

Rising Together: Leadership Skills for the Future of Higher Education in Vietnam and Southeast Asia

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Fortuna Hotel, Hanoi

2025 – a year of anniversaries and ambitions

The German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) is celebrating its 100th anniversary in 2025. Since its founding in 1925, the DAAD has supported around three million students, academics, and higher education managers from Germany, Europe, and around the world. In its centenary year, the DAAD aims to highlight the vital role of international academic cooperation and exchange in fostering scientific progress and global understanding.

This milestone coincides with another significant anniversary: the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Vietnam and the Federal Republic of Germany. Over the past five decades, the partnership between our two nations has been shaped by cultural, economic, and political collaboration—and, to a large extent, by academic exchange and cooperation.

Higher education management has been an element of DAAD's work in Vietnam for a good share of those years. While DAAD has been particularly visible and well appreciated within the Vietnamese and regional higher education landscape, its DIES Programme (Dialogue on Innovative Higher Education Strategies) has also had a far-reaching impact across Southeast Asia. In Vietnam alone, around 350 higher education leaders have benefited from DIES training courses, with similar results observable in neighbouring countries. Many of these alumni now hold key management positions at their institutions, where they are able to apply the competencies and networks gained through DIES initiatives.

The leadership qualities nurtured through these efforts will be vital not only for Vietnam, which is entering— in the words of the CPV General Secretary—an “era of rising,” but also for Southeast Asia as a whole, where both the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) are advancing the vision of a common higher education area or Common Space in Southeast Asian Higher Education.

Introduction of topic

Vietnam has set its sights on becoming a high-income country by 2045, a bold ambition that marks a critical turning point in its economic trajectory. The country's vision for an 'era of rising' focuses on technology-driven growth and industrial modernisation. Key for this: prioritising education reform, research and development, science and technology, boosting frontier technologies and international cooperation.

The government has announced that it intends to allocate 2 per cent of Vietnam's gross domestic product to research and development by 2030, and at least 3 per cent of the annual state budget is to be made available for science, technology, innovation and digital transformation. The main areas of focus include artificial intelligence, big data, blockchain, semiconductors and quantum computing. Student population is to increase significantly as is the number of lecturers with doctoral degrees (at least 40%).

Internationalisation plays a major role in these plans: the number of international students in Vietnam is to triple by 2045 and the proportion of joint study programs with international partners is to be increased to 20 percent. Furthermore, more than 80 percent of all Vietnamese universities are to be active in international research collaborations, international publications are to be increased by 10 per cent. 20 per cent of Vietnamese training programmes are supposed to be accredited by international bodies, and the establishment of branches of international universities in Vietnam is to be promoted.

Such ambitious innovation and internationalization strategies have the potential to position Vietnam as a regional hub for higher education and research. Yet the challenges they raise—ranging from the need for enhanced staff competencies to more coherent internationalisation strategies and opportunities for professional networking—are not unique to Vietnam. They resonate across other higher education systems in Southeast Asia. Vietnamese higher education institutions (HEIs), like those in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and beyond, require extensive capacity building, training, and networking to develop the innovative higher education strategies that will allow them to thrive.

Accordingly, the themes addressed in this event are of regional importance, supporting Southeast Asian HEIs as they navigate common challenges in leadership development, institutional innovation, and international engagement.

This workshop hence intends to create a forum for the regional exchange amongst higher education managers from Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar on current needs for effective higher education management. Participants shall be enabled to act as multipliers and agents of change at their home institutions. The intended outputs are:

- 1. Awareness! Participants are aware of the implications of current policy developments for their institutions.**

The planned up-scaling of Vietnam's higher education and science sector is all-encompassing. To make it more tangible, this workshop approaches it from the following directions, which can be directly derived from the thematic areas defined by the Vietnamese government:

- Institutional development: How will this tectonic shift in education, research and innovation impact Vietnamese universities? How does it transform their “business model”? What can single institutions do, in order to adhere to the policy-formulated expectations? How can governance structures be strengthened? Which ones?
- Internationalisation: How do the target-numbers put out there by the Vietnamese government impact current internationalisation efforts? Will they have to adapt? If yes, how? What are key issues Vietnamese HEI have to consider in their internationalisation efforts? How can this be integrated into a strategic approach to internationalisation?
- Quality Assurance: What structures are needed to safeguard quality in Vietnamese higher education institutions? Is the current QA-system fit to comply with the new challenges?
- Capacity development: what competencies are needed at the various management levels to make Vietnamese HEI fit to respond adequately to the challenges they are confronted with in all these fields? How can they go about to have their staff acquire such competencies?

The conference organizers recognize that the expectations, development paths, and challenges in neighbouring countries such as Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar will differ from those in Vietnam. Nevertheless, as outlined above, institutions in these countries can also benefit significantly when these thematic areas are systematically addressed.

An additional vantage point will be added to all discussions: What role can international cooperation play in this? How can German partners be instrumental? And how can DAAD provide potential support?

2. Networks! Contacts between higher education institutions in Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar are strengthened and expanded.

Higher education institutions in Vietnam and across the region must rely on strong networks to effectively address the challenges that lie ahead. No institution can meet these challenges on its own. While some have already made remarkable progress in building resilient management structures, high-quality study programmes, and sustainable international partnerships, others are still at the beginning of this journey. Learning from one another and engaging in active exchange are key strategies to empower institutions and drive collective progress.

3. Sensitization! Decision-makers at universities are sensitized to how higher education management structures and capacity development can be strengthened.

It is essential not only to analyse the profound shifts in expectations placed on the higher education and research sector, but also to collaboratively develop strategies that enable universities to respond effectively—by identifying needs and designing targeted approaches for training and capacity development.

The main target group of this DIES-Workshop are a) decision makers at President- & Vice-President-level in universities from Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar b) heads of central management departments who are responsible for the topics outlined above, and c) educators and heads of faculties, academic departments and schools, responsible for the set-up of academic programmes. A total of 70 participants is expected.



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