

Embedded Accountabilities: The Politics of Learning in Vietnam

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About this country brief

The RISE Programme is a seven-year research effort that seeks to understand what features make education systems coherent and effective in their context and how the complex dynamics within a system allow policies to be successful. RISE had research teams in seven countries: Ethiopia, India, Indonesia, Nigeria, Pakistan, Tanzania, and Vietnam. It also commissioned research by education specialists in Chile, Egypt, Kenya, Peru, and South Africa.

Those researchers tested ideas about how the determinants of learning lie more in the realm of politics and particularly in the interests of elites. They focused on how the political conditions have (or have not) put learning at the center of education systems while understanding the challenges of doing so.

Each country team produced a detailed study pursuing answers to two central research questions:

- Did the country prioritize learning over access, and if so, during what periods?
- What role did politics play in the key decisions and how?

The full studies detail their analytical frameworks, their data, and sources (generally interviews, government internal documents and reports, and other local and international publications), and the power of their assessments, given their caveats and limitations. Country briefs extract from the full studies how leadership, governance, teaching, and societal engagement are pertinent to student outcomes.

Introduction

Strong performance on international learning assessments makes Vietnam a high-performing outlier relative to its national income. What accounts for these results? And what insights might an analysis of Vietnam's education system offer for improving education system performance around learning in other countries? Within Vietnam, many policymakers and citizens view the education system's achievements much more critically: as falling short of its desired functions. Analysis of Vietnam's education system find that its strengths and weaknesses lie in the politics of education and, more broadly, in the ways the country's education system is embedded in its broader social and institutional environment.

Vietnam's education system is embedded within the country's broader social and institutional environment. We can begin with the politics and the public governance of the education system. Here, we observe the Communist Party of Vietnam's (CPV's) political commitment to education—visible both at the level of elite politics *and* in the routine processes and compliance procedures of its sprawling Party state. Crucially, the CPV has prioritized education over several decades across all levels of public administration. Other distinctive features of Vietnam's education system's social embedding are seen in patterns of state and societal engagement that have evolved in the course of the country's transition to a more market-based but still socialist-oriented market economy. Two key elements include the complex mix of public and private payments for education and the country's surprisingly active education-specific public sphere. Taken together, features of Vietnam's politics and societal embeddedness mean the country's education system receives considerable attention to the daily affairs of the country and in the daily lives of citizens. These features have produced institutionalized levels of accountability to education policy goals that exceed that seen in other countries.

Education policy in Vietnam has been associated with state building, nation building, patriotism and, not least, the relentless emphasis on the Party's subjective legitimacy. Indeed, the education system is deeply embedded in the sprawling Party-state and is the CPV's central instrumental means for the production of its desired forms of consciousness, such as patriotism, reverence for the Party, and normative conformity. Most school principals and leading teachers in any school are members of the Party, as are leading figures in the education bureaucracy—from commune-level cadres responsible for social affairs up through the district-level bureaus of education, the province-level departments of education, up to the Ministry of Education in Hanoi. Party-led organizations extend throughout the education system, involving students in ideological training from kindergarten through to the PhD level and beyond.

Vietnam's comparatively superior performance on indicators of education and learning is impressive by many measures, but an exclusive focus on these risks distracting from problems in the country's education system that render it ineffectual or even counterproductive with respect to announced education sector goals, including the promotion of quality education for all and the system's performance with respect to learning. While the Party's education policies implicitly endorse expanding learning for all and even speak of a learning society, the functioning of the education system sometimes undermines these goals. Learning for tests is not learning for critical and independent thinking. Making access to education beyond a basic level excessively contingent on out-of-pocket payments harms learning for all, as well as equity and solidarity.

Many of the challenges Vietnam faces in efforts to improve its education system's performance around learning owe to features of the country's public governance. Specifically, Vietnam's highly decentralized system of public administration, while conferring certain advantages, has evolved in a way that lacks coherence and has contributed to a sense and a reality of policy fragmentation. There remains a weak link between the delegation of policy goals and the finance, information, support, and motivation needed to achieve them. In the meantime, societal buy-in in the Vietnam context, despite having certain benefits, has also contributed to the commodification and commercialization of education which contributes to unequal access to quality education.

