

RISING DEMAND FROM SOUTHEAST ASIAN PROFESSIONALS FOR TERTIARY EXECUTIVE EDUCATION PROGRAMMES: WHEN QUALITY MATTERS

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The international context

Tertiary education (including higher and further education) has changed tremendously in the last 20 years. Increasing needs of global economies for flexibility, cognitive skills, professional behaviour and new competencies, coupled with the emergence of the so-called "knowledge-economy" have radically altered the educational context over the last two decades. Alongside the need for Doctorates and Post-doctoral qualifications, Masters Degrees, Executive Education, Diplomas and Certificates are gaining in popularity throughout the world as the "labour force needs to be continuously updated and remain relevant to the demands of the new world-of-work" (Kenny, 2009). At the same time, many countries have democratised access to higher education (HE). Today, in countries like Finland, the US, the UK and others, gross enrolment rates (GER) in higher education are as high as 80% to 90%. This "massification" is putting pressure on the quality of services delivered by higher education institutions, including Executive Education programmes.

Another clear trend we are witnessing today is the "commodification" of tertiary education. International agreements, like the General Agreement on Trade and Services of the World Trade Organisation, mean that tertiary education has today become the first segment of education systems to be subject to internationalisation and "marketisation". Several countries have taken advantage of this trend as a means to cope with ever-increasing HE enrolment figures and to provide extensive and diversified lifelong learning services.

Innovation plays a crucial role in the current global economy, while high technological turnover has important impacts on productivity and the development of human resources. As a result, changes in the global economy are transforming the skills needed to match the development objectives of emerging countries. This, coupled with the growing importance of the role of "knowledge", would seem to hail an all-new context for education and training. These changes mean that there is growing pressure to adapt skills-training and education to respond to market forces. Developing emerging countries, especially those with high levels of economic growth, are having to rise to the challenge of globalisation and invest considerable resources in networking and learning in order to "arrange production to achieve quality, productivity and flexibility" (Haddad, 1997). Given this context, today the role of education is not only to

provide the necessary skills and knowledge, but also to constantly update them through, among others, the provision of diverse executive education systems.

Rising demand in Southeast Asia

In the emerging countries of Southeast Asia,¹ the GER has not yet reached international levels. Countries like Vietnam, Thailand and China have much lower enrolment rates – between 15% and 50%, in comparison to industrialised countries. In Vietnam, for example, despite massive investment in education and human resources development (the educational share of the national budget increased from 9.3% in 1992 to 18% in 2005) the needs in terms of human resource remain immense. These challenges become particularly important for countries moving away from their comparative economic advantage based on cheap labor towards a more value-added economic model.

In a context of globalization, the development and quality of human resources become even more important factors in the economic growth of countries, along with industrialisation and new challenges such as climate change mitigation and sustainable development. China and Vietnam are currently developing “World-Class Universities”,² not only to achieve the educational objectives required by their development processes, but also, in the near future, in order to achieve international standards of quality in both graduate and executive education-like training.

Thus, educational demand in Southeast Asia seems to be increasingly for higher education-type training programmes and executive education products; there are several successful projects in this area (MBAs, Executive Masters, etc.). For example, for almost nine years, the Graduate Institute has successfully managed a partially-decentralised International Executive Master (IMAS) in the region. However, at the same time, traditional professional and vocational education and training seem to be struggling to keep pace with market needs. Despite some changes (“privatisation” of vocational centres, stimulation of intermediate professional levels), vocational and professional training remain unattractive to investors and households. As a result, since 2004, some major private enterprises, such as Intel, have created and invested in their own training activities in the region.

Alongside this lack of interest in non-tertiary education and professional training, several educational systems have been liberalised through national reform policies and international agreements like the GATS. This is the case for example in Vietnam, Thailand, China, Indonesia and some other Asian countries, all of whom have signed up to the GATS in recent years. Consequently, the last two decades

¹ By Southeast Asian countries is meant members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and China.

² For example, Vietnam plans to invest US\$ 100 million (with the support of international donors) in the launch of its “World-Class Universities” project.

have witnessed the emergence of a robust market for executive education programmes. Thus, as the idea of continuing education emerges as a key concept in Southeast Asia, not only have local institutions started to develop their own executive activities, but international institutions too have begun to launch programmes to meet the growing demand for executive education. Short training courses, Summer Schools, Diplomas, Executive Masters and even Professional Doctorates are now emerging in various fields and gaining in popularity. Today, the context is very active, changing and competitive. This explains why some programmes of the Graduate Institute, such as the Summer Programmes on International Affairs and International Trade, and some of the Executive Masters, such as the IMAS and the Executive Master in International Negotiation and Policy-Making based in Geneva, have witnessed a sharp increase in the number of students from Southeast Asia.

The question of quality

The issue of quality remains a major challenge today. Quality standards vary tremendously within and across Southeast Asian countries. Several governments have initiated ambitious programmes to respond to demands for quality. Gradually, countries in the region are beginning to adopt international standards in that field: quality assurance and accreditation procedures are now the subject of regional discussions. In August 2009, for example, the South Asian Ministers' of Education Organisation (SEAMEO) annual conference addressed the questions of quality, branding and international collaboration in education and training, thereby demonstrating the increasing importance which these issues have assumed over the last few years. Other topics which are increasingly discussed include procedures and instruments as well as recognition of foreign diplomas and degrees. This is particularly important as students and teachers become increasingly mobile; for example, more than 1 million Asian students³ were studying abroad in 2006 compared to 536,000 in 1999.

Obviously, quality of education remains difficult to measure; however, Southeast Asian policy-makers are devoting increasing attention to outputs (student performance) and outcomes (level of graduate employability). The need to cope with international challenges and stimulate economic integration, means that public education systems are coming under increasing pressure to achieve quality standards. As a result, and in an effort to maximise use of financial resources to support educational development, many countries have begun to consider privatisation as a means to achieve educational development objectives, primarily in tertiary education. This approach has provided a boost to executive education programmes managed as joint-ventures by local and international institutions.

³ The majority of these students hail from China, Malaysia, Vietnam and Thailand. The main destination countries are the US, the UK and Australia. For details, see Institute for Statistics UNESCO website at: <http://www.uis.unesco.org>.

In a context where professional skills still fall short and needs in terms of qualifications are enormous, there is room for innovative executive education products in a region which is striving for educational quality.

For more information on Executive Education at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, please visit <http://graduateinstitute.ch/executive>

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