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by Laurie A. Drabble, Edward Cohen, Hoa Thi Nguyễn, Alice Hines, Debbie Faires, Tuan Tran and Patrick Thanh An Ngô



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epress@unitec.ac.nz
www.unitec.ac.nz/epress/
Unitec Institute of Technology, Private Bag 92025,
Victoria Street West, Auckland 1010, Aotearoa
New Zealand





Article

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ABSTRACT

This case study describes the leadership component of the Social Work Education Enhancement Project (SWEET), an international collaboration designed to strengthen the capacity of Vietnam's undergraduate social work programmes to deliver quality education. SWEET strategies for building capacity in leadership and administration include the following: 1) leadership development, 2) development of university-specific and collective strategic plans, and 3) improving collaboration among leaders. Thematic analysis of qualitative evaluation data identified eight effective elements of the leadership programme. Findings underscore the importance of partnership and flexibility in planning, as well as the value of supporting a leadership consortium to guide ongoing national efforts for improving higher education in social work.

INTRODUCTION

Although social work services have been provided in Vietnam in one form or another since before the French colonial period (prior to 1962) (Oanh, 2002), the development of formal social work education programmes in higher education were only formalised in the 1990s (Hugman, Lan, & Hong, 2007). During the formative years of social work education, the Vietnamese government partnered with universities and funders (such as the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund [UNICEF]) to facilitate consultation on curriculum and programme development from international experts (Hines, Cohen, Tran, Lee & Van Phu, 2010; Hugman et al., 2007). Data compiled by the Ministry of Labour, Invalids, and Social Affairs (MOLISA, 2014) underscores the need for professionally-trained social workers in Vietnam to respond to the concerns of approximately 1.4 million individuals in need of social work services including elderly populations; households living in poverty; people with serious mental health issues; people with disabilities; victims of natural disasters; and children who are orphaned, impacted by HIV/AIDS, or living with autism or intellectual disabilities.

Social work in Vietnam has advanced rapidly over the past decade. One of the key milestones in formalising social work education involved approval by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), which oversees higher education, of a core undergraduate curriculum in 2004. This was followed by implementation of an updated core curriculum in 2010 (Nguyen, 2010). In 2004, there were only four social work programmes (Nguyen, 2010); however, as of 2014, there were over 40 universities offering undergraduate degrees in social work (Ministry of Labour, 2014). Social work was officially recognised by the government as a profession in 2010 and plans were initiated to expand social work education as well as training for professionals (Vietnam Office of the Prime Minister, 2010). Formal recognition of social work allowed for development of salary ranks, professional standards, and other policy changes conducive to the development of the social work profession in Vietnam. Until recently, there was no consortium of social work educators in Vietnam (Hines et al., 2015), which was identified as an impediment to advancing social work educational standards and the field as a whole (Lan, Hugman, & Briscoe, 2010).



Social work education in Vietnam continues to evolve, but is impacted by many contextual factors. For example, a national shift in authority for the higher education curriculum from the Ministry of Education and Training to local universities has afforded new opportunities for strengthening professional education in social work and other fields (Khanh and Hayden, 2010). Although recognition of social work as a profession was formalised in policy, understanding about the mission and focus of social work and social work education is still evolving (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2017). Furthermore, differences in the health and welfare needs of different regions of the country underscore the need for both generalist and specialised social work training (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2015)

Despite the rapid growth in social work education in Vietnam, several key challenges continue to hinder the delivery of social work education. Specific challenges include underdeveloped curriculum resources; a dearth of Vietnamese-language texts and educational materials; few faculty members with social work teaching experience, practice experience, or higher degrees in social work; limited field placement opportunities with experienced supervisors; and a need for strong national associations of social work professionals and social work educators to help inform national policy (Durst, Lanh, & Pitzel, 2010; Hines et al., 2015; Hines et al., 2010; Lan et al., 2010). Challenges related to scarce resources and the need for stronger field-training infrastructure are also faced by other countries in the East Asia and Pacific regions (Furuto, 2013).

