

Policy interventions for minority ethnic young people and Decent Work

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Introduction

Minority ethnic young people in most countries are some of the most likely to be unemployed or be in unstable or badly paid employment. Vietnam is a case in point where its minority ethnic young people face relatively low rates of employment, wages, job insecurity, job informality and poor working conditions.

To address these employment issues, Vietnam's educational policy interventions have included the provision of minority ethnic boarding schools and foundational programmes, differentiated access arrangements and specialised vocational or training programmes for minority ethnic young people. But how do these relate to the aspects of 'Decent Work' for students and graduates of higher education, that is, opportunities described by the International Labour Organization describes as

productive and delivers a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for families, better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, organize and participate in the decisions that affect their lives and equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men.

This policy briefing draws from a study examining the empowerment of minority ethnic young people (aged 18-25) to re-vision Decent Work in Vietnam with policy-makers, employers and university leaders (see the *overview of study* below). The briefing pinpoints key lessons and insights from Vietnam, one of the world's fastest growing economies, where policy initiatives have attempted to enable greater access to employment opportunities for the diverse communities of minority ethnic people living across the country (see *context of study* below). Specifically, the briefing identifies the range of impacts that the various initiatives seem to have on the young people, in terms of their sense of empowerment to be able to access and participate in Decent Work.

The briefing outlines practical ways policy interventions might change to deepen access to Decent Work for minority ethnic young people. Whilst the recommendations in this report are directly relevant to policy makers across the fields of education and work in Vietnam and similar developing countries, the underlying principles have a wider resonance and applicability to policy makers across other geographic contexts with similar characteristics. For example, the rising occurrence of informal and unstable work opportunities which do not provide sufficient wage 'to live' has been noted for over two decades in the UK and US. We invite all policy makers in the fields of education and work to consider the practical value of the recommendations and principles within this brief.

Overview of study Our study involved exploring social practices across geographic regions of Vietnam through surveys ($n=1275$), interviews ($n=117$), and appreciative inquiry groups ($n=90$) with young people (aged 18-25) and policy and practice stakeholders related to their recruitment (e.g. employers, employment agencies, and policy makers) (more information can be found online <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/projects/>).

Context of study: Vietnam has an aging population (a median age of 30.5 in 2015) and one of the few countries with continued GDP growth during 2020-2022 (ranging from 2.95% to 7.15% per annum since 2016). Minority groups represent 15% of the population, but there are over 54 ethnicities in this 15%. Most minority ethnic people are employed in farming (75.1%), and formal contracts outside of farming are fairly uncommon (8.1%) compared to the majority group (25.4%). Self-employment and unpaid work (within the family) are common, reflecting other growing Asian economies such as Bangladesh, Cambodia, and Nepal that are becoming increasingly engaged in international trade. Vietnam, like other fast-growing economies in Asia, has experienced high graduate unemployment as low as 27% in 2014. Graduate employability figures are difficult to establish but available figures indicate employment levels as low as 30% in some institutions. (Sources and further information: Demombynes & Testaverde, 2018; Tong, 2019; Statista, 2022).

Key points:

- 1. Minority ethnic young people in Vietnam are marginalised from mainstream structures because of long standing discrimination and lack of disruption to that discrimination.**
- 2. In addition to changing the supply of jobs, being locally responsive and empowering young people can change access to and participation in Decent Work.**
- 3. Vocational training for minority ethnic young people is the policy intervention associated with the most characteristics of Decent Work, so is a strategic investment to connect education and employment.**
- 4. Financially incentivised access to university for minority ethnic young people is strongly associated with Decent Work, but it only goes so far. Policies need to consider access and participation in university education.**
- 5. Access to higher education without an entrance examination and certification is associated with only some characteristics of Decent Work. Access and participation must be coupled across educational institutions.**
- 6. Boarding schools and foundation programmes dedicated to minority ethnic young people are associated with only a few characteristics of Decent Work. Employability empowerment should be strengthened with stronger visible representation and recognition of minority groups in policy work.**
- 7. Policy resources and representation can be skewed to majority groups in urban places. Institutions need to diversify representation across policy areas to impact minorities as well as the majority.**
- 8. Policy interventions need to go beyond coupling national priorities with localised knowledge. This requires policy organisations, educational institutes, and employers to collaborate closely at different spatial scales.**

Point 1: Minority ethnic young people in Vietnam are marginalised from mainstream structures because of long standing discrimination and lack of disruption to that discrimination.

