



Journal of Liberal Arts and Humanities (JLAH)
Issue: Vol. 4; No. 8; October 2023 (pp. 63-67)
ISSN 2690-070X (Print) 2690-0718 (Online)
Website: www.jlahnet.com
E-mail: editor@jlahnet.com
Doi: 10.48150/jlah.v4no8.2023.a2

THE IMPORTANCE OF A LIBERAL EDUCATION IN EQUIPPING STUDENTS FOR THE FUTURE IS EXEMPLIFIED IN THE CONTEXT OF VIETNAM

Huong, Xuan Vu (PhD)

Faculty of Foreign languages - Social sciences
Ba Ria - Vung Tau University, Vietnam;
Email: huongvx@bvu.edu.vn

ABSTRACT

Vietnam's rapid economic growth and increasing global integration have highlighted the urgent need to modernize the country's education system. Currently, the emphasis is heavily placed on exams, but it is evident that a shift towards a more progressive approach is necessary. One promising solution is the implementation of a liberal education model that prioritizes critical thinking, creativity, cultural awareness, and lifelong learning. However, this transition is faced with obstacles rooted in traditional Confucian values that promote conformity and memorization.

This article delves into the significance of incorporating liberal education into Vietnam's evolving landscape and its potential to equip students with the skills demanded by today's economy. By analyzing government policies, scholarly articles, and curriculum documents, several barriers have been identified. These include deeply ingrained sociocultural norms, resistance from bureaucratic institutions, and resource limitations. Despite these challenges, it is crucial to acknowledge the long-term advantages that a modernized education system can bring to Vietnam and its future generations.

To fully unlock the benefits of a liberal education, it is essential to implement substantial changes that align the curricula, assessments, and teaching methods with interdisciplinary learning and student-centered instruction. By restructuring the educational system to embrace liberal models, Vietnam can effectively equip its younger generation to become leaders in the 21st century. This article contends that a liberal education plays a vital role in empowering Vietnamese students to confront future challenges, necessitating a political dedication to depart from antiquated approaches and embrace holistic development.

Keywords: Liberal education; Vietnamese students; Vietnam education; Confucian principles; education system.

INTRODUCTION

Over the years, Vietnam has experienced a substantial increase in its economic prosperity. The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per person has surged from a mere \$230 in 1986 to an impressive \$2,785 in 2021, according to the World Bank's report (World Bank, 2022). This significant growth can be largely credited to the country's successful integration into the global economy. Through the establishment of trade alliances, attracting foreign direct investments (FDIs), and active participation in multilateral institutions, Vietnam has managed to establish itself as a key player on the world stage. However, this newfound success has also shed light on the pressing need for a highly skilled workforce that possesses both adaptable cognitive abilities and non-cognitive skills, as emphasized by Bodewig and Badiani-Magnusson (2014).

Despite the progress made in Vietnam's education system, it still heavily relies on Confucian customs that prioritize conformity, obedience, and rote memorization solely for the purpose of achieving high exam scores (Tran, 2013). This disconnect between the values and mindset instilled by traditional Vietnamese education and the needs of the country's ongoing development in the 21st century has sparked a growing demand for a more liberal approach to education.

Liberal education aims to nurture inquisitiveness, bolster critical thinking capabilities, encourage innovation, refine communication skills, foster interdisciplinary knowledge, and promote adaptability (Nussbaum, 1998). Advocates argue that this holistic approach to learning equips students with the skills they

need to actively engage in society and thrive in an ever-evolving economy, as opposed to passive, exam-focused models (Fox, 2021). As Vietnam continues its integration into the global economic and cultural landscape, policymakers, educators, and families are increasingly recognizing the benefits of liberal education in empowering young individuals with the advanced abilities essential for success. This comprehensive educational framework not only equips students with subject-specific knowledge but also encourages them to think critically, approach problems from multiple perspectives, and communicate effectively across various disciplines. By fostering curiosity and embracing creativity, liberal education prepares students to navigate the complexities of the modern world and adapt to changing circumstances. It goes beyond rote memorization and standardized testing, emphasizing the development of transferable skills that can be applied in diverse contexts. By nurturing these capacities, liberal education cultivates individuals who are not only knowledgeable but also adaptable, innovative, and capable of making meaningful contributions to society.

