PREPARING STUDENTS IN VIETNAM FOR STUDY ABROAD

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ABSTRACT

This paper will examine the issues faced by Vietnamese students while studying abroad. It further explores the motivations that initiate their study abroad process, the concerns they have before and after their journey abroad, and ways institutions and government levels can facilitate study abroad. Finally, the paper will suggest how policy makers and study abroad professionals can better prepare students for the process.

Keywords*: Study abroad, educational policy, student affairs*

1. Introduction

In the past few decades, the numbers of foreign students participating in higher education programs worldwide have increased at a high rate. In 2017, there were 5.3 million internationally mobile students in the world, up from 2 million in the year 2000 (Neghina, 2017; UNESCO, 2019). Most of these students went to study in six countries: the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, France, Germany and Russia. In the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries alone, the number of international students enrolled in higher education institutions increased 2 percent between 2010 and 2017 (OECD, 2019). Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States hosted 40 percent of these international students. Students from Asia constitute the largest group of international students participating in educational activities, accounting for 56 percent of all foreign students in OECD countries in 2017 (OECD, 2019). Studying abroad has become a global trend when students learn another language, experience another culture, and have a better understanding of the world.

In Vietnam, following the open-door policy initiated in 1986, the country has developed rapidly compared with other countries in the region since the 1990s. In light of the economic development, the Vietnamese government has considered education as "the first priority among national policies" (MOET, 2013). As a result, there have been huge improvements in the past three decades. Private institutions have been allowed to flourish, universities have been given more autonomy, and one university was in the top 1,000 global university ranking in 2019. However, Vietnam's education is under the tight control of the government and its higher education system is still influenced by the former Soviet model. These account for the current crisis in Vietnam's higher education, which is expected to take a long time to overcome. On the one hand, the system must work harder for more decentralization, improve its

accountability, and increase the role of the academic community in every decision made by the university (Salmi & Pham, 2019). On the other hand, universities are still facing a lot of challenges including how to be more research-focused, how to be more internationally engaged, how to improve their academic salaries, and how to increase their graduates' employability (Anh & Hayden, 2017).

Owing to the economic development, more Vietnamese families are sending their children to other countries, especially English-speaking countries, to study than ever before. Statistics of the number of Vietnamese students in other countries varies, but Education Minister Phung Xuan Nha said in 2018 that 170,000 Vietnamese were studying abroad. This is a significant number compared with 106,000 in 2012. Ashwill (2018) reports the number of Vietnamese students studying abroad in 2017 at 61,676 in Japan, 31,613 in the United States, 23,000 in Australia, and 15,000 in Canada. In other words, over two-thirds of Vietnamese students studying abroad go to these top four destinations.

Universities in Vietnam, local authorities and the government have various student services for student success, but specifically the following areas have been in place to support this huge number of students wanting to study abroad: academic services, financial aid, orientation, and interview skills. To help students with English, most universities have English clubs for students to improve their speaking and listening skills. As far as financial aid is concerned, there are various programs from the government and local authorities to sponsor students' study abroad such as Program 332 or Program 911. On a smaller scale, some universities send select students to foreign countries for further training. Obviously, the selection process is competitive, and selected students should be competent in both English and knowledge of their fields of study. In addition, universities also cooperate with their foreign partner institutions in giving scholarships and assistantship to their students. As mentioned earlier, most universities in Vietnam have collaborated with universities from many countries in the world. Information sessions are regularly held in preparation for their students to study abroad with speakers coming directly from these partners. Universities in Vietnam also hold mock interviews and help prepare students' resumes for future job search. These skills are also useful for students' application to foreign universities.

Studying abroad has been the dream of many students (Institute of International Education, 2018; Khanal & Gaulee, 2019). This is especially true of students from Asia wanting to study in such top destinations as the United States and the United Kingdom. However, studying away from home in a foreign country where things are so different from what students are familiar with presents many challenges. This paper will highlight a research study, focused on the experience of Vietnamese students going to college in other countries. The article aims to examine

the issues faced by Vietnamese students while studying abroad and what home and host institutions can do to help students overcome the issues.

Specifically, the paper begins with a brief introduction of Vietnam's higher education system and student services related to study abroad and reviews previous studies relevant to study abroad. The study highlights a study using Social Capital Theory to understand more about the motivations of Vietnamese students studying abroad. The final sections present suggestions to policy makers and study abroad professionals on how to better prepare students for the process.

2. Relevant literature

International students, who are in foreign countries to participate in educational activities and whether they are there for a few credit hours, an exchange program or stay there longer, are a growing population. In the United States alone, the number of students from U.S. higher education institutions participating in study abroad activities increased by 23 percent over a period of 10 years from 2006 to 2016 (NAFSA, 2019). In developing countries, upon their return, this population is playing an increasingly important role in local economy (Cheng et al., 2010; Sumer et al., 2008). Meanwhile, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia have become leading destinations for international students (Asian Development Bank, 2014; Institute of International Education, 2018) due to their economic development, educational advances, and the English language of instruction. Current

literature on international students identifies four reasons why they want to study abroad. First, students want to gain skills and life experience (Alba & Sidhu, 2015; Botas & Huisman, 2013; Reilly & Senders, 2009; Vetter & Wingenbach, 2019). Study abroad gives international students a chance to meet new people and see new things, thus enhancing their real life experiences. It also makes their experiences more applicable. Second, study abroad is also a chance for students to study a foreign language more effectively (Alba & Sidhu, 2015; Bae, 2013; Botas & Huisman, 2013; Djafri, 2018). Through daily interactions and practice with peers, professors and other speakers of the language, students improve their multilingual competence. Another reason for students' decision to study abroad is they know a different culture (Botas & Huisman, 2013). Integration into the new culture makes students aware of the cultural environment of the target language. Last, study abroad makes student's future employment more secure (Botas & Huisman, 2013; Chen, 2014; Potts, 2015; Tsang, 2013; Vetter & Wingenbach, 2019). Studying in a foreign country, normally in a country with an advanced education system, students learn such employability skills as interpersonal communication skills, acceptance of diversity and real-life experience. Although these skills do not ensure employment, they are very useful when students apply for a job.