In 2020, over 85% of Vietnam's poorest people (in terms of income) identified as an ethnic minority. This figure gives an indication of the extent to which minority ethnic people are excluded from Decent Work opportunities (e.g. forms of employment relationship which provide sufficient and stable levels of income).

Even with government policy initiatives specifically targeting minority ethnic people, the rate of ethnic minority people in formal employment and/or receiving training (for ages 15 and above) was low at 6.2% compared to the majority group which has more than tripled in recent years. This is especially surprising in Vietnam, as the wider economic picture of GDP growth should theoretically stimulate employment levels.

In part, such dynamics highlight that even when policy efforts train and develop minority ethnic people through highly targeted interventions, there are other employment processes simultaneously occurring. It is not enough to have the right skills, knowledge and qualifications.

Precisely, it shows the scale and significance of discrimination of minority ethnic groups in labour markets, even in rapidly changing economies like Vietnam. However, our research now provides evidence as to *what* interventions are linked to *which* aspects of Decent Work for minority ethnic groups.

Point 2: In addition to changing the supply of jobs, being locally responsive and empowering young people can also change access to and participation in Decent Work.

Economic conditions and social norms have a major influence on minority ethnic young peoples' access and engagement in Decent Work, especially in terms of the geographic supply of jobs. Research now also strongly suggests that within these wider economic constraints, a person's capabilities to change their employment and work situation can moderate such constraints.

'Employability empowerment' is a term we use to describe the feeling of being able to influence your life and future, and being flexible enough to do it over time. It includes **power within** (e.g. the self-awareness and confidence to believe they can change their employment situation), **power with** (e.g. being able to contribute to collective action to change their employment situation), **power to** (e.g. being able to deliver effective action to change their employment situation), and **power over** (e.g. expressing authority over others to change their employment situation).

We have found a strong link between a person's sense of employability empowerment and their experience of Decent Work. This confirms prior research that subject or technical knowledge and skill are generally not the strongest predictor of employability, and that this may vary by location, industry, and occupation. For example, in some urban areas with an oversupply in graduates of popular subjects such as business is likely to lead to under- and un-employment.

This means that policy effort needs to combine local intelligence about labour markets, issues and opportunities, with targeted interventions which are sensitive to these. For example, it might appear to be an appropriate policy choice to target investment in digital skills for minority ethnic young people. However, if there are few businesses or jobs providing jobs in these areas, the discriminatory social norms and dynamics might override such opportunities for minority groups, and continue to benefit the majority group. Indeed, if there is no local demand for such digital skills, neither minority or majority groups are likely to find work in this field. In effect, this policy intervention would not materially change this group's access and engagement in Decent Work.

Although our data from Vietnam do not current suggest that the effectiveness of policy interventions might have variable impacts across different ethnic groups, the following points should be understood with this possibility in mind (to reflect local circumstances).

Point 3: Vocational training provided by local government is the policy intervention associated with the most characteristics of Decent Work, so is a strategic investment to connect education and employment.

Out of all of the government interventions in our study, the most strongly associated with the characteristics of Decent Work was vocational training provided by local government but which is not specifically organised for minority ethnic young people.

The characteristics of Decent Work associated with vocational training were: having enough income for themselves and their families, regular income, stable work, support for flexible working and personal/professional development, a sense of belonging, an ability to express concerns at work, contribute to decisions at work, an environment with gender and ethnic equality and free from physical or emotional harm/danger, and work satisfaction.

Nationally provided vocational training specifically targeting minority ethnic young people (i.e. different to locally-arranged schemes), showed similar associations, but was not associated with having enough income for self and having regular income.

Locally provided vocational training was also the most strongly associated with the characteristics of employability empowerment, in terms of having the confidence, belief, relationships, roles, tasks, collaborations, skills in influencing, networks, and local knowledge of culture to improve participants' employability.

National vocational training specifically for minority ethnic young people was associated with having the relationships, roles, skills for influencing, networks, and local knowledge of culture, to improve their employability – but also the ability to make connections between settings to improve employment prospects (e.g. to translate skills between settings).

This insight helps to explain the success of Vietnam's 2009 policy initiative, Project 1956, which aimed to upskill 1-million rural labourers. As part of rural and agricultural industrialisation and modernisation, the project targeted marginalised groups which included minority ethnic people, as well as war veterans, economically poor and disadvantaged communities, people with disabilities and communities who are internationally or internationally displaced. By 2019, 9.6-million rural labourers had received training, and over 80% of trainees obtained new jobs or achieved a higher income.