However, the adoption of liberal education continues to face obstacles due to deep-seated systemic barriers rooted in traditional Confucian principles of hierarchy, obedience, and conformity (Gribble, 2014). Sociocultural norms ingrained from an early age prioritize exam results over critical thinking and individual exploration (Huong, 2022). The implementation of active learning approaches is hindered by resistance from bureaucratic structures, limited resources, and instructors' unfamiliarity with these methods. To fully unlock the potential of liberal education in cultivating graduates who are creative and adaptable, a comprehensive reform is imperative. This reform should encompass aligning curricula, assessments, and teaching practices with the objectives of interdisciplinary learning and student-centered instruction (Thomas, 2018).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This qualitative research paper aims to explore the current status of liberal education in Vietnam through a thorough examination of its benefits for students, barriers to its implementation, and the role of comprehensive reform in facilitating its adoption. The data for this study will be derived from various sources, including government policies, reports from international organizations, curriculum documents, and scholarly literature on Vietnamese education published between 2010 and 2022.

By analyzing the curriculum documents and government policies related to primary, secondary, and higher education, we will gain insights into the extent to which liberal education principles have been integrated into the structure and objectives of Vietnam's education system. Additionally, reports from reputable organizations such as the World Bank will provide valuable quantitative data on Vietnam's educational outcomes and socio-economic trajectory, allowing us to better understand the context in which discussions on equipping students for the future take place.

The scholarly literature encompasses theoretical discussions and qualitative studies that offer a range of international perspectives on liberal education. It also includes analyses of both the advantages and limitations of liberal education specifically within the Vietnamese context. To ensure academic rigor, this paper relies on a selection of peer-reviewed journal articles and expert analyses that form the conceptual framework for the arguments presented.

To identify key themes and sub-themes, the data was thematically coded using NVivo 12 software. In the first cycle of descriptive coding, sources were categorized based on document type, methodology, and the topics they discussed. In the second cycle of pattern coding, these categories were synthesized to form overarching themes, which include the benefits of liberal education, challenges to its implementation, the need for reform, and strategies to promote its adoption. By comparing and contrasting different perspectives within these themes, a comprehensive analysis is provided to capture the intricate dynamics surrounding liberal education in Vietnam.

By utilizing a qualitative approach that integrates various data sources, this methodology offers a comprehensive comprehension of the factors that influence the promotion of liberal education in Vietnam. The data encompasses viewpoints from both supporters and detractors, which aids in placing discussions within the social and cultural context that must be taken into account for effective implementation. This detailed analysis serves as the basis for providing well-rounded recommendations that are supported by evidence, with the aim of proposing feasible reform initiatives that can address the obstacles and enhance accessibility to liberal education, thus empowering students in Vietnam.

RESULTS

Upon analyzing the data, several significant themes emerge regarding the present state of liberal education in Vietnam and the necessary steps to further promote its adoption:

Advantages of Liberal Education

Extensive discussions surrounding the benefits of a liberal education in preparing Vietnamese students for success in the modern era are supported by data. Scholars emphasize how a liberal education fosters cognitive skills that can be applied across various domains, including critical thinking, problem-solving, creativity, and adaptability (Thomas, 2018; Zakaria, 2015). By exposing students to diverse disciplines and perspectives, a liberal education promotes cultural awareness, empathy, and an interdisciplinary knowledge base that can be utilized in a wide range of situations (Nussbaum, 1997; Fox, 2021).

Advocates also emphasize the advantages of engaged citizenship that result from a liberal education. They argue that such an education empowers students to critically analyze complex issues and responsibly participate in their communities (Hanson, 2014). By encouraging students to develop a deep understanding of societal challenges, a liberal education equips them with the skills necessary to contribute meaningfully to society and effect positive change.

Moreover, a liberal education prepares students for the demands of the rapidly evolving job market. Employers increasingly seek individuals who possess not only specialized knowledge but also a broad skill set. A liberal education provides students with a solid foundation in various disciplines, enabling them to adapt to new industries and navigate complex professional environments.