Apparent superior performance

Political commitment

The Party has placed education at the center of its political agenda over the past three decades—and backed this commitment. The resources and energy the Party devotes to education have been substantial. And through its fiscal policies, the central state redistributed resources to poorer regions more than other developing countries have. This permitted rapid expansions in enrollment and in average years of schooling nationwide and narrowed gaps in enrollment across regions and between urban and rural zones.

Public and private spending

An additional indication of political commitment and a likely contributor to Vietnam's performance has been that, while private spending on education continues to grow, the Party has itself maintained high levels of public support for education, approaching 5.7 percent (in 2017) of an expanding GDP, compared with 3.6 for Indonesia (2015) and 2.6 for the Philippines (in 2012). Annually, education spending accounts (by formal requirement) for 20 percent of Vietnam's state budget. How much of this amount is actually spent—and how effectively—are often not revealed or made explicit even to high-ranking policy planners.

Economic growth boosted the resources available for public and private education. Vietnam's rapidly expanding economy and not the Party's position alone has permitted ever-increasing public and private spending on education. Economic incentives have played an important role in expanding opportunities in the world market and in local labor markets. Returns to investment in education and skilling have incentivized education spending by both government and households. The willingness of Vietnam's families to invest time and resources in their children's learning is considerable, and the fact that up to 40 percent of finance for *public* education is out of pocket has elevated public engagement in the education system.

Private tutoring

Extra study also appears indispensable in the final years of lower and upper secondary with significant household expenditures on extra classes geared toward exam preparation. Extra study is most widespread in the largest cities and urban areas, but is also common in towns and densely settled rural areas. Out-of-pocket payments are higher as students move into the lower and upper secondary levels. By all accounts, and despite measures to curtail its growth, the scale and scope of extra-study courses at all levels have increased in recent years.

Deficiencies

Despite performing better than other countries in its income group, Vietnam's education system effectiveness in promoting the types of knowledge, learning, and skills that children need and want remains lacking, even with recent advances. The issue is not whether participants assessed in the PISA program in 2015 or 2018 or 2022 performed well or how representative their performance was. It is that talk of PISA and the results of students who participated tend to conceal the shortcomings of a system that is excessively geared to performance on tests and insufficiently invested in training children's talents into skills necessary for the labor market.

Although enrollments and years of schooling have increased, Vietnam has one of the shortest school years in the world while the quality of education is widely uneven, making enrollment statistics a problematic measure of success. And while Vietnam's children have unprecedented access to education, large disparities remain in rates of secondary school completion across regions, income groups, and ethnicities. There are mounting concerns that the numbers of students completing secondary education are insufficient to meet the country's increasing need for skilled labor. This, in turn, suggests the need for a political commitment to this specific goal.

Political commitment to education and learning

A substantial part of Vietnam's leadership commitment to education has to do with the education system's role in promoting and disseminating prevailing norms, values, and expectations. As in other single-party states, the Party places massive, sustained, and system wide emphasis on promoting normative conformity. This is exemplified by the red scarf that millions of Vietnamese (and Chinese and Cuban) students don daily to demonstrate their loyalty to the Communist Party and by all Vietnamese students' daily recitation of patriotic memes.

Key features of political settlement

Vietnam's political settlement has changed significantly, with important implications both for the politics of education and for the politics of learning. In the context of the country's transformation into a more market-based social order. The Party's political settlement has been reconstituted through a process in which mobilizational corporatism has gradually if incompletely given way to a market-Leninist form of corporatism.¹ The Party's revolutionary ideologies and mobilization tactics have been supplanted by the Party's emerging understanding of its role as a champion of socialist-oriented market-based social order.

Mixed origins of intents for learning

While the Party has been demonstrably committed to expanding access to education, particularly at basic levels, the intents and purposes of its education policies have been heavily geared toward the recitation of knowledge and the transmission of state ideologies and normative orientations rather than promoting learning or critical thinking per se. For several decades, the Party's principal intents and purposes appeared to center on the cultivation of an intellectual elite and, for the masses, the promotion of idealized citizens under the banner of "new socialist man." In the last 10 years, there has been a gradual, uneven, though nonetheless significant transformation of intent where the continued heavy emphasis of promoting ideology has been accompanied by a willingness to adopt new curricular and pedagogical strategies.