Vocational training and training institutions' closeness to employers seems to create a strong connection between workplace requirements (technical and sociocultural) and students/graduates, and should be a strategic priority for funding and support.

To deepen and sustain this impact on Decent Work through education, models of higher education which operate in the same way should also be developed and supported, e.g. forms of work-based and work-integrated learning.

Point 4: Financially incentivised access to university for minority ethnic young people is strongly associated with Decent Work, but it only goes so far. Policies need to consider access and participation in university education.

Special access includes tuition fee waiver and State credit loan policies designed to remove the financial barriers to accessing higher education. These interventions recognise the generational and familial disadvantage and marginalisation that often inhibits access to employment.

After vocational training, financially incentivised access to university is the government intervention most strongly associated with characteristics of Decent Work: having enough income for themselves and their families, comparable pay, stable work, support for flexible working and personal/professional development, a sense of belonging, an ability to express concerns at work, contribute to decisions at work, an environment with gender and ethnic equality and free from physical or emotional harm/danger, and work satisfaction.

In terms of employability empowerment, special access is associated with having the relationships, roles, skills for influencing, networks, local knowledge of culture, ability to make links between settings, and ability to actually improve employability.

Despite these positive associations, special access does not address all the barriers to decent work facing minority ethnic young people. It does not change the social norms which minority ethnic young people experience whilst at university, where other students and teachers may not have sufficiently developed intercultural competencies.

Similarly, pre-university educational institutions may lack sufficient resources to provide adequate preparation for higher education. Such ongoing challenges have been associated with higher drop-out rates of minority ethnic students in higher education.

Point 5: Access to higher education without an entrance examination and certification is associated with only some characteristics of Decent Work. Access and participation must be coupled across educational institutions.

Access to tertiary vocational and higher education without an entrance examination and certification is more problematic in terms of Decent Work. This form of access is fairly uncommon in contemporary education practice, though it is similar to some practices of Recognition of Prior Learning (where experience is subjectively equated to a level of equivalence to an entrance exam).

In Vietnam, “Cu Tuyen” literally means “entry without examination”, and has operated for over a decade. During this time, majority ethnic groups continued to achieve more education places than minority ethnic young people, and 70% of the students who completed the programme still could not find a job.

The policy was revised in 2020 reflecting additional financial support to young people from smaller ethnic groups or those living in difficult conditions, and now requires local authorities (‘provincial people’s committees’ in Vietnam) to secure relevant employment when the student graduates.

We have found Cu Tuyen to be associated only six characteristics of Decent Work: having enough income for the family, having stable work, being able to express concerns at work, being able to contribute to decisions at work, experiencing an environment with ethnic equality, and work satisfaction. That is an association with less than half of the characteristics compared to the other initiatives above. In terms of employability empowerment, young peoples’ experiences of Cu Tuyen were only associated with awareness, relationships, and influencing others in terms of improving employability.

These findings emphasise the improvements needed in and during pre-tertiary systems which can often be in rural schools without the learning resources of urban schools. In pre-tertiary education, students lack the development of the majority ethnic language and other social and work-relevant skills. This, in effect, sustains their relative disadvantage compared to the majority group.

Similarly, during tertiary education, research indicates that teachers and career support professionals may not have the intercultural competence to effectively support and develop minority ethnic students. Oftentimes their experience is narrowly framed around majority ethnicity groups. Echoing the policy levers for financially incentivised access, investment in access and participation in higher education must be coupled.

Point 6: Boarding schools and foundation programmes dedicated to minority ethnic young people are associated with only a few characteristics of Decent Work. Employability empowerment should be strengthened with stronger visible representation and recognition of minority groups in policy work.

Vietnam has recognised the need for extended preparation for higher and vocational education. It established minority ethnic boarding schools at upper secondary school and extended foundation programmes, which brings the education of smaller ethnic minority groups into line with majority ethnic groups.

Minority ethnic boarding schools were associated with only two characteristics of Decent Work: having enough income for the family and experiencing a work environment with ethnic and gender equality. The minority ethnic foundation programme was associated only with one characteristic of Decent Work: having stable work.

