Learning Resource Centres in Vietnamese Cities and Regions

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Summary

From a background disadvantaged by war and poverty, Vietnam is making a concerted effort to create a more advanced information society through communications and information technology, a nascent software development industry, and a major effort in training professional staff in information literacy and modern management. Pressed by impossibly high demand for places and poor resources, the universities are potentially a weak link in this national development strategy. While there is long-standing reverence for scholarship in Vietnam and extraordinary social and family commitment to education even by east Asian standards, universities in Vietnam have been struggling to meet the needs of a fast-changing society and economy. As with other sectors, a major reform effort in tertiary education and research is under way. Lack of access to information resources in Vietnam's universities at anything approaching international standards is a key bottleneck to university development and any transformation of teaching and learning.

A program to assist the universities one by one to develop learning resource centres seeks to remedy this problem. Led by host universities and RMIT International University Vietnam, a number of LRCs are being developed in Ho Chi Minh City, Danang, Hue, Can Tho and potentially in Hanoi, Thai Nguyen and other regions. These turnkey projects require planning, design, acquisition, procurement, commissioning and review. Training, professional development and scholarship schemes are central to each project.

Such centres in universities are most effective if they work as nodes on wider networks, and so a collaborative effort is under way to identify or devise national information systems and standards, libraries policy, consortial procurement and acquisitions, and to assist university planning more broadly. With the strong support of the Ministry of Education and Training and other ministries, major stakeholders such as the World Bank, and generous philanthropic backing, this program offers an exciting opportunity for universities in Vietnam to leapfrog over the typical information resource constraints that hold back national capacity for scholarship elsewhere.

Key words: information resources, Vietnam, universities

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Introduction

Purpose

Learning resource centres (LRCs) combine the functions of traditional library, electronic library, learning platform, seminar and meeting room, study carrel / hot desk, publication, exhibition and learning services centre. They are places of access to print and electronic information, learning opportunities on-line and by other mode, research and training. An LRC is thus more than an electronic library but less than a full learning centre, which would include a full range of student and client services[1].

RMIT International University Vietnam, the first of the international universities to establish in Vietnam, is working with other universities to develop a linked network of LRCs. The learning resource centres are located within the national and regional public universities of Vietnam, serving the economic, social and cultural needs of their respective cities and regions. The purpose of this paper is to explore the potential of LRCs in Vietnam, in their universities and as an emerging network to create and support learning cities and regions in Vietnam as defined by the OECD[2].

Background

Vietnam's development depends critically on a world-class higher education and university system. This is recognised by the government of Vietnam in its priorities and by the people of Vietnam in their extraordinary commitment to education and reverence for scholarship. The higher education system has a long history and is undertaking reform as quickly as resources and politics permit[3]. The government has recognised the fundamental role of information technology and resource-based learning in the transformation ahead. It has indicated its intention to have the universities of

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[1] An example of the latter are the Student Hubs at RMIT campuses in Melbourne, one-stop places for all student and client services.

[2] For a full discussion of learning cities and regions see Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development: *Cities and Regions in the New Learning Economy*, OECD, Paris, 2001. See also Dean Forbes; 'The urban network and economic reform in Vietnam' *Environment and Planning A*, 27, 5, May 2001: 793.

[3] See Pham Minh Hac: 'The educational system of Vietnam'' in David Sloper and Le Thac Can (eds): *Higher Education in Vietnam: Change and Response*, Institute for Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, 1995: 41-61, Nguyen Xuan Thu 'Education in Vietnam: an overview' in Nguyen Xuan Thu (ed): *Vietnamese Studies in a Multicultural World*, Vietnamese Language and Culture Publications, Melbourne, 1994: 230-252, Nguyen Van Dao: 'Higher education: a pivotal lever for socio-economic development in developing countries in the 21st century' *Conference Proceedings Higher Education in the 21st Century: Mission and Challenge in Developing Countries*, RMIT and Vietnam National University Hanoi, Hanoi, 1996: 1-24, and Kristy Kelly: *Higher Education in Vietnam: Prospects for US Universities*, Report Prepared for the Institute of International Education Biennial Seminar Series, Hanoi, May 2000..

