

AN INNOVATIVE APPROACH TO INVESTMENT IN ENGLISH-BASED OVERSEAS HIGHER EDUCATION

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I. REASONS FOR ENGLISH-BASED OVERSEAS HIGHER EDUCATION

According to a publication from the Institute of International Education entitled "Open Doors", 975 Vietnamese students enrolled in degree programs in the United States in the academic year 1996-1997 as international students. The number increased over 24% to 1,210 students in 1997-1998. It is anticipated that this rate of increase will continue during the next decade. Similarly, Vietnamese students also enroll in large numbers in other English-speaking countries such as the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada and New Zealand. The English-speaking countries (ESC) have experienced continuous growth in international student enrollment, and the United States is the leader with 481,281 international students in 1997-1998. What is the strong market appeal or what are the main advantages of the English-based overseas higher education (EBOHE) for Vietnamese and other foreign nationals?

1. Internationally Recognized Credentials: College degrees from the above English-speaking countries have international recognition in the ever-increasing global market. ESC universities are generally accepted as being academically vigorous, reasonably current in technol-

ogy, consistent in quality, well documented and accredited. As a result, their degrees uphold the highest respect in the global market.

2. English as the International Language: English is the international language of business, politics, science, technology and international travel. English is also used extensively by powerful international organizations such as the European Union, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the United Nations, the World Bank, etc. Further, business people use English to communicate with foreign customers, suppliers and business associates. Studying in an English-speaking country will help international students master the use of the English language. Students who master English during an EBOHE degree program have the competitive edge in the global market and the science/technology based professions.

3. Employment Opportunities: Students receiving degrees from EBOHE universities have higher chances of being employed by multinational corporations both within their home country and in the global market place.

4. Global Economic Power: These above countries are the home of the majority of global companies who make global economic decisions that affect the world market place. Students studying in these countries

have a better chance to understand not only how multi-national corporations function, but also about the thinking processes and logic behind the market.

5. Leadership in Innovation: During the past few hundred years, the vast majority of innovations in sciences, engineering, technology and business processes have come from these countries. Students studying in these countries have a better chance to understand the forces behind the innovations so that they can emulate such forces at home.

II. CURRENT EBOHE SITUATION IN VIETNAM

Certainly, EBOHE is highly desirable and evidenced by the fact that hundreds of Vietnamese youths, mainly high school graduates, leave Vietnam every year to go to these English-speaking countries to work on their bachelor's degrees. Many of them leave with limited English proficiency and have to spend a year to study English before enrolling in their main program of study. As a result, it may take a typical Vietnamese student five years to receive his or her bachelor's degree while the domestic counterpart only spends four years to receive the same degree. The *current method of delivery* of EBOHE poses the following difficulties that make the education highly inaccessible to Vietnamese and very expensive to Vietnam as a country.

1. High costs: English-based education is very expensive according to Vietnamese standards. It may cost between US\$10,000 to 30,000 per year to attend a university in an English-speaking country. This is an enormous sum when comparing with wages of a common Vietnamese laborer who only makes about \$400 a year. A five-year English-based education may cost the student at least US\$50,000. This is a large amount of foreign currency that can be used by other types of investment in Vietnam.

2. High Risks: The current method of delivery of English-based higher education is risky for the following reasons.

English proficiency - Some students may fail if they can not master the English language.

Maturity - Some young people can not cope with the lack of family support, loneliness, homesickness and new culture associated with living in a new country. Consequently, they may not be able to study effectively.

Finance - The finance of the supporting parents might change adversely in three to five years and affect the student's ability to pay for the education.

Non-returning - There is a history of non-returning of talented young students once they successfully complete their English-based education in highly marketable fields such as computer, business and engineering. Consequently, Vietnam would face a brain drain situation.

3. Little Graduate Studies: Currently, the vast majority of Vietnamese students who go for English-based higher education, pursues bachelor's degrees. Efforts should be made to promote overseas graduate studies that are much more valuable to Vietnam as well as much shorter in duration. Master's and Ph.D. degrees are worth much more in Vietnam in terms of earnings power and prestige.