Rather than taking an approach that would see Western social work knowledge transferred uncritically, efforts to advance social work education through international collaboration require consideration of the local cultural and political context (Gray, 2005; Hugman, Moosa-Mitha, & Moyo, 2010). Successful knowledge transfer initiatives in countries such as Vietnam require the development of trust, bi-directional exchanges of ideas and information, and willingness on the part of foreign 'senders' to adjust approaches to knowledge transfer based on recipient capacity to receive, value, and use knowledge (Napier, 2005). Support from, and engagement of, senior administrators and leaders is crucial to the success of knowledge transfer initiatives, as such support is needed to explore how new ideas may apply to local contexts, to strengthen collaborative networks required for implementation of initiatives, and to reduce potential barriers to knowledge translation such as intergroup/university rivalry (Napier, 2005).

THE CASE STUDY

The Social Work Education Enhancement Project (SWEEP), led by San José State University (SJSU), was implemented to address challenges in social work education in Vietnam, grounded in an approach emphasising collaborative planning and capacity building. San José State University's involvement in Vietnam began as part of a UNICEF-funded project which included the transmission of a foundation-level social work curriculum in the areas of policy, human behaviour, practice, and research (Hines et al., 2010). Relationships and insights from these early collaborative efforts created a foundation for a successful grant proposal to the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) to establish a three-year cooperative agreement to implement SWEEP. SWEEP was designed to address shared issues in four key areas: administration and management, faculty development, curriculum development, and development and training in technology to facilitate networking and communications (see Hines et al., 2015, for a description of the overall SWEEP project structure, staffing, goals, and activities).

Engagement of leaders and other stakeholders was pivotal to the success of the SWEEP project and the development of sustainable plans for continued advancement of social work education in Vietnam. In a political and social context where decision-making processes were typically hierarchical, cultivating relationships, credibility, and 'buy-in' amongst leaders was key to ensuring the success of all four areas of SWEEP. For example, strategies involving training, capacity building, and curriculum innovation with faculty members would not be feasible without the support of leaders. The leaders included university administrators responsible for the development of academic departmental programmes, department deans and directors, and representatives of key government ministries.

The overall approach in the development of the SWEEP project emphasised core values of collaboration, capacity building, and focus on local knowledge and solutions. From this perspective, the role of the SWEEP team involved supporting the development of a shared vision and creating opportunities to define and pursue shared goals. The SWEEP project engaged both leaders and faculty members from partner universities in a wide range of training and collaborative planning activities, which were grounded in an assessment of stakeholder needs and priorities. The needs



Shared Needs of Partner Universities and Final SWEEP Objectives Related to Administration, Management and Leadership

| Needs Assessment Findings | SWEEP Leadership Activities |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Additional management and human resource skills, including skills relevant to leading social work programmes • Introduction to social work principles and practice for leaders often trained in other disciplines • Additional management and human resource skills, including skills relevant to leading social work programmes • Introduction to social work principles and practice for leaders often trained in other disciplines • Strengthening collaborative capacity between universities | Strengthening Leadership and Administration/Leadership Academy |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capacity-building for leading and sustainable planning in relation to other strategic areas identified in the needs assessment, such as faculty development and curriculum development | Strategic Planning |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhanced use of technology to support teaching and networking • Additional opportunities to collaborate with other universities, particularly in relation to addressing gaps in social work education | Consultation and Building Collaborative Capacity |

Table 1

assessment was conducted in the first months of SWEEP (between January and May of 2013) in order to align project activities to the needs of stakeholders. A total of 159 respondents were interviewed in focus groups and key informant interviews, including university leaders, faculty members, students, government ministry representatives and community agencies. Findings from the needs assessment were presented at each partner university to check the validity of the assessment findings and to modify the regional and collective assessment as appropriate. Proposed SWEEP leadership activities were also reviewed and vetted through communication with leaders by SWEEP team members who were stationed in Vietnam.

Table 1 provides a summary of findings from the needs assessment related to leadership, administration and management (see Hines et al., 2015 for additional detail). Needs assessment findings were used to define priorities for the intensive training sessions designed for leaders, called Leadership Academies, including topics to address and foci for discussion for in-person training workshops (described in more detail below). Needs assessment findings were also used to guide individual and collective strategic planning consultation as well as formulate plans for consultation related to collaborative capacity, use of technology, and advancing shared goals. Leaders were engaged actively throughout the project in developing and refining strategies for the project as a whole, as well as activities specific to the training and planning needs of leaders.

