Students’ educational achievements in Vietnam surpass the learning of students in far wealthier nations

Vietnam - a country in which primary- and secondary-school students’ learning levels reach or exceed those of their peers in far more prosperous nations - will be the subject of an in-depth RISE project that seeks to understand how the nation “got it right” in its quest to help students learn. An experienced, multidisciplinary team of nine researchers within and outside of Vietnam will conduct the long-term project.

“Vietnam is an incredible success story, and it is enormously important to understand how Vietnam produces high levels of learning success while facing many of the institutional and poverty-related challenges many other countries face,” said Lant Pritchett, Research Director of RISE, a new international programme that aims to find ways to improve learning on a large scale throughout the developing world.

Vietnam’s achievements in primary and secondary education over the last two decades are extraordinary. Out of 65 countries, Vietnam ranked 17th in maths and 19th in reading – surpassing both the United States and the United Kingdom – in the 2012 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), the worldwide scholastic performance measure of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Vietnam’s primary school completion rate is 97 percent, and its lower secondary enrolment rate is 92 percent.

“Vietnam’s success raises key questions about how it reached such levels of learning, and whether its achievements can provide insights that help other nations,” said Paul Glewwe, one of the research team’s principal investigators. He has been engaged in research in Vietnam for 25 years, and is a Distinguished McKnight University Professor in the Department of Applied Economics at the University of Minnesota. “The project is very ambitious in scope, and it takes advantage of an incredible success story in education in developing countries.”

The GBP4.2 million, six-year RISE research project will undertake a systematic evaluation of Vietnam’s education system by analysing the status and impacts of past, current and upcoming educational reforms. The aim is to understand how policy levers made Vietnam’s exceptional achievements possible, and whether and how new reforms are able to build on its achievements.

Key questions are:

• What explains Vietnam’s high levels of student learning?

Insights from the Vietnam experience are likely to provide lessons that can be used to improve the education systems of other countries. The team will undertake historical analysis of the underpinnings and evolution of Vietnam’s
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education. The system includes many distinctive features, among them a complex combination of public and private funding that has given rise to a “shadow education” system. That is, in most areas of Vietnam, even in rural areas, parents pay to send their primary-school-age children to “extra study.”

- What impact will current and planned curriculum reforms have on student educational outcomes?

Vietnam is embarking on comprehensive, system-wide curricular reforms that are aiming to fundamentally change how teachers teach, and what and how students learn. Because one of the key reform programmes is already being used in more than 20 other countries, the researchers will be able to make comparisons about how certain changes work in different countries. Vietnam’s “next generation” reforms are aimed at building up students’ skill to emphasise problem solving and teamwork rather than memorisation. The team will evaluate whether these reforms affect student learning over time, and they will seek to understand why any boosts in learning takes place.

Vietnam’s push to continue to improve its educational system stems from the desire to address inequalities in education among certain populations within the country, and from the realisation that it will need to expand its supply of skilled labour in order to continue the nation’s economic growth, which has led to broad-based improvements in living standards over the past generation.

“Debates about how best to sustain growth and to improve living standards form the backdrop of efforts to reform Vietnam’s education system,” said Le Thuc Duc, a Senior Researcher and Head of the Section for Economic Forecasts at the Centre for Analysis and Forecasting, a policy-oriented institutional member of the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences.

The Vietnam team includes nine researchers affiliated with institutions throughout the world. Principal bases are at the University of Minnesota, where faculty have been engaged with education research in Vietnam for decades; the Centre for Analysis and Forecasting, a policy-oriented institution within the Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences, a think tank of the Government of Vietnam; and the Mekong Development Research Institute, an independent scientific research agency that focuses on public policy and social change. Other affiliated institutions include Leiden University, University College London, the (UK) Institute for Fiscal Studies, the World Bank, and the University of Oxford. The team members offer expertise in fields that include education, comparative and international development, economics, and political economy.

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Seldom do researchers have the opportunity to embark on a study of education in a developing country because it is doing so well. Vietnam is that successful, exceptional story. Once one of the poorest countries in Asia with abysmal living standards and poor educational attainment in the wake of colonialism and wars, Vietnam transformed itself in the span of 25 years, and it now boasts one of the world’s highest growth rates and remarkable educational outcomes.

