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CLMV Collaborations with Malaysia, towards Sustaining Asian Identities in Higher Education

An Interview with the Vice Rector of Cantho University, Vietnam, Dr. Do Van Xe

By Koo Yew Lie, Munir Shuib and Rozinah Jamaludin



Dr. Do Van Xe

The higher education landscape is changing rapidly. Driven by powerful forces such as economy, geography and technology, higher education has diversified and flourished. Online learning, for instance, is getting more common and cross-border education is becoming more popular. There have also been major changes in perception, demand, funding and governance. With such dramatic changes taking place in higher education contexts the world over, there has been rising concern for strengthening higher education in the Asia Pacific region.

Higher Education (HE) has a long history involving the exchanging of ideas and expertise across national borders. In fact, active collaboration, resource and knowledge sharing have played a key role in advancing HE.

It was with this in mind that the Ministry of Higher Education initiated the Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar and Vietnam (CLMV) dialogue aimed at generating collaborations through the exchange of knowledge and ideas between Malaysia and CLMV countries. In the developing world, the

developmental needs of universities are key to sustaining the well being of communities and nations. Fundamental issues of access, equity and quality education for development are crucial.

Held on 1 and 2 December 2008, the CLMV dialogue was precisely aimed at providing a platform for synergistic collaboration and cooperation in HE. Among the invited participants was the Vice Rector of Cantho University, Vietnam, Dr. Do Van Xe.

It was within such a scenario of cooperation that this conversation with Dr. Do took place on the first evening of the dialogue in the quiet and pleasant corridors of the Boulevard Hotel in Kuala Lumpur. The interview between Dr. Do and three associate fellows of the National Higher Education Research Institute reflected on the kind of collaborations that will be of mutual benefit to CLMV countries especially for Vietnam and Malaysia.

Recognising that Vietnam is a transitional economy from agricultural to industrial economy, the Vice Rector was posed the question concerning the aspirations of HE in Vietnam to which he responded “we are at least ten years’ behind in terms of HE development”. The key challenge for Vietnam, he said, was access to High School as well as access to HE with the latter as a major challenge for the CLMV dialogues. According to him, in HE, only about ten percent of Vietnamese applicants are able to access HE, citing in particular the case of his own university, Cantho University, where out of 75,000 who sat for entrance examinations only 6,500 were taken in.

“...priority should be given to Engineering and Computer Science fields as these are the niche areas which would boost the human capacity development of Vietnam.”

Pushing ahead with the question of collaboration, Dr. Do responded broadly, that due to the basic challenges on economic development, the investment on education has been necessarily limited. Hence, he suggested that major areas of collaboration would come from capacity building of university staff in terms of management, governance, quality assurance, curriculum development, developing teaching and learning, research and academic research and scholarship. He brought in what he saw the example of the Asian University Network which is a

network for building on strengths of the universities in Asia. In relation to capacity development, Dr. Do was enthusiastic on the offer from Malaysian Universities on scholarships for Vietnamese staff and students to build capacity. Indeed, he saw this to be the most immediate goal for collaboration with long-term gains and implications.

“The key challenge for Vietnam, he said, was access to High School as well as access to HE with the latter as a major challenge for the CLMV dialogues.”

Dr. Do suggested that priority should be given to Engineering and Computer Science fields as these are the niche areas which would boost the human capacity development of Vietnam. He suggested that there could be a Malaysian University type branch campus in Vietnam citing the example of an RMIT branch university in Vietnam.

Dr. Do applauded Malaysia’s attempt to initiate research collaborations which had been raised in the morning’s proceedings. Further, he suggested collaborations between Vietnam and Malaysia in terms of strengthening governance and management in HE. He suggested that Malaysia “help us to manage the University in strategy planning, quality management, quality assurance”.

More broadly, Dr. Do warmly responded to the idea of ‘the Asian way in Higher Education’ - one which is suitable to the culture and the wisdom of the region emphasising in his own words, ‘Asian cultures, essences and values’ while being open to what is positive from other cultures. In this regard, he saw student and cultural exchange between CLMV countries and Malaysia as highly important taking CLMV students beyond what he considered to be the limited learning from conventional books.

Such reflection gained through the interview will, it is hoped, lead to CLMV collaborations with Malaysia with an Asian identity; a collaboration that is sustainable, holistic and integrated within the vision of a HE for a fairer and more equitable Asia within the wider challenges of the global marketplace and global competitiveness. The CLMV dialogue was but an important first step in this direction.