To address the issues raised in the needs assessment, the three priority SWEEP activities for strengthening administration and leadership included the following: (1) leadership development, primarily through an annual Leadership Academy, (2) assistance in development of strategic plans for each university and across universities, and (3) ongoing consultation to facilitate collaborative communication and planning between leaders, support progress in strategic plan implementation, and respond to emerging challenges and opportunities. The purpose of this descriptive case study is to provide a brief overview and thematic analysis of whether or not, and if so, how the three core SWEEP leadership strategies served to effectively build capacity and support leaders in their efforts to advance social work education in Vietnam.



METHOD

Case study design

Descriptive case studies are ideal for describing a phenomenon in the real-life context in which it occurs (Yin, 2014). Taking a holistic approach to analysis of a single case is an appropriate approach for a longitudinal case, where the focus is on changes that occur over a specific period of time (Yin, 2014).

Unit of analysis: SWEEP leaders

Leaders of organisations are frequently the primary subjects for case studies (Yin, 2015). The unit of analysis of the current case study primarily involved SWEEP leaders and, secondarily, documentation of initiatives in their own universities and their collaborative activities over the course of three years of SWEEP. SWEEP included leaders from eight partner universities. The eight participating SWEEP universities were selected based on geographical representation (northern, central and southern regions), a mix of urban and rural settings, and the willingness of universities' top leadership to participate in the SWEEP project. The initial five Vietnamese universities included three in the northern area: Vietnam National University, University of Social Sciences and Humanities (USSH) in Hanoi, University of Labour and Social Affairs in Hanoi, and Hanoi National University of Education; one in the central region (Hue University of Science); and one in the south (Vietnam National University, University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Ho Chi Minh City). The additional three universities were Vinh University, located in the north, Da Lat University in the central highlands, and Dong Thap University in the southern Mekong delta. A total of 33 leaders were actively involved throughout the SWEEP project (24 men and nine women). The core leadership group included three administrators (president, rector and/or dean) from each partner university, as these leaders all have responsibilities for directing the development of social work departments and curriculum. Because advancing social work education and practice is also linked to key government ministries in Vietnam, the leadership group included two representatives from the Ministry of Labour, Invalids, and Social Affairs, which has primary responsibility for the development of the social work profession in the country.

Data sources and analysis

Multiple sources of data were used for the case study. First, process evaluations of the three core strategies of the leadership component of SWEEP were conducted through brief interviews with leaders by SWEEP team members based in Vietnam. The interviews focused on leaders' strategic plans for enhancing social work programmes at their universities and documentation of progress toward achieving collective goals defined by leaders. The SWEEP team also conducted telephone interviews with leaders six months after the initial university-specific strategic plans were completed to track progress, and again during subsequent training academies. Second, Leadership Academies were evaluated through participant feedback at the time of the Leadership Academies (including quantitative daily and final-day surveys as well as qualitative data from open-ended survey questions and final-day focus groups). Surveys elicited participants' views on the effectiveness and applicability of the Academy, the extent to which the Academy improved leaders' professional skills, and participants' recommendations for improving subsequent Academies. Finally, data included transcribed notes from SWEEP team debriefing at the end of each convening of leaders as well as meeting summaries and other archival documents. Thematic analysis of narrative data from evaluations, summaries from interviews with leaders, and SWEEP team debriefing transcriptions were used to 1) provide a brief descriptive overview and 2) identify key successes and lessons learned in each of following three strategic goal areas for strengthening administration and leadership: (a) leadership development; (b) development of a strategic plan for social work education at each university and across universities; and (c) improvement of collaboration among leaders. These goal areas were derived from a needs assessment of universities and stakeholders at the beginning of the SWEEP project (Hines et al., 2015).