Vietnam linked to each other and to the world through the internet, and to reform the higher education sector to modernise university management and teaching and learning methods.

Around the world the means of teaching and learning are in dramatic change, with higher education moving to focus on learners' needs and the resources for learning distributed electronically in unprecedented abundance. Vietnamese universities no less than others are seeking to open up these opportunities and reform teaching and learning methods.

However the resources to develop these new capabilities are not available. A World Bank lending program for institutional modernisation in higher education is under way along with a number of self-financed and donor-supported programs from the government of Vietnam. Rote learning remains the main mode of instruction in most universities and government oversight of curricula and university management have until recently tended to stifle innovation. Despite all this, Vietnam still produces world winners in mathematics and informatics competitions and leaders in other fields. But the country is finding it very difficult to catch up with its ASEAN neighbors in the technology race, let alone come to the forefront. It is held back by acute shortages of skilled professionals, poor learning resources and restrictions on electronic and other information access and circulation.

It would be a tragedy for the country's high commitment to learning, its continuing steps to open its economy to the world and its new-found desire to modernise university teaching and learning to be stopped through lack of educational resources and lack of know-how. One of the most effective means of enabling Vietnam to develop is to bring university programs into the international information age through developing places with high information intensity, good electronic platforms and the means to create, find and disseminate knowledge. A number of learning resource centres are being created in Vietnamese national and regional universities to meet these aims, led by the host universities, funded in part by Atlantic Philanthropies and project managed by RMIT, East Meets West and GHD.

The program offers a superb opportunity to assist the key universities in Vietnam to transform their teaching and learning, their research and development, and their outreach to the community. This is being pursued through collaborative design and construction of learning resource centres to serve university campuses, linked to distributed learning resources through common systems including an emerging shared internet backbone, enabled by necessary but modest national reforms in information, education and library policy, and in time reaching out to business and civil society partners in the surrounding cities and regions.

Issues of sustainability in terms of recurrent costs and the retention of skilled personnel are being addressed, as well as environmentally sustainable development. The transformation will be from the current situation of use of limited print resources in a closed library situation to active participation in teaching and learning through access to electronic resources. This will require significant changes to the expectations and skills of staff and users of the resource centres.

Adequate information resources are fundamental to the success of any university development program for Vietnam. As with other institutions in Vietnam, the current library systems are urgently seeking ways to raise their standards to those of systems in developed countries. The information and electronic infrastructure of each LRC will also need international standards of library management at the national level. Issues as basic as a consistent and shared classification system, common standards of cataloguing of materials and choice of multi-lingual management software are just some of the issues to be addressed at a national level to enable LRCs to meet their potential.

Objectives for Learning Resource Centres

Each LRC results from a joint feasibility study involving the university, RMIT Vietnam and in some cases East Meets West, a non-governmental organisation based in Danang. The feasibility study may then lead to the design of a 'turnkey' project for a building fully equipped and operating with trained staff, full acquisition of information resources, library management systems and a plan for sustainable continuing operations.

Objectives vary by centre, but may be to:

- improve student and staff access to information

- upgrade library and information resources, and library management systems

- create open working platforms for independent learning and research

- support regional engagement including extension of community linkages to help overcome the 'digital divide'

- provide training and capacity-building for the LRC, its users and stakeholders

- enhance inter-university, national and international collaboration

- ensure that each project results in a low energy, low cost, sustainable centre.

Typical LRC project tasks include project and building planning and design, documentation, building and fitout, human resource evaluation, recruitment, training & education, procurement of ICT equipment, acquisitions of library systems and information resources, commissioning and start-up, sustainable operation, post-occupancy evaluation and dissemination of the experience.