Vietnam’s achievements in primary and secondary education have surpassed those of many advanced countries, including both the US and the UK. In 2012, for example, Vietnam ranked 17th in math and 19th in reading out of 65 countries on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), the worldwide scholastic measure of 15-year-olds that is undertaken by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Vietnam’s primary school completion rate is 97 percent, and its lower secondary enrolment rate is 92 percent.

The following graphs illustrate the exceptional performance Vietnamese students have demonstrated on the PISA reading and maths assessments. The vertical scale shows how students in various countries scored; the higher the vertical position of a country, the higher its students’ scores. The horizontal scale shows the per-capita Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the countries; the farther right the country’s position, the higher its per-capita GDP. Vietnam’s position shows that its students far outperformed countries with similar GDP levels, reaching levels as high as or higher than students in many far wealthier countries.

At a time when the world is facing a learning crisis, the lessons the RISE Country Research Team (CRT) will learn from the Vietnam case are crucial. The team will seek to understand what worked in the Vietnam context, and what lessons can be applied elsewhere. Furthermore, the researchers will also seek understand what did not work in Vietnam’s drive to achieve remarkable gains in education; for example, Vietnam’s results are not uniform for all the country’s socioeconomic and ethnic groups, or for all its many regions. At present, concerns remain about the need to decentralize the school system, as well to the need to bring increased transparency to Vietnam’s complex mix of public and private financing of education. In short, Vietnam offers the RISE Programme an opportunity to understand how to create and sustain success - and how these lessons may apply to other countries seeking to do the same.

The RISE Vietnam CRT will examine the institutional reforms to learn what levers of support made such an extraordinary change possible. The researchers will look Vietnam’s past, present and upcoming educational system reforms to understand how and why Vietnam is able to leverage its policies to achieve such exceptional learning results – with the aim of gaining insights that can prove useful in policymaking in Vietnam and in other nations.

The research will seek to establish which elements and relationships within Vietnam’s education system lead the
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"actors" in the system - parents, teachers, and administrators - to act in ways that produce student learning. Researchers will also seek to understand where and why gaps persist. The research will create a map that seeks to understand how the system works in theory and in practice on key matters such as delegation, finance, information and motivation. Key features of Vietnam’s governance and economy that will inform the analysis of the education system include:

- the presence of a one-party state with no direct elections;
- a decentralized fiscal and administrative system;
- rapid urbanization and increasing migration;
- absence of independent teacher unions;
- pervasiveness of opaque formal and informal fee structures and shadow education;
- trained and well-regarded teaching force with little autonomy;
- an engaged civil society.

Two key questions for researchers are:

**Question 1: How did Vietnam achieve high enrollment rates and high learning outcomes?**

The team’s preliminary assessment suggests that eight major factors likely played a role in producing high levels of enrolment and student learning:

- political commitment;
- decentralization and autonomy at all levels of the system;
- strong accountability relationships and financial support;
- high levels of commitment by parents and students;
- high income growth for parents;
- teachers’ commitment;
- state and educational managers’ commitment;
- civil society engagement in the education discussion.

**Question 2: What impact will new reforms have?**

Vietnam is implementing several major initiatives to make further progress in enrolment and learning outcomes. A 2012 decision outlining the national education strategy through 2020 ensures that at least 20 percent of the state budget must be spent on education. Two important reforms from this same decree are:

- The Vietnam Escuela Nueva (New School) programme. This programme represents a major change in the curriculum, teaching and learning objectives (in terms of the skills to be acquired). Begun in Colombia, the programme has been implemented in more than 20 countries around the world, but almost no rigorous studies of its impact have been undertaken. Thus, the research promises to see whether and how a programme works in completely different settings. The programme’s new curriculum and more practical lessons are aimed at emphasising participation in the learning process, and the development of problem-solving and teamwork skills over memorization. Teachers receive training in more new methods that emphasise student participation and best practices.
- System-wide curriculum reform. Last updated in 2002, textbooks and curriculum in Vietnam are widely viewed as out of date, particularly given the country’s adoption of a market economy and embrace of global integration. A curriculum reform will shift from teaching of academic knowledge through rote techniques to a greater emphasis on competencies such as critical thinking and interpersonal skills. Teacher training and new textbooks are key components of the broader reform.