FINDINGS

Table 2 summarises themes related to elements of the SWEEP project that were perceived as effective from the perspective of leaders. Specific themes are described in relation to three goal areas: leadership development, strategic planning, and strengthening collaboration among leaders.



Themes About Effective Elements of Final SWEEP Strategies for Strengthening Administration, Management and Leadership

| Leadership Strategies | Themes |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| Leadership Development | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on translation of ideas to Vietnam context • Mapping out a structure for continued collaboration across universities • Importance of relationships and social capital |
| Strategic Planning | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concurrent attention to university-specific and collective planning • Engaging new leaders for continuity and sustainability |
| Improving Collaboration among Leaders | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consultation to support initiatives that leverage long-term change • Emphasis on respectful partnership • Use of technology in support of communication and collaboration |

Table 2

Leadership development

An annual Leadership Academy brought separate cohorts of university leaders together to provide intensive training and opportunities for discussion designed to advance the overall goals of SWEEP and to facilitate development of working relationships between leaders required to sustain development of social work education. The first two Leadership Academy events (in 2013 and 2014) brought leaders to San José for a week-long series of trainings, meetings and site visits to community agencies. The final Leadership Academy was organised in Vietnam as a two-day training for new leaders (in January, 2016), just prior to a three-day final planning session with all leaders.

Key training topics included strategic planning focused on expanding or improving social work educational programmes in the universities; strategies for strengthening infrastructure and expanding resources for faculty development in teaching and scholarship; and leadership and collaboration at university, regional and national levels. Leaders were also provided with an introductory training in use of Cisco technologies, since use of internet communication tools such as TelePresence and WebEx were essential to the project. Because many of the leaders were trained in other disciplines, the training also included an overview of core social work concepts, and trends in social work education and practice. The overall structure of the Leadership Academy involved providing brief presentations from experts about research, models, and/or best practices in topic areas followed by discussion about how ideas might be relevant to or adapted to Vietnam contexts. Site visits to local agencies afforded leaders an opportunity to learn about social service delivery and field education models in areas that were identified as priorities in needs assessments (e.g., social protection for children and elderly, hospital-based social work, mental health services and social work in school settings). Networking events were designed to introduce leaders to local Vietnamese American social workers, connecting leaders with social work professionals who speak Vietnamese, understand Vietnamese culture, and have experience and knowledge about social work education and practice.

Three themes emerged in relation to determining effective elements of the Leadership Academy: a) translating ideas to the local context, b) mapping out a structure for continued collaboration across universities, and c) the importance of relationships and social capital.

Focus on translation of ideas to local context

Thematic analysis of narrative comments from evaluation data and interviews provided insight into both content and training strategies that were perceived as particularly valuable and effective. The practice of following presentations from experts with discussion about relevance or adaptation to Vietnam contexts was perceived as useful. A comment made by one participant, “The presentations help us understand the benefits and methods to apply these ideas to [the] Vietnam context,” was typical of the observations.



Leaders also valued the focus on topics relevant to their role as administrators, such as competency-based education, best practices in leadership, field education models, and models for collaboration in advancing social work education and workforce development. For example, one leader noted, “when other programs focus on specific content, SWEEP also focused on activities for leaders – this was especially significant as the leaders had chances to learn and share knowledge about their experiences in education administration with other leaders and scholars from a developed country like the US.” Another leader noted, “The training provided new scientific knowledge about management, but also helped the university administrators change the way they manage social work and other educational programs.” Participants also valued efforts to balance structure with flexibility throughout the event (e.g., maintaining a well-organised agenda while calibrating content to address emerging questions and adapting agenda to accommodate more discussion). “We learned a great deal from the content” summarised one participant, “and we also learned about how to organize a very effective training [session].”