An LRC might therefore contain personal computer workstations, individual and group study spaces, discussion and collaborative work spaces, ICT training facilities, conference and seminar rooms, audiovisual viewing facilities, photocopying and printing, electronic and print information resources, internet access, personal computer applications and email, post-graduate and research collections, reference and information services. Each LRC varies.

Learning Resource Centres in their Cities and Regions

Ho Chi Minh City

Ho Chi Minh City region is the largest and richest in Vietnam, with the city holding the status of a province. With over 8 million people, it is the economic powerhouse of Vietnam and the location of the key manufacturing, finance and service sectors.

RMIT Vietnam is developing its own learning resource centres in Ho Chi Minh City. Under an investment licence issued in April 2000, RMIT International University Vietnam (RMIT Vietnam) has been operating independently in Ho Chi Minh City since January 2001 as well as collaborating with other universities in Vietnam. The key to the effectiveness of RMIT Vietnam will be the provision of education, training, community and regional partnerships and research and development programs through an advanced ICT platform and a distributed learning system. Students and clients are the managers of their own learning and work with and are assisted by learning facilitators. Learning is campus-based because the telecommunications infrastructure in Vietnam is not well developed – but improving rapidly – the provision of technological programs needs advanced facilities, and the face-to-face development of leadership and teamwork cannot be fully assured online. Nevertheless all courseware, most learning materials and a growing share of experiential learning will be electronically mediated.

To make an immediate start, RMIT Vietnam leased an inner city site with a French-style villa, classrooms, pool and recreation spaces, and opened its doors for English language learning,

masters and undergraduate programs. The city campus in District 3 already has 700 students and 90 staff and although expanding nearby is otherwise at capacity.

The focus of RMIT Vietnam's campuses in Ho Chi Minh City, physically and electronically, will be its LRCs. A centre with 60 work stations is in operation on the City campus, with a new IT centre housing 120 more work stations as part of a learning environment for computer science and related specialist programs.

In Saigon South, RMIT Vietnam has leased a 57 ha campus with capacity for over 10,000 students. This will be developed carefully in stages along with other possible sites. Planning for the first stage is built around a learning resource centre, an advanced distributed learning system and a set of research infrastructure.

Wherever they are located, students at RMIT Vietnam study the same academic award programs as in Australia and other countries, and they have virtually the same access to a large e-library, with some limits determined by the global licensing provisions of the information resource vendors. Having e-resources available through an LRC does not guarantee their effective use, and introductory and concurrent coaching programs (e.g. 'RMIT 101') assist students and clients take advantage of information resources.

Danang

Danang is the main services, port and transport hub for central Vietnam, with important tourism, textiles, ceramics and light manufacturing industries. Health and education are also important service sectors. The University of Danang is a multicampus university (like many, the result of institutional mergers in the 1990s) with colleges in technology, foreign languages, education, economics and a vocational school . An information resource centre was developed by the University of Danang and East Meets West with assistance from the University of Queensland (see figure 5). RMIT Training undertook a post-occupancy review including of the locally-developed Lac Viet library management system as installed.

For some time there has been a pressing need to provide the fast-growing College of Technology, within the University of Danang, with adequate information and learning resources, as well as the nearby College of Education. The college campus currently has a student body of about 10,000 of a total of 16,000 at the university. Given the University of Danang's experience with the first information resources centre downtown, another USD4m project is under way to develop a four-floor 5400m^2 centre 9 km from central Danang (see figure 6). To

be completed in December 2003, this LRC will be networked with other campuses, sharing resources and links to national networks. The project, led by the University of Danang through RMIT Vietnam and the East Meets West Center, uses GHD Pty Ltd as project managers and collaborates closely with Vietnamese government and other stakeholders. The University of Queensland is developing an English language institute in Danang which will assist build LRC capacity.

