

Chapter 34

Perceptions and Viability of Launching LIS E-Learning Programs in Developing Countries: A Vietnam Case Study

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ABSTRACT

E-Learning is still relatively uncommon in developing countries, but there is growing interest. This case study explores the factors influencing readiness to launch e-learning of a Library and Information Science (LIS) program in a developing country, with a focus on understanding attitudes toward e-learning and the viability of transitioning to an online delivery model in Vietnam. A technology infrastructure assessment was performed to understand whether changes were needed at Vietnam National University to support e-learning, and 5 key informant interviews and 4 focus group sessions with 39 participants were performed with faculty, graduate and undergraduate students, members of the professional community, and administrators to understand their usage of technology and their perceptions and attitudes toward e-learning. Study findings suggest the importance of understanding the cultural context and the need for further e-learning research, as well as the steps needed for e-learning readiness and integration.

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INTRODUCTION

E-Learning is still relatively uncommon in developing countries, but there is growing interest. E-Learning offers an attractive option for developing countries as it enables people to keep up with changes in the global economy while offering education that is economical, flexible, and easy to deliver without the constraints of time and distance (Carey & Blatnik, 2005; Torres Maldonado, Khan, Moon, & Rho, 2011). Developing countries like Vietnam are becoming interested in implementing e-learning for library and information science and other programs. With many people living in rural areas, e-learning has the potential to reach a greater number of people than traditional higher education, which can be expensive and difficult to access. E-Learning can also help increase the number of trained professionals in countries that need them. However, the technology infrastructure in developing countries may not be stable enough and access to technology may not be extensive enough to enable e-learning success. Additionally, many feel it is implausible that e-learning can offer the same benefits as face-to-face education. A successful transition to an e-learning model is dependent upon the attitudes of its key stakeholder groups towards e-learning, as well as the technological and pedagogical readiness for the transition.

This paper explores the factors influencing readiness to launch e-learning of a library and information science (LIS) program in a developing country, with a focus on understanding attitudes toward e-learning and the viability of transitioning to an online delivery model in Vietnam. We first present a background on the emergence of LIS education at Vietnam National University (VNU), the importance of exploring e-learning as an attractive option for higher education, and the contribution e-learning can make in human resource and economic development. The research methodology and results are then presented, outlining the findings from the technology infrastructure

assessment, the key informant interviews, and the focus group sessions. A discussion on recommended next steps for e-learning adoption follows and serves as an example for other developing countries considering e-learning.

BACKGROUND

As is true in other developing nations experiencing economic growth, Vietnam is being transformed into a modern, industrialized nation, with younger individuals moving from rural to urban areas, and dramatic improvements in the financial and educational well-being of many residents. Major factors contributing to Vietnam's economic growth are its deep cultural respect for education (Nguyen, 2002) and its commitment to education and human resource development (Fry, 2012). In 1945, Vietnam's commitment to education first became public when Ho Chi Minh stressed that the success of the nation's future would be dependent on the education of its children. After the emergence of the *doi moi* (economic renovation) in 1986, Vietnam further demonstrated its commitment to education with higher secondary enrollment and rapid development of its higher education system (Fry, 2012). With its continued growth in primary and secondary education and the development of universities, Vietnamese leaders are interested in Vietnam becoming a major player in the global market economically, culturally, and intellectually (Huong & Fry, 2004).

Library and information science is an emerging profession in Vietnam, a country that has recently experienced tremendous change and a rapidly growing economy (Reddy, 2012). In order to meet the increasing demands of the country, Vietnam is in need of trained librarians who can serve in the nation's academic and public libraries and other information centers (Huynh, 2009). Stuart (2000) stated that the "lack of a critical mass of professionals" (p. 110) is one of the major

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