The development of a socialist citizenry is perhaps *the* primary aim of the country's mass education system, as articulated in the Law on Education (1995, 2005). But the concept of socialist citizenship has been reconfigured with changes reflecting the country's social and economic transformations. Since the early 2000s, the Party has stated its intent to improve learning and teaching, to create young citizens who are "independent, active and creative," and to provide a highly skilled, productive, and adaptive workforce for the national modernization project. Efforts to attend to these goals are visible in recent rounds of education reforms.

Since the mid-2000s, the "Innovating teaching methods" campaign has encouraged teachers to update pedagogies to "promote activeness, autonomy, and creativity in students and turn learning into self-study with the guide and control of teachers."² The "emulation movement" to develop "friendly schools, active students" launched in 2008, called for a healthy learning environment to bring about positive learning experiences and cultivate independent, creative and critical thinkers. Since 2011, the Party has exhibited a willingness to experiment with alternative pedagogies, as is seen in the development of Vietnam's version of Escuela Nueva (VNEN), which has been adopted by thousands of schools and whose implementation has itself given rise to spirited debates about appropriate pedagogical practices.

While the Party has consistently promoted more equitable access to quality education, which is reflected in increasing enrollment, efforts to improve the accessibility of quality education and to raise learning outcomes are threatened by intensifying inequalities. There is an increasing sense and reality that, in contemporary Vietnam's education system and labor markets, what matters most is not what you know or how well you learn, but whom you know or how much you are willing to pay—for grades, diplomas, extra tutoring, re-sitting exams, being in a high-quality classroom within a public school, and other institutionalized and pervasive informal costs attached to education. Such trends call into question the principle of quality education for all and undermine the values of social solidarity and equity to which the Party has long pledged its allegiance. This suggests the need to better align policies and practices with policy goals.

Public governance of education: Decentralization and weak delegation—information links

Two features of public governance are of special interest for their potential importance in promoting or limiting future improvements in the system's coherence for learning. The first has to do with specific features of decentralization. The second is that—while Vietnam's education policies require comprehensive data on education, including teacher, students, and school performance—the collection and (especially) use of information is extremely thin, except for a small minority of provinces. Fiscal and administrative decentralization combined with the relatively weak use of information to steer public finance for education limit the overall coherence of Vietnam's education policies in practice and may limit their efficacy.

Foreigners unfamiliar with Vietnam may be surprised to know the country and its education system are governed through a highly and perhaps overly decentralized system giving Vietnam's 63 provinces unusually high levels of discretion in the allocation of budgetary funds for education. The situation is in some respects paradoxical. Central norms dictate that provinces must allocate 20 percent of their annual budgets for education, which seems indicative of Vietnam's commitment to education. But Vietnam's law on the national budget does not specify any norms

and standards that provinces may not violate. In only a small minority of provinces (less than a third) are there meaningful interactions among the different stakeholders. The result: 63 provinces with 63 education systems with little or no national overview of how provinces are managing education or promoting learning.

Despite these concerns, many other features of Vietnam's political settlement and political system support the education system's coherence for learning. Among these is undoubtedly Vietnam's distinctively Leninist framework, in which the organization and operation of official government structures and service delivery units is interpenetrated by structures and organs of the communist party. Having both official government structures *and* a perpetual organized parallel political process within them makes "management" relationships within the bureaucracy more accountable to national political priorities than might be the case in a purely top-down government bureaucracy (even in a democratic polity), where local officials, managers, and service-delivery might not give a hoot about education or learning and may face no countervailing political force.

Party state and organizational domains

The Party rules Vietnam through a sprawling Party-state apparatus that the Party has formed and put into use over the course of decades. Formal features of the Party-state are established in Vietnam's Constitution (last amended in 2013) and innumerable formal documents. Article 4 of the Constitution establishes that "The Communist Party of Vietnam—the vanguard of the worker class, working people and Vietnamese nation, the faithful representative of their interests, grounded on Marxist Leninism and Ho Chi Minh thought, is the leading force of the state and society."