The centre's continuing operations would be financially and ecologically sustainable. The LRC will be a site from which other parts of the University of Danang and other universities in Vietnam could learn, including through online and mixed-mode delivery of graduate upgrade programs in teaching and learning with technology and in educational leadership and management. It will be a site for developing information programs particularly in science and technology and modern teaching and learning, applied to the particular needs and opportunities of central Vietnam. It will extend opportunities for flexible learning in the online environment and cater to a range of different working and learning styles, particularly areas of science and technology, education and training appropriate to Central Vietnam: e.g. environment, water, health, ICT, transport, energy, tourism and urban and regional infrastructure.

Hue

Hue is also in the central region of Vietnam. This ancient cultural capital is still regarded as the cultural heartland of Vietnam. Much of it is classified as a World Heritage site (e.g. see figure 7). . With superb historic properties and resources, the region is seeking to capitalise on the development of the knowledge economy, cultural tourism and conventions. Central Vietnam also includes minorities and rural communities living in poverty and is a focus for development assistance programs and philanthropic support.

Hue University is the second public university, established in South Vietnam in 1957, originally with seven faculties: science, law, education, medicine, social sciences, fine art and music. At unification in 1975, a number of single discipline universities and colleges were formed. In 1994, with the restructuring of the higher education system in Vietnam, many of these universities and colleges were re-amalgamated, with colleges of natural science, social science, agriculture, music and performing arts, education and economics. A 1997 agreement between RMIT and Hue University pledges cooperation in training and research and a series of exchanges and scholarships. Now joint work on developing the LRC and extending academic cooperation are

realizing this potential. The site is adjacent to the famous Perfume River on the city's main street, and has required sensitive design.

The Hue LRC is being developed by a multi-disciplinary project team led by RMIT Vietnam consisting of a project manager, library/resource center specialist, architect/designer, information technology specialist, and others. Project Cost is $USD 5.4 million, and is expected to be complete by April 2003. With 7000 m^2 over four floors, the LRC will house 150 personal computer workstations (scaling up to 450 PCs), 350 individual study places, 110 group discussion places, 200 places in seminar rooms, 20,000 reference volumes, 75,000 monograph and reserve volumes, 50,000 periodical volumes and 7000 audiovisual items.

The project steering committee comprises the host university, the provincial people's committee and the donor, East Meets West and RMIT Vietnam. A reference group of international and Vietnamese experts is available to call on as necessary. User-based design and documentation were developed and the building is now being constructed, fitted out, furnished and equipped. Hard-copy holdings and e-resources are being acquired, along with a library management system. The LRC will be made operational prior to handover. Based upon needs assessments and university strategies, a major training and staff development program is now under way. The center will be a site for developing information programs in particular areas including public health and medicine. The necessary developments in national policy needed to make the program possible, in areas such as internet access policy and library classification systems, were triggered by the Hue LRC project. Special emphasis is being given to the sustainability of the centre after handover and to its compatibility with the university's expansion options. RMIT academic programs may operate through the centre with the agreement and participation of Hue University, and joint programs of research in the water sector have already been started.

Can Tho

The city of Can Tho in the south of Vietnam is very different. With a population of 300,000, it is the provincial seat of Hau Giang province and centre of Vietnam's richest agricultural area. The city is surrounded by the lands and waters of the Mekong delta, with a high density of settlement and a regional economy based on a large inland port, service, food processing, transport and logistics that go with it. Industries include coconut-oil extraction and rice milling; fertilizer, plastic goods, building materials, and seafood products. In the region there are a number of poor communities, people from which are a focus for development assistance programs in health, education and training, water and other sectors.

Can Tho University, founded in 1976, is an amalgamation of colleges built around agriculture, forestry and fisheries, with three campuses in the city (see figure 10), 15,500 students on campus and 14,500 enrolled in extension programs through satellite training centres in the region. The university curriculum is now comprehensive, also covering sciences, veterinary medicine, engineering, information technology and electronics, education, economics and business administration, medicine, dentistry, pharmacy and law.