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It is not often that we can motivate a study of education in a developing country because they are doing so well. Vietnam is that success story. In the span of 25 years, Vietnam went from one of the poorest countries in Asia with abysmal living standards and stagnating educational attainment to one of high growth rates and impressive educational outcomes: Vietnam’s 2012 PISA scores in reading and math surpassed those of many developed countries, such as the US and UK, and exceeded those of many other developing countries by more than a standard deviation.

At this time, when we are facing a learning crisis in the world, it is crucial to look at the Vietnam case and understand what worked in their context, and how it worked, and what lessons we can learn that can be applied elsewhere. Furthermore, we must also understand what did not work in their drive to remarkable gains in education – it is commonly understood that the great improvements were not uniform across all socioeconomic strata, ethnic groups and regions in that country. While increasing financing and decentralization have been initiatives of the government, how they have been implemented across provinces is variable. Further study is warranted to understand how governance has supported or impeded academic outcomes. In short, Vietnam is an opportunity for much research to be done, both in lessons for other countries and for sustainability of the success story within Vietnam itself.

The team will examine the institutional reforms and understand what levers of support existed that made such an extraordinary change possible. They will look to understand what Vietnam’s Theory of Change was, and how it came to work, and in what ways it did not work. The research plan will start with a diagnostic phase that will seek to establish which elements and relationships within Vietnam’s education system induce actors (government, education and party officials, as well as teachers, principals and parents) to act in ways that produce learning, and where gaps in learning persist. The diagnostic exercise will include a mapping of de jure system structures as well as de facto characteristics of principal-agent relationships for key design elements (i.e. delegation, finance, information and motivation) across each relationship of accountability. Figure 1 shows a framework of the actors and relations of Vietnam’s education system as it relates to student learning.

In particular, several distinctive features of Vietnam’s governance and economy will inform the analysis of the education system. These include (a) the presence of a one-party state with no direct elections; (b) a decentralised fiscal and administrative system; (c) rapid urbanisation and increasing rural to urban migration; (d) the absence of independent teacher unions; (e) pervasiveness of opaque formal and informal fee structures and shadow education; (f) a trained and well-regarded teaching force with little autonomy; (g) an engaged civil society.

One key step in the diagnostic phase is digging deeper into the PISA data to certify whether it suffered from any sampling bias, for example, from selection of participating schools. Importantly, the team will also check the results of ethnic minorities vis-à-vis other students and provide an assessment of whether these groups perform less well in Vietnam’s education system.
Question 1: How did Vietnam achieve high enrolment rates and high learning outcomes?

The reforms to be studied are the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reform</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Date enacted</th>
<th>Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Increased public finance, along with encouragement of household contributions for education.</td>
<td>Early 1990s</td>
<td>Financing and Resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Increased access to schooling through construction of new schools in each commune and reducing/eliminating fees</td>
<td>1995 onward</td>
<td>Equity, Financing and Resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3a</td>
<td>Fiscal and administrative decentralisation</td>
<td>1996 onward</td>
<td>Governance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3b</td>
<td>Increased school autonomy</td>
<td>2002 onward</td>
<td>Governance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Introduction of school quality standards and assessment</td>
<td>2009 onward</td>
<td>Information/Governance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition to studying the impact of these reforms, the research will analyse the impact of other school level factors, as well as family and child characteristics, on student performance.

The team's preliminary Theory of Change posits that there are 8 major factors that likely played a role in producing high levels of enrolment and student learning: 1) political commitment; 2) decentralisation and autonomy at all levels of the system; 3) strong accountability relations and financial support; 4) high levels of commitment by parents and students; 5) high income growth for parents; 6) teachers’ commitment; 7) state and educational managers’ commitment; 8) civil society engagement in the education discussion.

Question 2: What impact will the new reforms have?

Vietnam is currently implementing several major initiatives to make further progress in enrolment and learning outcomes. A decision in 2012 outlining the strategy for 2011-2020 stipulates that at least 20% of the state budget must be spent on education. Two important reforms from this same decree are the following: a) Escuela Nueva programme and b) a system-wide curriculum reform. The research in this part of the project will cover three specific areas:

1. qualitative analysis of teacher skills (including pedagogical content knowledge, pedagogy and classroom practices), and their implementation of the new curriculum;
2. accountability analysis and implementation record.

The research approach is summarised in the figure below.

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