Mapping out a structure for continued collaboration

One of the gaps identified in the first Leadership Academy was the absence of a formal national organisation of social work educators, and one notable outcome of the Leadership Academy involved progress in development of a national consortium for advancing social work education. The Leadership Academy included training and facilitated discussion with an expert from the California Social Work Education Center (CalSWEC), the largest state coalition of social work educators and practitioners in the United States. “The U.S. collaboration model is very interesting, and can be replicated in Vietnam,” noted one leader. The presentations and discussions with CalSWEC centred around models and strategies for organising stakeholders from university, community, and government sectors to develop common goals for workforce development, educational standards, and curriculum. By the final year of the project (2016), leaders agreed to sustain and formalise a national consortium of social work educators and other stakeholders to continue collaborative planning. “The establishment of a SWEEP consortium will help leaders discuss and create a road map to develop social work, solve common problems, and mobilise resources from member universities such as teaching materials, research experience, field practicum models, and relationships with social service agencies,” summarised one leader.

Importance of relationships and social capital

Leaders valued the opportunity for immersion in collaborative planning and discussion held away from their individual universities, both during the Leadership Academies and gatherings in Vietnam. This was important, since in the initial needs assessment leaders described an environment characterised by competition among the universities for resources and prestige, and they expressed a desire by leaders to collaborate more productively with each other in order to improve social work education in the country. Networking events, structured discussion sessions and time for informal conversations among leaders helped foster working relationships. “Participants had a chance to build personal and professional relationships; many of them had not met before the Leadership Academy. ... They were more tentative at first, but over the course of the week began to really talk with one another,” observed one SWEEP staff member who translated for, and worked with leaders throughout the training. These strengthened relationships were critical to fostering the willingness of leaders to create time and invest other resources toward advancing shared goals.

University-specific and collective strategic planning

SWEEP leaders each developed a strategic plan to improve social work education at their respective universities. SWEEP team members worked with leaders to refine the plans and to align training and consultation activities with common priorities. Two key themes emerged in this area: 1) the importance of concurrent attention to university-specific and collective strategic directions, and 2) the need to engage new leaders to ensure sustainability of collaborative planning.

Concurrent focus on university-specific and collective planning

Progress toward having a national impact was fuelled by helping leaders shift from a sole focus on university-specific planning to collective planning. Two strategies emerged as critical in this area. Firstly, SWEEP used Leadership Academy sessions in the U.S. as well as strategic planning consultation in Vietnam to establish and make progress on specific common goals and objectives. The following statement from a participant exemplified the impact of work on common goals: “We [leaders] developed strategies to improve social work education in our universities, enhance faculty’s capacity,



improve field practicum, and increase research opportunities.” Secondly, national summits in Vietnam and follow-up meetings among leaders using video conferencing (WebEx) were used to review progress in common goals, share lessons learned, and align efforts related to development of social work education in Vietnam. One ministry representative commented on how the collective work with leaders was immediately useful to informing the priorities of the Vietnam Vocational Training Association and Vocation Association (VVTA), an existing collaborative of government, university and trade school leaders, and internal planning meetings between leaders and the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), which has ultimate authority for educational standards and policies. This individual summarised the collective impact of this work, noting, “The SWEEP project not only had an important impact on SW education and training, but also influenced the government authorities in shaping SW policies and regulations.”

Engaging new leaders for continuity and sustainability

One challenge in engaging the partner universities in the sustainability effort was the high turnover rate of universities’ leadership. “The role of leaders in developing policies for social work development is crucial,” was echoed by many. Rotation of leadership is common throughout universities and over the course of the three years of the SWEEP project, there were several changes in rectors and deans. For example, in some universities rectors and deans who committed to SWEEP activities subsequently retired. To address this issue during the project, SWEEP staff in Vietnam actively engaged the new leaders, encouraged them to participate in SWEEP activities, and invited them to speak at SWEEP events so that they became familiar with the project. By the end of the project, leaders agreed to establish a memorandum of understanding between universities to formalise the commitment to continue collaborative planning between university leaders. This is important, as one leader commented, to “help leaders at other upper levels have a better understanding about social work, which will create favourable conditions for faculties in research and teaching.”

Improving collaboration among leaders

The SWEEP leadership project also provided ongoing consultation to facilitate collaborative communication and planning between leaders, support leaders’ progress in realising strategic plan objectives, and respond to emerging challenges and opportunities. Three key themes emerged in relation to effective elements of this strategic area: 1) the importance of investing in initiatives that leverage long-term change, 2) the value of respectful partnership, and 3) the utility of technology in creating networks and sustaining collaboration.