Satellite programs in the region offer undergraduate courses and vocational training in teaching and business administration. The university is growing rapidly and has been able to attract funding for new campus development.

Consequently the proposed new LRC is part of a comprehensive campus development plan, more truly a learning hub than the other LRCs. Costing over USD 7m, it will be about 10,000m². The LRC is a potential vehicle for regional university extension, including several development projects, as it has a relatively well developed library system and a network of library branches. It is expected to be complete by February 2004.

Thai Nguyen

Thai Nguyen University is currently preparing for a feasibility study for a possible LRC. The university serves the development needs for the northern mountainous area (NMA), an economically undeveloped group of 16 provinces between Hanoi and China and comprising a wide variety of ethnic minorities including indigenous minorities. Iron ore deposits are located in the region and an iron and steel industry has been established. Population is approximately 180,000. Thai Nguyen is one of three regional universities recognised in Vietnam, with a vision to contribute to the sustainable development of the NMA and the industrialisation and modernisation of the country. Its mission is to provide higher education in scientific and technological areas, conduct scientific research and generate innovation and technology suitable for the NMA, participate in transfer and extension of socio-economic development of the NMA, and generate, store and provide information for development and management. The university enrols 30,000 students in medical, education, industrial engineering, agriculture, fisheries and vocational colleges.

A university campus development plan consolidates separate campuses into one, permitting a possible LRC to serve as the hub of the newly-developed university. The LRC feasibility study will examine distributed learning and information resources in this regional context, so as to enable the university effectively to engage with its dispersed regional constituents, deep-seated poverty, and aspirations to provide modern learning infrastructure and generate research results. It is expected the study will be completed early in 2002.

Hanoi

The capital city of Hanoi has in effect a number of LRCs already. The World Bank sponsored Vietnam Development Information Centre (VDIC) has excellent communications capacity and serves as a learning centre for development training and education, contributing to Hanoi as a learning region[4]. The key libraries of Vietnam are in Hanoi, particularly the National Library, the

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[4] See Christopher Shaw: 'E-learning in higher education: possibilities for Vietnam' Paper presented to *Videoconference On Connectivity, Knowledge and Tertiary Education*, World Bank, Hanoi, August 2001.

National Centre for Scientific and Technological Information and Documentation (NACESTID) and the libraries of Vietnam National University Hanoi (VNU Hanoi). This university is the pre-eminent university of Vietnam, highly autonomous, multi-campus as the result of mergers, and large, with 40,000 students and 2,300 staff. VNU Hanoi is RMIT's long-standing partner for a joint masters program in engineering and development of a joint building on the main campus. VNU Hanoi has five campuses (Cau Giay, Thuong Dinh , Le Thanh Tong, Me Tri, and Hoa Lac, the latter a new campus of 1000 ha to the west of Hanoi). VNU Hanoi's strategic mission is for the national development and international linkages for Vietnam; less so regional development of the Hanoi area. However, as the hub for many national ICT, teaching and learning and research centres, the university inevitably plays a key role in the development of Hanoi region as a learning region. Its potential role in the national LRC network is therefore pivotal even though, unlike other public universities, it is not part of the Ministry of Education and Training.

Towards a Network of LRCs

National systems and standards

As the result of developing LRCs in universities in Vietnam, the need for consistent national standards for electronic management and educational resources became sharply apparent[5]. The Ministry of Education and Training was also grappling with these issues as they came to implement programs for the development of the tertiary sector with the assistance of the World Bank loan program. Under the LRC program key policy makers and stakeholders in Vietnam have been brought together on different occasions in Vietnam and overseas, alongside international experts willing to make a contribution, to identify technical library management system issues requiring national or collaborative resolution, and to promote appropriate policies helpful to the development of interactive libraries and learning resource centers throughout Vietnam, particularly in the university sector.