Party links

By 2021, the Party had more than 5.2 million members. But this figure understates the Party's influence. The number of persons with direct links to the Party approaches or exceeds 20 million, at least a fifth of the country's nearly 100 million-strong population. Since the 1950s, the Party's broad-based membership and reach has had the practical effect of actively incorporating a large share of the population into the country's dominant political settlement. So, while the Party monopolizes power, it is inclusive in this specific if limited respect. Indeed, since the 1950s, the Party may be understood as a sprawling and expanding form of communist corporatism, in that it cultivated and won political support, loyalty, and deference by mobilizing and incorporating its members into hierarchical structures of formal authority, status, and privilege.³

Party rituals

In the education system, students are subject to comprehensive indoctrination, and the children of the political elite along with high-performing students are channeled into the party system. There is, in other words, an official culture of conformity that the Party as an organization promotes continuously through a variety of channels, all day and every day.

As in any state, political rituals are an important aspect of social life in Vietnam. As in other authoritarian countries and communist party-states, political ritual in Vietnam is especially pronounced, while Party-friendly political messages are broadcast across a range of media

outlets, from loudspeakers to social media and state-run text messaging apps. Those within Vietnam's Party-state are suffused by Party ideas and symbolism, and the Party relentlessly promotes its legitimacy through a diverse array of means. The Party's Ideology Committee plays an active and high-profile role in the education system and in regulating public discourse and the mass media.

Beyond its formal institutions and organization, the mix of ideals, representations, and symbols that attend the Party's rule are essential to understanding its character. From top to bottom, it is infused with a religiously ingrained faith in the notion that the Party is the sole legitimate representative of Vietnam's people, and in the idea that the Party possesses a morality that makes it uniquely capable of leading the country. The presence of a perpetual political process (through the Party cells) within the education system amounts to a countervailing force that can generate (though not always) enhanced accountability for education policy goals. Party structures and processes are employed to hold schools, principals, and teachers to account.

Plans and targets

Schools are required to submit an annual plan (to provincial and district education authorities), detailing the outcomes that schools will strive to achieve by the end of the school year. These achievement targets then determine how many teachers shall get training, meet teacher standards, and ultimately be awarded the "Excellent Teaching" title. Political targets also shape how many students shall pass the graduation exam and even how many outstanding students there will be. Often, this plan is treated (and inspected accordingly) as a political obligation rather than a tentative proposal to the point that most school leaders and teachers feel the need to "fulfill the assigned tasks" for fear of being disciplined by the Party unit or demoted or kicked down the professional ladder. While aspects of these political methods seem antithetical to the promotion of learning, and rather appear as formalistic, these political commitments carry real weight, as they are regularly discussed in the "political work" of schools and bureaucratic agencies throughout the system.

On management relations with the education system, the structures and processes of the Party ensure constant attention to education policy norms and goals. This does not mean that local policymakers' priorities and practices always support the promotion of learning, but it does mean that processes of policy implementation, reporting, evaluation keep a constant eye on prescribed norms. And the presence of Party politics is used to monitor, discipline, and reward members of the education sector workforce. While only a minority of education bureaucrats and teachers are Party members, most education leaders or administrators are Party members or key members of grassroot Party cells who play a role in steering decisionmaking and in monitoring and evaluating the performance of organizations and individuals.

Finance: formal and informal

Formal autonomy in education finance rests mostly with provinces, and provincial education departments lack meaningful autonomy in education finance. Although education departments at provincial and district levels are accountable for the quality of education, they have little say in their budget making process or in the allocation of fiscal resources to current and capital

expenditures or in the hiring and firing teachers. Rigid pay scales do not distinguish between high- and low-performing teachers, giving teachers little incentive to work harder.

Schools have even less formal decisionmaking power, a situation that contradicts the letter of the law. The 2005 Education Law stipulates that public schools have a right “to hire teachers and participate in a teacher placing process” and “to mobilize, use, and monitor resources according to the law” (Article 58). But schools have very little autonomy in practice, both in hiring teachers or in raising additional revenue to meet their needs and must abide by tuition fees set by provinces. They were able to raise voluntary parental contributions through various “societalization” schemes. However, rampant abuse and lack of transparency in this revenue source led to regulations that parental contributions must be completely voluntary with no required minimum amount. Interviewees at surveyed districts lamented that this regulation has severely harmed schools’ ability to tap into parental contributions and more importantly, adversely affected poorer schools, where voluntary contributions, while opaque, could sometimes mitigate limited budgets.