4. Limited Audience: The current method of delivery in which the education is conducted in its *entirety* in a foreign country, has made EBOHE available only to Vietnamese youths from *very wealthy families*. It is either prohibitively expensive to intelligent youths from less wealthy families or too long for currently working older people who cannot leave their jobs for several years to pursue a degree in a foreign country.

5. No Leading Role for Vietnamese Universities: In all developed countries, universities play a significant role in preparing their citizens

for the new jobs that are being created. Even though the Vietnamese economy needs a larger English-speaking workforce to work with foreign companies as well as to adopt new technology developed by English-speaking countries, Vietnamese universities play no leading role in this endeavor. New methods of delivery must be examined to provide Vietnamese universities a leading role in EBOHE in the future.

6. High Rejection Rate of Student Visas: Since the normalization of diplomatic relations between Vietnam and the U.S., a large number of Vietnamese youths have shown a preference for the U.S. as their destination for EBOHE. However, the U.S. preference has run into a significant setback due to a high rejection rate of student visa applications by the U.S. Embassy. A plausible explanation for this high rejection rate is the abuse of the student visa status by many Vietnamese who use the student visa as a means to immigrate to the U.S. for better economic opportunities. Efforts should be made by the Vietnamese side to distinguish student visa applicants from economic opportunists, and help reduce the existing high rejection rate.

Certainly, English-based higher education is important to Vietnam's economic development as well as to its drive in becoming a significant contributor in the global economy. However, the above difficulties associated with the current method of delivery must be resolved to make EBOHE more beneficial to Vietnam.

III. UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON-CLEAR LAKE AND ITS EBOHE PROGRAMS

The University of Houston System is a state-supported university system with over 50,000 students and four campuses that include the University of Houston-Clear Lake (UHCL). UHCL is an upper-level educational institution that serves a diverse student population from the state, the nation and abroad. UHCL offers a variety of bachelor's and master's programs in business and public administration, education, human sciences and humanities, and natural and applied sciences. The university emphasizes high standards for teaching and learning in undergraduate, graduate and professional programs. Each program develops the critical, creative, quantitative and communication skills of students. Information on UHCL's academic programs can be found on

the Internet under the name <HTTP://WWW.CL.UH.EDU>.

UHCL has created innovative transfer programs that offer great benefits to both students and the home country. In these programs, UHCL and a Vietnamese university (the *home institution*) cooperate to provide EBOHE that is divided between the two institutions. A summary of the programs appears as follows.

1. Types of Transfer Program: There are two types of transfer program: undergraduate and graduate. The undergraduate program starts out as a 2+2 program in which the home institution teaches the first two years at home and UHCL teaches the last two years of a bachelor's degree program in Houston, Texas, USA. UHCL will award the diploma to graduating students. The 2+2 program can later be expanded into 3+1 transfer program in which the home institution teaches the first three years and UHCL teaches the fourth year of a bachelor's degree program. In the graduate transfer program, the home institution teaches foundation or prerequisite courses of a master's degree program, and UHCL teaches the core courses of the program. For students with non-USA undergraduate degrees, foundation or prerequisite courses account for a third of their graduate study at UHCL. The home institution teaches all courses in the transfer programs in English.

2. Goal of the Transfer Programs: The main goal is infrastructure development. UHCL will help the home institution to develop its own English-based higher education that conforms to American standards of quality. Well-thought-out syllabi and textbooks developed and adopted by professors in the USA will be brought to the home institution. Next, UHCL helps train faculty of the home institution so that they can teach courses in the transfer programs in English. The home institution should move from 2+2, to 3+1 and eventually to a full-blown bachelor's program at the undergraduate level and from foundation courses to a full-blown master's program at the graduate level. UHCL will review periodically the program for quality and compliance to ensure that the home institution offers its students an education that is equivalent to that in the USA.

3. Tuition, Fees and Living Expenses: While at home, students pay tuition and fees that are set inde-

pendently by the home institution. In general, living expenses are lower at home while attending the home institution. However, tuition, fees and living expenses are much higher at UHCL. The tuition and fees are about US\$330 per semester credit hour and subject to changes. Undergraduate and graduate students are required to take a minimum of 12 and 9 credit hours per semester, respectively. UHCL tuition and fees are about the same or lower than those charged by accredited public universities in major urban areas in the USA. However, they are much lower than those charged by private institutions in the USA. Living expenses are between \$USD 6,000 and 8,000 per year for visa purposes. Actual living expenses vary depending on the individual's life style. Among the 10 major American cities, Houston has the lowest costs of living.