Efficient and effective library software systems, reliable internet connectivity, low-cost access to national and global information resources, and dedication of information resources to the learning

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[5] See Michael Robinson and Robert D Stueart (eds) *Systems and Standards for Libraries in Vietnam: Proceedings and Outcomes of a Workshop* RMIT International University Vietnam, Melbourne, 2001. This section reflects on an introduction by David Wilmoth 'University learning resource centers in Vietnam: collaboration for sustainability', Paper presented to RMIT International University Vietnam National Library Systems Workshop, Hanoi, Vietnam, 24-27 September 2001.

and research clients of the country are all critical to meeting international standards in library management across Vietnam. Issues as basic as a consistent and shared classification system, readability of Vietnamese fonts, common standards of cataloguing of materials, choice of multi-lingual search engines and collaborative e-subscriptions and collection development are being addressed.

The emerging LRC network

A national discussion was also held on what are the likely nodes and what should be the network[6]. For e-learning, NACESTID, the National Library of Vietnam, VDIC, VNU Hanoi, VNU Ho Chi Minh City, University of Danang, Hue University, Thai Nguyen University, Can Tho University, RMIT Vietnam and others in Vietnam could provide centres and connect, interact and share information resources, accessing information and programs on-line from around the world and contributing to it.

The future state of the internet in Vietnam (technically and price-wise), university connectivity and firewall restrictions are all important issues, and part determinants of what ICT standards and infrastructure should go into any LRC. In an ideal world, updated decisions about national systems and standards should precede local procurement, but that is not possible. A national framework of standards (e.g. catalog and classification systems, search engines, acquisitions, publishing, lending and sharing, LRC administration, communication/ internet) is evolving partly as a result of regional LRC decisions.

Economies of scale

A related set of issues is the extent of economies of scale in the procurement, management and distribution of information resources in Vietnam. The costs of licenses for hard copy and electronic materials, and their on-going maintenance, are high. Integrated library management systems are very expensive. There is merit in consortial buying, through voluntary associations of libraries and institutions or via the government. Vietnam has good standing in the international development community and it is possible to negotiate concessional prices alone or with the support of multilateral agencies in the field like UNESCO or the World Bank. With the recent US Trade Agreement and possible accession to the WTO, Vietnam is in a position to drive good bargains, in exchange, say, for a stronger compliance regime for protection of intellectual property rights.

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[6] Christopher Shaw: E-learning in Higher Education: Possibilities for Vietnam: *Presentation to Videoconference on Connectivity, Knowledge and Tertiary Education*, VDIC 15 August 2001.

Sustainability of LRCs

Many issues of collective action or government policy come together when the sustainability of LRCs is concerned. They take three dimensions. Ecological sustainability speaks for buildings and infrastructure that conserve materials and energy, particularly through limited or no air conditioning, natural light and ventilation, and recyclable materials. This depends more on local practice than national systems and standards.

The social sustainability of LRCs is particularly linked to their contribution to reducing or preventing a 'digital divide' in Vietnam, ensuring wide access to information resources and popular capacity to take advantage of them through the channels identified by the OECD. While assisted by national policy, this dimension is more a local and regional issue than a national one.

The financial sustainability of LRCs in universities is a major challenge. As indicated the continuing costs of licenses and subscriptions, not to mention salaries and power, can hold such centres back from their potential and discourage initial donor or government support with fears of continuing burdens. Good planning can help, but business plans for the use of LRCs for fee-paying on-line learning, and other revenue-raising activities, provided they do not detract from other objectives, can be supported by national agencies.

Conclusions

Principles for creating learning cities and regions

Although it is early days for the LRC program, it not too early to assess the aims of LRCs against the OECD policy principles for creating learning cities and regions, which are quoted in italics.