Consultation to support initiatives that leverage long-term change

Based on shared priorities revealed during the Leadership Academies, strategic plan reviews, and annual summits, the SWEEP team worked with leaders to provide special consultation in two areas: development of competencies for social work education and development of a Training of Trainer (TOT) model to assist in project dissemination and sustainability. SWEEP resources were directed toward the primary grant objectives; at the same time, with permission of the funder, some resources were re-allocated to respond to emerging priorities of leaders. For example, resources were re-aligned in the final year of the project, based on leader recommendations, to fund staff time, travel, and materials to support development TOT pilots in three regions of Vietnam.

During a leadership convening in 2015, leaders decided that development of a national set of competencies for Vietnam social work education was crucial for the standardisation of the profession. “Competencies will not only standardise social work education throughout the nation, reducing the gap among students graduating from different programs, but will also help set the foundation for certifying and evaluating programs in the future,” summarised one leader. Leaders identified the development of competencies as an important focal point for leveraging change in social work education for several reasons. Firstly, leaders believed that defining specific competencies more clearly was timely in a political context where responsibility for the higher education curricula was shifting to universities from the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET). Secondly, leaders ascertained that the process of defining competencies would help to define and establish credibility for social work as an emerging profession that was not yet widely understood or appreciated. Thirdly, leaders felt that developing common core competencies was a reasonable approach to facilitating some consistency in training across universities while allowing individual universities to cultivate areas of specialisation appropriate to their regions. In subsequent meetings, leaders and faculty discussed explicitly avoiding approaches that were overly prescriptive and ensuring that competencies were framed in a way that would accommodate the priorities of different universities. The Vietnam



Vocational Training Association and Vocation Social Work (VVTA) was ultimately selected as lead in developing the competencies. VVTA drafted a new set of competencies based on materials provided by SWEEP universities and competencies from other countries, mainly the United States. Drawing from U.S. and international models, competencies were operationalised as knowledge, skills and values in key practice domains such as ethics; engagement, intervention and evaluation of practice with individuals, groups, and communities; respective diversity in practice; and connecting research with practice. Details about SWEEP activities related to competency-based social work education in Vietnam are documented in detail in another publication (Han et al., 2016).

Based on requests from leaders, the SWEEP team provided consultation, helped to convene university leaders, and finally helped to organise a national conference, inviting educators and experts from different regions of the country to provide input for the draft social work competencies. The final draft of the competencies was presented at the third SWEEP summit in September 2015. SWEEP partner universities identified key non-SWEEP universities in their regions to invite as participants in the summit. The following statement typified the perspective of leaders: “Competency-based education really transforms the way we teach and develop course material. Before, we just taught students what we know and based on the materials we have. Now, CBE challenges us further, makes us work harder to think about what students really need to know.”

Another initiative resulting from leader recommendations involved supporting collaborative Training of Trainers (TOTs) in three priority areas: competency-based education, field education models, and social work research publication. One comment, “It is important for all eight schools to be the first cohort, but we need to figure out how to spread training to other schools,” typified leader concerns. Three pilot TOTs were conducted in three main regions of Vietnam: south (Ho Chi Minh City), north (Hanoi), and central (Hue) to provide training for faculties from non-SWEEP universities. The SWEEP team provided technical assistance in preparing pilot training materials and organising trainings, which were implemented primarily by faculty from the eight SWEEP universities. In addition to disseminating tools developed through SWEEP that were useful to other universities with social work programmes in Vietnam, the TOTs were designed to enhance the capacity of SWEEP universities to sustain the project after the end of funding. “There is clearly a huge audience in Vietnam for these TOTs, as all the social work programs in Vietnam are struggling with the issues related to curriculum, field education, and research,” noted one leader who was involved in regional TOTs. The same leader pointed out that participants left the TOT prepared to make changes at their various universities.