Our research also highlights that minority ethnic boarding schools and foundation programmes were associated with the fewest aspects of employability empowerment. For boarding schools, young peoples' experiences of empowerment were focused on having the skills, awareness and roles to help improve employability. For the foundation programme, young peoples' experiences of empowerment were focused on engaging in tasks, and having skills, relevant to improving employability.

Aspects of employability empowerment should be further strengthened in these initiatives, driven by the principle of access and participation mentioned above. Most notably, the visible representation of minority ethnic people who are now in positions of power may help to boost the confidence and belief that they, too, can become influential in society. As these initiatives are visibly differentiated for minority ethnic young people, this wider representation and recognition are critical for wider appreciation of minority ethnic people.

Point 7: Policy resources and representation can be skewed to majority groups in urban places. There is a need to diversify representation across policy areas and their resourcing to impact minorities as well as the majority.

The order of the government initiatives above, reflecting reducing associations with Decent Work and employability empowerment, reflects a model of increasing targeting: from mainstream education through to targeted education for marginalised groups.

This targeted model helps to explain, in itself, how disadvantage is sustained over time through entire systems; minority communities are naively stereotyped as 'lesser' in comparison to the majority. This difference is represented throughout the education system and in government. The majority group is often represented as the most educated and powerful in society. This can be seen in the distribution of financial expenditure and support in geographic regions, for example, urban versus rural areas.

Skewed representation can also be seen in the ethnicity and gender of teachers, of employers/recruiters, and as government officials. Evidence now even shows how this is represented in educational resources including text books. These are very subtle differences, but these subtleties matter.

The distribution of resources and representation matters to minority groups because it provides a reference point for their own self-esteem and confidence as productive and positive contributors to society. But it also matters to majority groups, because it provides a societal reference point for who is expected to do, and who is capable of, doing certain roles in a society. And when there is an over-supply of graduates within fields, these differences (and discrimination) become even more prominent.

Point 8: Policy interventions need to go beyond coupling national priorities with localised knowledge. This requires policy organisations, educational institutes, and employers to collaborate closely at and across different spatial scales.

As location has a major role in the access to and participation in Decent Work, local knowledge of industries, occupations and issues need to be combined with national priorities. This is primarily because investment in an industry in one area can have knock-on effects in other areas, as people move between locations to seek Decent Work opportunities.

In economies where there is a level of decentralisation, local interpretation of national policies, and an emerging governance structure, there can be highly variable implementation in practice. National coordination therefore is an area needing strengthening, for example, in stimulating the development of certain subjects, skills, or geographic regions.

Our research has highlighted that policy organisations, educational institutes, and employers, do have an interest in collaborating to help improve access to and participation in Decent Work. This can include working together to share local intelligence of local labour markets and issues.

Such information is essential to support collaborative workforce planning and business support in certain locations, as well as to put in place new educational opportunities, for example, work-based and integrated learning in priority subjects, skills, geographies, and industries.

In the case of Vietnam, where minority ethnic young people may have a strong desire to work for government departments, this might include apprenticeship or internship opportunities in public services with a view to promote the visibility and recognition of minority ethnic people in leadership roles across society.

Conclusion

This policy briefing outlines policy initiatives and lessons from Vietnam that may be helpful in tackling the global challenge of the lack of Decent Work for too many. It argues that different policy initiatives are variously associated with particular aspects of Decent Work, and further suggests that a young person's sense of empowerment is important when it comes to employability.

Vocational education seems to be most closely associated with minority ethnic young peoples' experiences of Decent Work, followed by financially incentivised access to university, and access to education without examination. Minority ethnic boarding schools and foundation programmes are initiatives associated with fewer aspects of Decent Work.

Here, a key lesson is that investment must be made not only into enabling minority ethnic young people to *access* higher or vocational education, but into enabling their *participation* whilst in these organisations. This involves changing the educational and work opportunities *before* and *during* higher and vocational education so that when young people engage in an educational establishment, they are equipped to positively engage.

It also involves creating learning environments where minority ethnic people are visibly valued as positive contributors to society – as influential citizens such as teachers and community or business leaders. This positions minority ethnic people as positive frames of reference and role models for enhancing the confidence, esteem, and belief of future generations.

Revisioning policy interventions with these principles in mind, Decent Work should become a more realistic prospect for growing numbers people who typically are disadvantaged. As Decent Work can mean improving pay and working conditions to afford more realistic living conditions, it will enhance the ability of some of the most marginalised in society to move out of poverty and hunger, and enjoy a greater sense of life satisfaction.

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