To sum up, the discourse surrounding the benefits of a liberal education for Vietnamese students is supported by research and expert opinions. Such an education cultivates transferable cognitive skills, cultural awareness, and engaged citizenship. It equips students with the tools they need to thrive in the 21st century by fostering critical thinking, problem-solving abilities, creativity, adaptability, and a strong sense of social responsibility.

Challenges in Implementing Liberal Education

Nevertheless, the data also reveals significant obstacles within Vietnam's sociocultural context that hinder the implementation of liberal education. Experts point out deep-rooted norms that prioritize exam results and rote learning, discouraging innovative teaching methods (Gribble, 2014; Huong, 2022). Additionally, bureaucratic inertia, limited resources and training for instructors, and a continued adherence to Confucian hierarchies create systemic barriers to adopting student-centered approaches (Harman & Nguyen Thi Viet Nga, 2010; Tran, 2013). Furthermore, resistance from parents, educators, and policymakers who have been socialized in Vietnam's exam-oriented traditions further hampers the progress of liberal education initiatives.

Need for Comprehensive Reform

The findings underscore the importance of a comprehensive overhaul in the education system. Supporters argue that it is imperative to make significant changes to the curriculum, assessments, accreditation, funding structures, and instructor training in order to overcome bureaucratic and sociocultural barriers (Thomas 2018; Zakaria, 2015). To drive these reforms, government investment, public-private partnerships, community advocacy, awareness campaigns, and the establishment of new standards and incentives can be utilized (Hanson, 2014; Valley & Wilkinson, 2008). Above all, the findings emphasize the necessity of political commitment and coordinated effort to fundamentally transform education with a focus on liberal learning objectives.

In conclusion, the data provides evidence that confirms the potential benefits of liberal education in Vietnam, as well as the significant barriers that prevent its widespread adoption. In order to ensure that all students have access to liberal education throughout the country, it will be essential to address these challenges through comprehensive and systemic reforms. The findings unequivocally demonstrate the urgent need for proactive measures to align the education system with Vietnam's ever-changing economic and social environment.

DISCUSSION

The research findings confirm the claims made by advocates about the advantages of a comprehensive education in fostering both cognitive and non-cognitive skills that are essential for Vietnam's rapidly evolving economy and society (Fox, 2021; Thomas, 2018). However, there are significant barriers to implementing a holistic education system on a large scale, primarily due to deeply ingrained systemic obstacles rooted in Vietnam's Confucian heritage (Gribble, 2014; Huong, 2022).

Although the government has recently demonstrated a commitment to encouraging critical thinking and student-centered teaching methods, the extensive implementation of liberal education practices is impeded by deep-rooted sociocultural traditions and a shortage of instructor training (Harman & Nguyen Thi Viet Nga, 2010; Vally & Wilkinson, 2008). Accordingly, despite efforts to promote progressive education approaches, there are still significant barriers preventing their widespread adoption. These obstacles include long-standing sociocultural norms that prioritize traditional teaching methods and a lack of sufficient training for educators. The government's policies may be supportive of critical thinking and student-centered learning, but without addressing these underlying issues, the full implementation of liberal education practices remains challenging. In order for these approaches to be effectively integrated into the education system, it is crucial to address the sociocultural barriers and provide comprehensive training for instructors.

A comprehensive approach to reform is necessary, which involves partnerships between the public and private sectors, community advocacy, updated standards and funding structures, awareness campaigns, and thorough training programs for instructors (Hanson, 2014; Zakaria, 2015). Instead of seeking quick solutions, the promotion of liberal education requires questioning assumptions and making significant changes to various aspects of the education system, including curriculum design, assessments, accreditation requirements, and teaching practices (Hayden & Lam, 2010). Vietnam's willingness to implement Doi Moi market liberalization reforms demonstrates its ability to enact challenging yet transformative policy changes in education and other sectors (Bodewig & Badiani-Magnusson, 2014). The determination to disrupt the existing state of affairs and align education with the ongoing national development is present, but it needs to be directed towards action.

CONCLUSIONS

As Vietnam experiences ongoing economic expansion and integration into the international arena, there is a pressing need to revamp the education system in order to align with the requirements of a modern, knowledge-driven economy. The conventional focus on examinations and memorization, which has been heavily influenced by Confucian values, has led to the production of graduates who excel in rote learning but lack essential traits such as critical thinking, adaptability, and versatile skills that are crucial for the country's progress in the 21st century.