Emphasis on respectful partnership

Throughout the project, leaders were recognised as the experts in priorities and strategies for advancing social work education in Vietnam. For example, universities in Vietnam have defined hierarchical relationships with the government’s Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), and all activities related to developing competencies and related curricular resources were discussed and refined based on leaders’ contextual knowledge of local politics. Bi-directional communication and exchanges of ideas with leaders informed implementation of SWEEP activities, large and specific. For example, comments from Leadership Academy evaluations and follow-up interviews revealed that participants valued the well-structured training that aligned with their priorities, as well as willingness of the SWEEP team to modify the schedule to address emerging questions, accommodate more discussion, or facilitate new site visits based on daily feedback. Evaluation narratives and debriefing notes identified listening, flexibility, and genuine mutual regard as an important theme. One leader captured this theme when reflecting, “besides training and content, it is very important that social work has heart – and I observed a lot of heart here.”

In addition to working in partnership with leaders to define and refine the activities of the SWEEP project, the team also worked to transfer ‘ownership’ of the SWEEP project to leaders over the course of the project. For example, three Annual Summits were held in Vietnam (Ho Chi Minh City, Dalat and Hanoi). These summits served to highlight lessons learned, share progress on SWEEP activities, and establish future plans. For example, summits allowed universities to showcase individual initiatives (e.g., institutionalising faculty training or social work curriculum improvements), engage in dialogue around shared concerns (e.g., development of common competencies), build relationships between universities, and participate in working sessions structured to identify immediate and longer-term actions for advancing social work education. The first summit was planned by SWEEP staff with leader input. SWEEP and Vietnam leaders co-planned, and presented at the second summit. During the third summit, the presentations were planned collaboratively between the SWEEP team and the university leaders and faculty, but presented entirely by the Vietnam universities. The final summit also focused on priorities for social work education that would continue after the end of the funded SWEEP project.



Use of technology in support of communication and collaboration

Comments such as “Communication between the universities is difficult – however communication is critical in the success of the project,” typified leader observations at the start of the project. The primary tools employed for communication and collaboration in the project were Cisco WebEx and TelePresence for synchronous meetings, and Google tools, particularly Google Sites, for asynchronous communication and archival purposes. For example, WebEx technology was used to convene meetings among the Vietnamese leaders. These sessions were organised by a SWEEP team member in Vietnam and were held via WebEx. Attendance and participation in these sessions increased as the leaders gained more experience with connecting to the WebEx session and managing the interface. A gradual transition shifted responsibility to the Vietnamese leaders for managing the meetings. The meetings also enhanced the social presence of each of the participants regardless of their geographic location. “The technology is very impressive; it is hard to think the others in this session are half a world away,” typified observations from leaders. In addition, technology was used to gather, organise and share documents among all project partners. Google Sites proved to be an excellent platform, in that it was flexible enough to meet the varying requirements for privacy or public sharing of files. For example, a public SWEEP site was set up in Google Sites to archive and share project resources and to foster communication. (Resources from the SWEEP Google site remain archived and available for public access: <https://sites.google.com/a/sjsu.edu/sweep/home>).

DISCUSSION

The findings of this case study underscore the importance of collaborative approaches in working with regional and national leaders to develop sustainable educational initiatives. The expertise of local leaders is a critical ingredient to investigating successfully how best practices or models from one country may be adapted to a different social and political context. Furthermore, findings point to the value of leveraging technology to facilitate communication and collaborative relationships across countries and across geographies within a country. Finally, themes from the case study point to the importance of sustainability planning from the outset of any international effort to impact education. For example, identifying and investing in leverage points for change that may persist after the end of the project was critical (such as adoption of competencies to guide social work education and development of Training the Trainer resources to help with continued knowledge translation).

This case study has several limitations: Firstly, it focuses on a case example from a single country and does not offer comparison of similar initiatives in other countries. Consequently, it is limited in generalisability. Secondly, although multiple data sources were triangulated in analysis, all the data sources were from SWEEP leaders and team members. Limited resources precluded collecting detailed data from other stakeholders (such as leaders from non-SWEEP universities). Consequently it is difficult to generalise about the influence of SWEEP beyond the partner universities, or to account for the impact of other educational initiatives that may have also influenced social work education in Vietnam during the course of SWEEP. Finally, the case study is based on data collected during the three-year SWEEP project period, and thus does not document the long-term impact of the project. It would require follow-up research to accurately assess the long-term impact of the SWEEP project on the universities and the practices of leaders. Furthermore, because educational leaders continue to be resourceful in leveraging other collaborative opportunities for educational programme development (e.g., through partnerships with other universities and through international professional associations such as the International Association of Schools of Social Work [IASSW]), it would be difficult to assess the unique contribution of the SWEEP project. In addition, it is not possible in the current case study to assess the impact of the frequent rotation or change in leadership, either in relation to diffusion or dilution of leadership skills and approaches developed during SWEEP.