4. Admissions Requirements: To be admitted into an undergraduate transfer program at the home institution, students must have a high school diploma from a twelve-year program and TOEFL score of 550 or higher. Upon completing all requirements at the home institution, students transfer to UHCL to complete the rest of the requirements and receive a bachelor's degree from UHCL. To be admitted into a graduate program at the home institution, students must have a bachelor's degree from a four-year program and TOEFL score of 550 or higher. Students are also required to sit for either the Graduate Record Exam (GRE) or Graduate Management Aptitude Test (GMAT) and receive a satisfactory score on a suitable exam. Upon completing all requirements at the home institution and having a satisfactory GRE/GMAT score, students transfer to UHCL to complete the rest of the requirements and receive a master's degree from UHCL.

5. Benefits of UHCL Transfer Programs: UHCL transfer programs offer a number of benefits to its students, the home institution and the home country, i.e., Vietnam.

Low EBOHE risks for students. EBOHE is a very expensive investment for international students and their families. If students don't succeed, they may squander their family's life savings. By obtaining a satisfactory TOEFL/GRE/GMAT score(s) and doing a large portion of the degree program in Vietnam, students have overcome the initial challenges. As a result, their chances of

success are much higher when they go to the USA to complete the remaining requirements of their degree program at UHCL.

Low EBOHE costs. Because a significant portion of a degree program is taught by the home institution, the tuition, fees and living expenses are much lower for students.

Gaining of practical business/technical skills. As the fourth largest industrial city in the USA, Houston has many jobs that are available to students with good English and technical skills. Students are allowed to work legally in their field of study after two semesters in residence under the programs named "cooperative education," "internship" and "practical training." Students are compensated for their work at the prevailing wages that are typically much higher than those of the home country.

Fewer Visa Problems. The decision to grant a student an entry visa to the U.S. is entirely up to the U.S. Embassy in the home country. The transfer programs will distinguish their students from economic opportunists and therefore improve the chances of getting visas to go to the USA to attend UHCL. In the past few years, 99.7% of students from UHCL existing transfer programs with other countries had no problems in obtaining F-1 visas to attend UHCL to complete their remaining degree requirements. It is expected that Vietnamese students would have similar successes in obtaining F-1 visas from the US Embassy or Consulate in Vietnam to attend UHCL in the future.

Broad Audience. The transfer programs will make the stay in the USA much shorter; therefore, the education is affordable to more families and to older students who can only stay away from Vietnam for a short period.

Graduate Study. The graduate transfer program addresses an urgent need for overseas graduate training. Ideally, Vietnam should send the majority of its students overseas for graduate training only. Graduate training is much less expensive because it is much shorter than the undergraduate one is.

Leading Role for Vietnamese Universities. The joint programs provide an opportunity for Vietnamese universities and their faculties to take a leading role in providing English-based higher education at both undergraduate and graduate

levels to Vietnamese students and students in neighboring countries. As Vietnamese universities become proficient with the 2+2 program, they can move up to the 3+1 program and eventually a full-blown bachelor's program conducted entirely in English in Vietnam. Similarly at the graduate level, they will move from teaching foundation courses to teaching a whole master's program in English in Vietnam.

6. Current Status of UHCL Transfer Programs: UHCL has brought these transfer programs to nine universities that are located in seven countries. Currently, UHCL is working with the Vietnam National University-Ho Chi Minh City to bring these programs to Vietnam. It is anticipated that the graduate transfer program will be fully in place in two years and the undergraduate transfer will be available thereafter.

IV. CONCLUDING REMARKS

EBOHE is beneficial to Vietnam at the individual, institution and national levels. Because of its extremely high costs, it must be pursued with caution to maximize its benefits and to minimize its risks and costs. The UHCL model does address well all major concerns that are associated with EBOHE. Vietnam and its universities should adopt this model in preparing its students to go to English-speaking countries for college education.

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