1. *Ensure that high-quality and well-resourced educational provision is in place, on which effective individual learning throughout people's lives can be developed.*

2. *Co-ordinate carefully the supply of skilled and knowledgeable individuals through education and training and the demand for them within the regional economy, so that the full benefits of individual learning may be reaped through its effects on organizational learning*

These are perhaps the key aims of the LRC program. The OECD research demonstrated the importance of good general education to upper secondary level, and university research for regional spin-offs. World Bank research into rates of return to education in Vietnam shows that

private rates of return from higher education average 11 percent, comparable to returns from primary education but by contrast with OECD findings well above secondary and vocational levels at 4-5 percent. Social rates of return are, by contrast, relatively low for higher education in Vietnam, at 3 percent with all costs included, suggesting opportunities for private higher education to contribute to national economic efficiency.[7]

In a large and dramatically under-resourced sector, the LRCs will be able to make only a small direct contribution to educational outcomes in their respective regions, but the demonstration effect, and the organisational changes enabled by the LRCs, may well be more significant than their direct effects. This leads to the third OECD principle.

3. *Establish appropriate framework conditions for the improvement of organisational learning, both within firms and between firms and other organisations in networks of interaction, and demonstrate to firms the benefits of these forms of learning.*

The LRCs are likely to make a major impact on the organisational learning of their host universities. First, organisation development, staff development and recruiting are part of LRC planning, as the LRC management methods, and optimal use of facilities, require practices more in line with open international standards. Second, the major training components of each expose key people, from university leaders to junior operative staff, to modern information resource practices. Third, the world of open information that the LRCs bring, if well used, will have a profound effect on hitherto relatively closed universities. This effect cannot easily be predicted and indeed in some respects the LRC program is a 'supply-led experiment' in education and training reform. Organisational learning here is mainly within the host universities – the organisational learning effect on linked firms and institutions in regions, including the emerging high-tech sector, is likely to be minor for a long time, given the relative impermeability of university boundaries and resource-determined limitations of access to LRCs to university staff and students only.

4. *Facilitate effective organisational learning not simply for a pre-selected set of conventionally defined 'high-tech' sectors, but across all those industries and services within the regional economy that have the potential to develop high levels of innovative capacity.*

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[7] Peter R Moock et al: 'Education and earnings in a transition economy: the case of Vietnam', Background paper for the World Bank Vietnam Education Financing Sector Study, World Bank, Washington DC, January 1998. See also World Bank: *Vietnam Education Financing Sector Study: A Sector Report*, World Bank, Washington DC, October 1996.

Given the mission of the universities, particularly the regional universities, to support the economic development of their regions, the flow-on in organisational learning is likely to be with the currently dominant industries of each region.

5. *Identify very carefully the extent to which the resources currently available to the region constitute an impediment to economic development or may usefully contribute in developing innovative strategies for the future.*

This regional analysis has not been done for the LRC program and would be most instructive, and possibly important, to undertake. It would appear as if the delta region served by Can Tho and the northern mountainous area served by Thai Nguyen would constitute positive opportunities as both universities are committed to identifying points of leverage for more advanced industry development, in the latter's case in an ethnically very diverse region with related political constraints that could perhaps constitute a 'locking in' constraint on regional learning[8].

6. *Respond positively to emergent economic and social conditions, especially where this involves the 'unlearning' of inappropriate practices and bodies of knowledge left over from the regional institutions of previous eras.*

Within host universities, enthusiastic 'unlearning' is well under way, with respect to hierarchical decision making, rote learning, internet firewalls, limits on access to information and norms of academic practice. How economic and social conditions will change in each region is difficult to predict, but rapid economic development and take-up of opportunities in the knowledge economy will be assisted by the LRCs if they remain open to the private sector and civil society as they emerge.

7. *Pay close attention to mechanisms for co-ordinating policies across what have generally been separate departmental responsibilities and between different levels of governance.*

This advice certainly applies to LRCs, less to the intra-regional scale than to coordination within the national level of government – see the discussion of national systems and standards above – and the intergovernmental level (albeit within a unitary state) between regional aspirations and national ministry priority-setting.

