such as 'Continuing

University'.

Universities in Vietnam face many challenges in the coming years. Some of these challenges have been addressed through the establishment of higher education goals which seek to increase the number of student enrollments, employ more faculty with advanced degrees, upgrade the quality of instruction, reduce class sizes and generate revenue from other instructional activities (Runckel, 2010). Workable responses to some of these goals can be found within the basic purpose of 'Continuing University' programming and its mission to educate underserved populations. Offering expanded university degree options to underserved students lifts higher education from an exclusive enclave for the few in favor of open access for the many. Educational administrators need not fear that broadening the base of academic offerings will lead to a degradation of quality. If universities commit to simple quality improvement processes that focus upon the learning outcomes of every student in every program, then 'Continuing Education' degree programs will become a valuable partner in meeting Vietnam's educational goals of the future●

REFERENCES

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