Despite these limitations, documentation and critical analysis of initiatives designed to strengthen education in health and human services are important to informing the work of other similar international collaborative projects in higher education in the Asia-Pacific region. For example, leaders ultimately recognised the importance of creating a consortium of leaders in national planning efforts. Specifically, the Leadership Consortium formed during SWEEP adopted plans to a) complete the development of the consortium’s organisational structure, b) continue organising how training content will be disseminated to the non-SWEEP universities, in collaboration with the national social work associations; and c) set priorities for inter-university collaboration in research, curriculum planning, continuing education and faculty development.

One of the challenges in Vietnam will be to address continued fragmentation of efforts. This



is a problem shared by many universities in other countries – initiatives are often fuelled by specific grant opportunities and existing individual relationships. Efforts to initiate large-scale, national-level change are often hampered by a lack of coordination of these efforts. However, SWEEP helped to put in place strategies to ensure the sustainability of initiatives developed during the grant period, including the leadership activities (consortium strategic planning, and communication network) described in this paper, use of technology for training and communication, and a website that archives training content for use by Vietnam’s stakeholders.

Another set of challenges is related to the early development stage of the social work profession as a whole, which is also relevant to other countries. Efforts to address these can be overwhelming to faculty and university leaders. However, the establishment of an academic consortium described in this paper has led to optimism by stakeholders that these challenges can indeed be surmounted over time. In addition, it is expected that the relationships established between the Vietnam leaders and SWEEP team members will continue beyond the end of the SWEEP project, as other opportunities for joint technical assistance and scholarship are identified.

Laurie A. Drabble, PhD, SWEEP faculty member, is a Professor at the San José State University (SJSU) School of Social Work. She served as coordinator of the leadership component of the Social Work Education Enhancement Project (SWEEP).

Edward Cohen, PhD, SWEEP faculty member, is a Professor at the San José State University (SJSU) School of Social Work and Co-director of the Social Work Education Enhancement Program. He teaches courses in research methods and international social work, and was recently awarded a Fulbright Scholar grant to teach in Vietnam.

Hoa Thi Nguyen, PhD, SWEEP Coordinator in Vietnam, is currently a Lecturer at Unitec Institute of Technology, Auckland, New Zealand. She earned her PhD in Social Work at the University of Minnesota, BA in English at Hanoi University, and her MSW at the University of Minnesota, U.S.A. Her research interests include economic empowerment for battered women, international women’s issues and programme evaluation.

Alice Hines, PhD, SWEEP Director, was Principal Investigator and Director of the USAID-funded Social Work Education Enhancement Project (SWEEP), a consortium of Vietnamese universities, government ministries, and Cisco Systems, Inc. She is also Special Assistant to the Dean at the College of Applied Sciences and Arts at San José State University.

Debbie Faires, MLIS, SWEEP faculty member, Lecturer and Director of Online Learning at the School of Information at San José State University, served as consultant in the use of technology and website development for SWEEP. She has worked in faculty development, website management and effective facilitation of synchronous online sessions.

Tuan Tran, MSW, served as Coordinator for the Social Work Education Enhancement Project (SWEEP) in Vietnam. He has worked in the field of social work since 1984, one year after he immigrated to the United States, and taught at the School of Social Work, San José State University, from 2004 to 2012.

Patrick Ngo, MSW, Former SWEEP Student Assistant, is a Psychiatric Social Worker at Good Samaritan Hospital in San José. Patrick earned his MSW at the San José State University School of Social Work and served as a Graduate Research Assistant with the Social Work Education Enhancement Project.



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