Professionalism of the education workforce

Vietnam’s political organization demands consistent attention to education from the level of policymaking to the daily management of Vietnam’s 63 provinces, 700+ districts, 11,000+ communes, and urban wards, and to its tens of thousands of schools.

Vietnam’s teaching corps have been praised for professionalism, reflected in high levels of attendance and dedication. Schools are steeped in a culture of accountability and most (though not all) school principals are members of the Party. These features of accountability have contradictory effects. They incentivize normative conformity in ways that are supportive of certain kinds of learning, such as rote. But they can be a liability, particularly when political conservatism among school principals or more senior teachers short circuit efforts to escape outdated curricula and teaching methods.

The adoption of professional standards for teachers and school leaders has come with the heightened promotion of accountability and standardization in the education system. Teacher standards, first introduced in 2007, are part of the state efforts to assure quality of the teaching force and hold teachers accountable for learning performance. The updated set of profession standards for teachers, released in 2018, included requirements higher than the previous standards, leading to many teachers becoming underqualified and seeking to be upgraded.⁴ Despite the good intention of standardization policies, many teachers found the process of meeting the teacher standards to be highly bureaucratic and time consuming given their already heavy teaching and administrative loads.

In the context of “Fundamental and Comprehensive Education Reform,” teachers have been placed at the forefront to improve the education quality oriented toward competency development instead of content-based teaching and learning. Teachers across the country have attended an intensive cascade of professional training for competency-based teaching. They are also expected to have autonomy and demonstrate competencies such as creative thinking and problem solving—core learning outcomes they need to develop in students.

Testing

Exam results are not tied in a meaningful way to education finance, even within provinces. But they are used as a means of evaluating the performance of schools and teachers on an annual basis. The most important national exams are those from upper secondary education to universities, which the Ministry of Education designs and provincial departments of education and provincial people's committees administer. Exams at the end of lower secondary education are also crucial and have been frequently marred by cheating and corruption.

The country's testing and achievement cultures have also been commoditized through the development of a shadow education system (called "extra study, extra teaching") that has been well documented in the literature on education in Vietnam, but which is resistant to direct empirical measurement owing to its opaque features, as well as corrupt payments for access to "prep questions" and opportunities to re-sit. At lower levels of education, Vietnam's education policymakers sought to move away from arrangements organized around annual assessment toward modes of continuous assessment.

Curricula

The establishment of a new curriculum is regarded as the landmark of the current "Fundamental and Comprehensive Education Reform," which began with the adoption of Party's Resolution 29 in 2013. In its strictest sense, it is the first complete standalone curriculum framework for Vietnam's general education, often referred to as the New Curriculum. One noteworthy development related to the New Curriculum is approval for the use of multiple sets of textbooks. Vietnam's primary and secondary education had previously a single state-sanctioned set of textbooks since the 1980s. The Ministry of Education and Training's Education Publishing House has been the only authorized entity that organizes the compilation, publication, and distribution of official textbooks. The obligatory use of an official set of textbooks nationwide and textbook publication monopoly have been sources of debates for many years. The biggest concern over the textbook publication monopoly is that it puts a cap on the acknowledgment of diversity, particularly with regard to historical, political, and ideological viewpoints.

After many setbacks, a "one curriculum, multiple sets of textbooks" proposal was approved in mid-2019. With the New Curriculum in implementation in 2020, it is the first time in Vietnam's contemporary education when the Provincial People's Committees, in conjunction with local schools, are allowed to decide the sets of textbooks relevant to their provinces. In the ethos of societalization, non-state sectors can also design, publish and circulate textbooks. Still, the textbooks need to be vetted and evaluated by the National Council for Textbook Appraisal, under the control of the Ministry.

Revamping the education system

While policy planners seem to show strong commitment to revamping the education system, policymaking processes and deployment of reform have many limitations. The competency-based curriculum underwent several rounds of drafting with inputs from the general public and educational experts. Although public consultation for the draft curriculum is seen as a new plus point in Vietnam's centralized system, people doubted whether inputs from public polls were

taken seriously and included in the revision of the curriculum. The implementation of the New Curriculum was also delayed for two years for better preparation of textbook writing and teacher training. Yet its launch in the school year of 2020–21 confronted severe public criticisms over the content of grade 1's Vietnamese textbooks. The dispute raised legitimate concerns about the limited time devoted to developing the curriculum and textbooks as well as the quality of teacher training despite substantial financial resources. More broadly, the criticisms of the textbook not only indicate increased societal engagement in education but also reveal reduced public trust in education reform.