A liberal education offers a promising alternative method for preparing the youth of Vietnam with the necessary cognitive and non-cognitive skills to succeed in a society that is becoming more complex and interconnected. Through fostering intellectual curiosity, cultural awareness, critical thinking, and interdisciplinary knowledge, liberal learning aims to develop engaged citizens who are fully equipped to contribute their abilities. This approach is better suited for equipping graduates to tackle the diverse challenges and opportunities present in today's modern marketplace. By embracing a liberal education, young people in Vietnam can acquire the tools they need to thrive in an ever-changing world.

However, the adoption of a liberal education system in Vietnam faces significant challenges due to deeply rooted systemic barriers within the country's sociocultural context. These hurdles, which include bureaucratic inertia and a persistent adherence to hierarchical structures and conformity, underscore the necessity for a fundamental reconfiguration of norms and educational frameworks. To accomplish this, it will be imperative to have strong leadership, substantial investments, and collaborative endeavors from both the public and private sectors. Such a comprehensive approach is essential to overcome these obstacles and bring about meaningful reform in the education sector.

Vietnam has a history of implementing extensive reforms when there is political determination, as demonstrated by the Doi Moi policy. This offers a hopeful chance to initiate a transformation in the field of education. However, it is vital for leaders to acknowledge the need for change. Through a complete overhaul of curricula, assessments, accreditation processes, funding structures, and instructor training, Vietnam can dismantle deeply ingrained obstacles and embrace progressive educational models. While this process will

undoubtedly encounter resistance, the advantages of equipping young individuals to contribute to national development far outweigh the challenges. If Vietnam aspires to maintain economic growth and social progress, it is imperative to seize this opportunity and fundamentally reshape the education system.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to all the researchers whose high-quality empirical studies made this analysis possible.

DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

The author has no conflicts of interest to disclose. This research did not receive any specific funding or grants, and the author declares no financial interests in relation to this work.

REFERENCES

- Bodewig, C., & Badiani-Magnusson, R. (2014). *Skilling up Vietnam: Preparing the workforce for a modern market economy*. World Bank Publications.
- Fox, C. (2021). Holistic education—Preparing students to make a positive difference. *Liberal Education Vietnam*. <https://levietnam.org/2021/09/20/holistic-education-preparing-students-to-make-a-positive-difference/>
- Gribble, C. (2014). Employment, education and immigration in Vietnam. *Monthly Labor Review*, 8(9). U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. <https://doi.org/10.21916/mlr.2014.32>
- Hanson, E. C. (2014). A liberal education in Vietnam: Pursuing excellence, embracing diversity. *Project Muse*, 7(1), 5-13. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/538631>
- Harman, G., & Nguyen Thi Viet Nga. (2010). Reforming higher education in Vietnam: Challenges and priorities. In G. Harman, M. Hayden & T. N. Pham (Eds.), *Reforming higher education in Vietnam* (pp. 1-13). Springer.
- Hayden, M., & Lam, Q. T. (2010). Vietnam's higher education system. In G. Harman, M. Hayden & T. N. Pham (Eds.), *Reforming higher education in Vietnam* (pp. 14-30). Springer.
- Huong, L. T. (2022). Challenges of implementing learner-centered pedagogy in Vietnam: A review of the literature. *Annual Review of Education, Communication, and Language Sciences*, 19(1), 301–316.
- Nussbaum, M. C. (1997). *Cultivating humanity: A classical defense of reform in liberal education*. Harvard University Press.
- Thomas, M. (2018, September 10). Why Vietnam needs to embrace liberal arts education. *University World News*. <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20180910130628370>
- Tran, T. T. (2013). Limitation on the development of skills in higher education in Vietnam. *Higher Education*, 65(5), 631-644.
- Vallely, T. J., & Wilkinson, B. (2008). *Vietnamese higher education: Crisis and response*. Harvard Kennedy School Ash Institute for Democratic Governance and Innovation.
- World Bank. (2022). *The World Bank in Vietnam: Overview*. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/vietnam/overview#1>
- Zakaria, F. (2015). *In defense of a liberal education*. W. W. Norton & Company.