

Undergraduates at the Hanoi University of Science and Technology studying integrated circuit design in March. Vietnam still faces a skills crunch as its talent pool has not caught up with its growth potential, but it is banking on its ambitious youth and their thirst for education to plug the gap. PHOTO: AFP



# Vietnam's secret sauce – its young people and their iPads

The country's growth potential has been talked about. Its ambitious youth can help to realise it.

**Lim Sun Sun and Viet Anh Vu**

Upon entering the living room of a bright and tidy home in Ho Chi Minh City's Binh Tan district in 2017, co-author Lim Sun Sun was struck by two things: the child-centred nature of the home and the premium placed by the family on education.

She was there to conduct research on how Vietnamese parents managed their pre-school children's digital device use.

Many living rooms she entered in Ho Chi Minh City bore the same hallmarks.

They were adorned with very large, professionally framed and photographed portraits of the household's little tykes wearing fine clothes (occasionally graduation gowns) and flashing their best smiles.

During the research interviews, the parents spoke with pride about how precocious their children were and how they were supporting their children's educational pursuits.

These living rooms also often had a sizeable study area with a proper child-size study desk and chair, alongside bookshelves lined neatly with storybooks, workbooks and educational toys.

Parents spoke animatedly about how they wanted every advantage for their children, including the latest iPads to help with everything from the alphabet to music to numeracy.

It was clear that these young Vietnamese families were filled with ambition. They saw education as the pathway to social mobility and spared no expense in giving their children a leg-up in the scholastic race.

This quest for academic achievement at the household level mirrors the entire country's push for educational excellence at the national level.

## INVESTING IN EDUCATION

Vietnam has made substantial investment in education in recent years.

As reported by the Vietnam National Institute of Educational Sciences, the country spent 4.9 per cent of its gross domestic product on education between

2011 and 2020.

The 2019 Law on Education stipulates that at least 20 per cent of the government's budget should go towards education and training.

National Academy of Education Management director Pham Quang Trung said: "If we aim to catch up with Singapore in another one or two years, I would say that it is impossible.

"But if it is in 15 years, we might be able to do so."

Catch up they certainly can, considering the burning ambition of Vietnamese youth.

The country is quickly making a name for itself as a dynamic economy drawing massive foreign investments from multinational corporations from around the globe seeking a viable alternative to China.

The key to Vietnam's allure lies in its industrious workforce, 49.5 per cent of whom are aged 15 to 39. These adaptable young men and women with a voracious appetite for learning and zeal to succeed are the not-so-secret engine of the Vietnamese economy.

Education has been a critical part of this enviable demographic dividend.

In a 2018 World Bank report, Vietnam received acclaim for its education system, boasting a primary school attendance rate of 98 per cent and a lower secondary school attendance rate of 85 per cent.

Indeed, it surpasses many of its South-east Asian neighbouring nations in the Programme for International Student Assessment tests and performs admirably on a global level as well.

From 1990 to 2019, Vietnam

experienced a remarkable 46 per cent increase in its human development index, one of the highest rates globally, placing it within the high human development category.

Why are Vietnam's youth doing so well academically? Apart from the efforts put in by the parents and children and the support provided by the government, there are also cultural and historical factors at play.

The people have a strong work ethic that flows from an embrace of Confucian principles and the country was determined to rebuild after the war.

Indeed, in applying for his position as director of the Singapore Management University's Overseas Centre in Ho Chi Minh City, co-author Viet Anh Vu, who had grown up in Vietnam, studied in Europe and worked in Singapore, was motivated to return home to help build up the country's education system.

When he left for the UK at the age of 16 for the very first time, he found himself juggling studies and part-time work, at one time travelling two hours by train daily to get to work.

He had an insatiable curiosity about the West and augmented the English he learnt at school by watching MTV.

He now hopes to provide Vietnamese youth with the mentorship that he himself had lacked. He also seeks to promote a two-way talent exchange between Singapore and Vietnam as the country tries to realise its economic potential.

## OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

As the Vietnamese youth gear up

to seize the day, opportunities are opening up for them.

With the ongoing artificial intelligence race driving competition in the semiconductor industry, Vietnam is positioning itself as a key node in the global supply chain.

The country's start-up scene is also booming.

Investment in Vietnamese start-ups exceeded US\$1.3 billion (S\$1.76 billion) in 2021, with over 3,000 start-ups established as at July 2022, birthing no less than four unicorns.

Ho Chi Minh City's start-up ecosystem value alone is estimated to have an economic impact of US\$5.22 billion, behind only Singapore and Jakarta in the region.

The country's tech-savvy and entrepreneurial youth are creating all kinds of innovations in sectors from fintech and e-commerce to logistics and tourism.

The country still faces a skills crunch as its current talent pool has not yet caught up with its growth potential.

For example, it has only 5,500 chip design engineers whereas the semiconductor industry needs 5,000 to 10,000 per year.

It is banking on its ambitious youth and their thirst for education to plug the gap.

Vietnam's market for video games is projected to reach US\$922.8 million by 2027 but it faces a talent crunch.

That is why institutions like the Hanoi University of Science and Technology and FPT University are offering degrees in game design, computer science and programming to meet industry needs.

To achieve its true potential, the country also needs to address challenges such as bureaucratic red tape and inadequate intellectual property protection, which can deter investors.

It has already started cracking down on corruption through a campaign that intensified last year.

Termed "blazing furnace", this crackdown has revealed the involvement of several business people and officials in corrupt practices.

In the short term, this has had a chilling effect on the economy.

The decision-making process has ground to a halt as officials are afraid to endorse projects and procurement that could potentially come under investigation.

And yet this campaign is exactly what could make Vietnam a transparent, well-regulated and more attractive destination for foreign investment.

More importantly, it helps to forge an environment for the younger generation to thrive and creates opportunities for them to enter key decision-making roles to make positive changes.

In future, today's little tykes, with their thirst for knowledge, could prosper in the Land of the Ascending Dragon.

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