Societal engagement

Many features of the education system and its performance depend on a range of relationships, processes, and institutionalized practices that define how citizens engage with their education system and the politics of education and learning. Thus, the spirit of “all for education” that the Party sought to impart through mobilization politics in the 1980s did not cease in the somewhat chaotic circumstances of the country's transition to a more-market based economy. On the contrary, Vietnam's growing economy promises returns to education and the expectation of expanded economic opportunity and has thus incentivized household investments in education.

The Study Encouragement Movement began in the early 1990s, with the activities of local actors aiming to promote learning in both formal and informal education, frequently involving small organizations such as local patrilineal associations. Major activities of many (grassroots) associations centered around how to get donations or financial contributions from local families, businesses, and organizations to promote learning of local students and community members.

At the same time, aspects of the “movement” have taken on increasing bureaucratic traits. In 1996, the state formally established the Vietnam Association for Promoting Education (VAPE) on a nationwide basis, as a state-supported association with the mission of “Promoting study [and] promoting financial contributions to build a learning society.” From the province down to the district and commune, VAPE units operate with modest budgets and volunteer staff. In some localities, the associations appear mainly concerned with providing support to talented and gifted students. In others, they engage in activities especially focused on assisting children from selected localities and households financially or through various means of educational support.

Concerns about the corrosive effects of societalization on equity and community have been expressed since its earliest stages. Some societalization policies have promoted “participation,” primarily from resource-capable individuals or organizations rather than public expertise in education. Others have contributed to inequality, perceptions of inequity and mistrust, and real marginalization of vulnerable groups.

The significance of societalization policies and practices in education and learning outcomes can be seen in three main respects. First, they have acted as formal and informal institutional mechanisms for channeling financial flows into the provision and payment for education services. Second, they have contributed to the diversification of modes of service delivery, seen first in the expansion of an extensive “shadow” education system of extra study and extra teaching and, over the last decade, an acceleration in the development of non-public education. Third, they have facilitated the commodification and commercialization of education.

Client power or system failure

According to official formulations, societalization can best be understood as a set of policies and formal rules aiming to promote the provision and payment for essential services. Societalization policies thus have sought to maximize the flow of societal resources into services, ease burdens on public finance, enhance participation in the creation and allocation of services by diversifying modalities of service provision and payment, and improve the overall quantity, quality and accessibility of services.

Yet, such an understanding is either incomplete or slips away from the original ideas of societalization in informal practices in school life. The clearest example of these informal elements is the extensive system of copayments that have evolved around the finance and delivery of education, many of which are informal or illegal or both. Originally introduced as a system of shared responsibility or collaboration between the state and the people, copayments aim to improve the coverage (and quality) of education since they permit local authorities to expand education in ways that would have been impossible with sole reliance on the state budget.

Societalization is practical and popular among policymakers and service providers alike, as it promises resources and opportunities to profit from state commercialization with few strings attached. For many service providers, there is thus a strong material interest in maintaining the status quo. But many of the limitations of societalization policies stem from weak accountability, which has often contributed to corruption and rent-seeking. The result: Vietnam has an increasingly chaotic and stratified system of service provision that links access to quality services to income rather than need.

While societalization has channeled resources into the education system, it has also facilitated practices that can be detrimental to learning among children from low-income households. Some also argue that policies have fueled the formation of entrenched interest groups whose commercializing actions—whether simply aimed at securing a living or at generating large profits—promote principles antithetical to quality education for all. A redeeming quality of education in Vietnam is that, in the education field, however reliant you are on informal payments, you get what you pay for. This implies that the education system is accountable to those citizens or clients able and willing to pay and contrasts favorably with settings where informal payments do not yield benefits.

It can be argued that societalization policies and practices, rather than leveling the playing field, have exacerbated educational inequalities by making access to education at all levels highly contingent on out-of-pocket payments. Evidence indicates that beneficiaries of various fee exemptions or transfers are not exempt from a host of formal and informal “contributions,” effectively nullifying the effects of “pro-poor” policies, while a host of other costs, such as extra study, impose significant burdens on the poor.