8. *Develop strategies to foster appropriate forms of social capital as a key mechanism in promoting more effective organisational learning and innovation.*

These are at present only secondary aims of the LRC program, likely to come to the fore at later stages. The program is supported by major scholarship programs, not all targeted at LRC staff and immediate users, but at the longer-term development of users from civil society and groups currently disadvantaged particularly through poverty and lack of English language capacity.

9. *Evaluate continuously the relationships between participation in individual learning, innovation and wider labour market changes, especially with respect to the social exclusion of groups within the regional population*

This is good advice that the program may be able to implement at a further stage but is not able to do so now. The effectiveness of each LRC is reviewed after occupancy and at other stages, including its effects on learning and research infrastructure, but the wider regional relationships depend on the particular means of regional engagement that the host universities undertake more than the actions of the foreign project team.

10. *Ensure that the regional strategy for learning and innovation is accorded legitimacy by the population of the region to be transformed.*

The conventional view of overall gains accruing to society from public funding for the expansion of higher education, as distinct from the positional gains of participants, is coming under question[9]. However the regional role of universities in Vietnam is developing, with many externalities accumulating into significant net positive social benefit.

It is to be hoped that the learning resource centres can play a key role in that, and, if planned such role is more likely.

Reflections

Some of the intangible benefits accruing to Vietnam are in the design and delivery of foreign participation in the services sector, intellectual property, software licence integrity, service agreements for offshore procurement, the mobilisation of academic and consultant teams for philanthropic purposes and assistance to regulatory agencies to manage a more sophisticated services economy.

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[8] For a statement of such objectives see Communist Party of Vietnam: Politburo Decision on Guidelines and Main Policies for Economic and Social Development in the Mountain Area, Hanoi, 27 November 1989.

[9] E.g. see Alison Wolf: *Does Education Matter Myths about Education and Economic Growth*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 2002.

Social factors such as resettlement are an important part of the LRC program.[10] If access to the network of LRCs is to be more affordable to students from poorer, remote, indigenous or otherwise disadvantaged backgrounds, further work will be needed to devise electronic or face-to-face extension services.   Can Tho University and Thai Nguyen University, with their experience at agriculture and forestry extension, are well-placed to use their LRCs for regional social development.

RMIT Vietnam seeks to work with donor groups, NGOs and other universities in Vietnam in an effort to open up opportunities into the tertiary education sector, including through the network of learning resource centers, and to extend its education, training, research and community partnership programs to other cities and regions.

In short, the network of learning resource centres currently under development in Vietnam is a radical attempt to open up learning resources to cities and regions of Vietnam for and through the public universities. The program is in its early days yet and is still evolving, a long way short of reaching the performance standards set out by the OECD.

In many ways this is a supply-side experiment in opening information resource doors previously shut, in advance of host universities being fully ready with modernised curricula and reformed organisational structures. But provided the initiatives come from the host universities, or better still from their cities or regions, such unbalanced growth is no bad thing. The universities are becoming better placed as the transmission media for opening up modern information resources, and hence resource-based learning and research, to their cities and regions.   Social and economic development best occurs in learning cities and regions supplied with rich information resources.

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[10] See e.g. Asian Development Bank: *Handbook for Incorporation of Social Dimensions in Projects*, ADB, Manila, 1994, *The Banks' Policy of Gender and Development*, ADB, Manila, May 1998 and *Fighting Poverty in Asia and the Pacific: the Poverty Reduction Strategy*, ADB, Manila, 1999.

Attachment: Learning Resource Centre Partners in Vietnam

Atlantic Philanthropies

East Meets West Foundation

GHD Pty Ltd

Ministry of Culture and Information

Ministry of Education and Training

Ministry of Planning and Investment

Ministry of Science and Technology

National Centre for Science & Technology Information and Documentation

National Library of Vietnam

OCLC Forest Press

Participating universities RMIT International University Vietnam

Simmons College Boston

The World Bank

University of Queensland US Library of Congress