Media voices for accountability

Vietnam’s press and broadcast media and its vibrant new media platforms have figured substantially in the evolution of the education system and are essential to an analysis of the

system's social embedding, evolution, and performance over time. Historically and up to the present, features of the production and consumption of mass media, specialized media, and new media in Vietnam have—at times—had the practical effect of strengthening the coherence of the education system for learning. Vietnam's press and mass media and the broader public's participation in social media have sometimes enhanced accountability both *within* the education system and the system's relations to stakeholders in its broader social environment.

A felicitous ratcheting up of public awareness of problems in the education system permitted locally based citizens to grasp local and extra-local aspects of the system's functioning and of the significance of accountability. Viewed from within the system, the presence of voices for accountability from the press and society (via new media) have, in combination with the Party-state's formal and informal compliance mechanisms and pressures stemming from societal buy-in, increased the perceived need within the system to maintain adherence to formal norms, probity, and preparedness for answerability.

Overall, social media, traditional and digitized media outlets have contributed to the rise of something resembling a public sphere in which expanding channels of communication have had the effect of expanding coverage of the education system—thereby calling attention to its various achievements and challenges. Social media have been especially instrumental in exposing and facilitating attention to education sector corruption scandals, including recent high-profile cases that resulted in long prison sentences.

So....

The performance of Vietnam's education system was by no means fated—it reflects the sort of “all for learning” spirit that is all too often lacking. In its efforts to further promote learning, the country has many things in its favor, including an enduring political and societal commitment born of historical experiences and an expanding and globalizing economy presenting good opportunities and incentives. These factors combined with the citizenry's active involvement in education—through various forms of cooperation and contestation—appear to generate elements of performance pressure in the system.

Three recurring points:

- Sustained political commitment toward education was matched by robust public spending on education that has been strongly redistributive across provinces.
- The consistent promotion of accountability and professionalism within the education bureaucracy and schools included continuing efforts to align policies and practices with the Party's political priorities.
- Societal involvement in education featured significant private, out-of-pocket financial contributions to education and growing popular demands for greater education system accountability for the quality and relevance of education.

Recent literature on the politics of education and learning does not go far enough in its analysis of politics or deep enough in the analysis of the dynamic features of the education system's interdependence with its social environment. Looking beyond Vietnam, there is value in exploring the politics of learning from a sociological perspective, appreciating that the

effectiveness of any education system depends on features of its societal embedding. A historical sociological exploration of a country's education can reveal the specific ways that education systems are embedded in their social environments. There is also value in making the analysis of principal-agent relations that shape education system performance, however complex, comprehensible to a diversity of education system stakeholders.

Annex 1 Indicators of learning for RISE countries

A country's learning adjusted years of school combines the quantity and quality of schooling into a single indicator by multiplying the estimated years of schooling by the ratio of the country's score on the most recent test scores harmonized to 625 (World Bank data for latest year of assessment).

Learning poverty, a combined measure of schooling and learning, is the proportion of children unable to read and understand a simple text by age 10 (World Bank data for 2019).

The Human Capital Index is the amount of human capital that children born today can expect to acquire by the age of 18 given the prevailing risks of poor health and poor education. It combines the likelihood of surviving to school age, the amount of school they will complete and the learning they'll acquire, and whether they leave school ready for further learning and work. For example, a score of 0.5 means that they will be only 50 percent as productive as they might be with complete education and full health—and that their future earning potentials will be 50 percent below what they might have been.⁵

	Learning adjusted years of school	Learning poverty (%)	Human Capital Index (0–1)
Chile	9.4	27.2	0.7
Egypt	6.5	69.6	0.5
Ethiopia	4.3	90.4	0.4
India	7.1	56.1	0.5
Indonesia	7.5	52.8	0.5
Kenya	8.5	—	0.5
Nigeria	5	—	0.4
Pakistan	5.1	77	0.4
Peru	8.6	44.4	0.6
South Africa	5.6	78.9	0.4
Tanzania	4.5	—	0.4
Vietnam	10.7	18.1	0.7

Note: — = not available.

¹ London 2022.

² MOET 2018a.

³ Stromseth 1998.

⁴ MOET 2018b; VNIES 2021.

⁵ World Bank Human Capital Index for September 2020.

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