Two main factors influencing students' plan to participate in study abroad. First, students are affected by the Social Capital elements (Salisbury et al.,

2009). This happens in the pre-departure of study abroad when students are affected by family members as well as their peers and teachers. Students' decision to study abroad is then fortified by their professors at foreign institutions they are attending. An equally important factor affecting students' plan to study abroad is their socio-economic status (Salisbury et al., 2009). Finances play a decisive role in study abroad as it is not cheap to pay for all the required paperwork in the pre-departure period. Nor is it cheap to pay tuition fees and living expenses as international students typically pay a much higher rate of tuition than local students.

While studying in a foreign country, students are faced with several issues. First, they must face the language barrier (Cowley & Hyams-Ssekasi, 2018; Khamal & Gaulee, 2019). Most international students studying in an environment where the language of instruction is not their mother tongue face this issue because they are not as fluent in the language as local students. As a result, they might struggle understanding lessons and class discussions. Related to this issue is that they have problems in social interactions with local students and professors (Li & Zizzi, 2018). The second issue study abroad students typically have is they are inactive learners and lack critical thinking skills (Young, 2017). As a result, they do not participate in class discussions or give personal viewpoints. Next, international students studying in a foreign country normally have financial issues (Khamal & Gaulee, 2019). In addition to paying a level of living

expenses higher than those at home, international students face rising tuitions which have already doubled and tripled the tuitions in-state students pay. One more issue faced by international students is cultural adjustment (Alba & Sidhu, 2015; Khamal & Gaulee, 2019). In the initial stage of study abroad, most students experience cultural shock. In addition, they have problems getting used to the foreign culture and education system (Adisa et al., 2019). The last issue, related to the previous one, is reverse culture shock (Adisa et al., 2019; Alba & Sidhu, 2015; Le & LaCost, 2017). Although this issue is not as popular as the previous four, some international students, upon returning home after study abroad, find it difficult to reintegrate into their own culture.

3. Theoretical frameworks

This study used the Social Capital Theory to guide the research questions, methodology and analysis of the findings. The Social Capital Theory, initially introduced by Bourdieu (1986), Coleman (1990), Fukuyama (1995), and Putnam (1995), suggests that what a person does is the result of a combination of social relationships. A person's social participation is, therefore, measured by the number of social contacts that person has (Grootaert et al., 2004; Lindstrom et al., 2002). In education, social capital is the number of social contacts a student has with other individuals either at home or in the community. It is the involvement with these contacts that helps create the student's social context (McDonough, 1997; St. John & Asker, 2001). In other words, student's educational choices,

including the decision to study abroad, are guided by a number of uncontrollable variables, and are influenced by family members in the home setting, friends and acquaintances in the community setting, and peers, teachers, advisors and mentors in the university setting. The influence is an ongoing process, shaped in the early years and before college and reinforced while the student is in college.

4. Methodology

This experimental study employed a qualitative research design (Patton, 2002) for collection and analysis of data. Specifically, this study used the intrinsic case study design to explore how students in Vietnam prepare for study abroad, what issues they face and how institutions support them. The research instrument was a list of 19 open-ended questions intended for interviews of 60-90 minutes. For interviews, the study employed criterion and snowball sampling. Only individuals with critical knowledge of Vietnamese students studying abroad were selected. At the end of the interviews, they were asked to recommend additional participants. There were a total of 22 interviewees, including two university presidents, four deans, three faculty, seven academic and student affairs administrators, and six students currently studying abroad. All the interviews were conducted in Vietnamese and translated by the author. The collected data were coded and themes emerged from the findings. In addition, document analysis of government documents associated with study abroad was also conducted.

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What factors lead to a large number of students studying abroad?

2. What issues do students face while studying abroad?

3. How have higher education institutions helped student overcome these issues?

5. Findings

Analysis of the data collected from the interviews and government document analysis revealed four themes: Motivations for study abroad, issues faced by students while studying abroad, concerns about study abroad program, and support that students receive from home and host institutions.

5.1. Motivations

The participants in the study discussed five reasons for studying abroad. First, most of them agreed that students learn many skills while studying abroad. For the vast majority of the study participants, most study abroad destinations have a more advanced education system. For that reason, studying abroad, especially in Western countries, provides students with the skills they need when they go to work:

> Because of their comprehensive education, they pay attention to not only theory but also practice, not only professional skills but also supporting skills and life skills.

With a few exceptions, "they" and "their" almost always refer to Western English-speaking countries, where most parents want to send their children to and most institutions are aiming at for collaboration. However, there was increasing interest in acquiring these skills from institutions in Singapore, South Korea and Germany.

The second reason why students wanted to study abroad is they will have better job opportunities on returning home. This motivation was agreed upon by most of the participants, who asserted that studying in a foreign environment gives students a chance to obtain experience and skills expected by employers:

> At foreign universities, students learn the practical skills required for work. For that reason, they can start work right after graduation while in here students have to learn too many things which, to me, are not necessary.

To prove that securing a job is much easier for students with foreign experience, one of the participants, who is a university president, stressed that he would rather hire a Vietnamese candidate with a master's degree from a foreign country than employ a Ph.D. holder from a domestic institution. It should be noted that the phrase "foreign university" used by the participants does not refer to any university in any foreign country, but instead, is intended to mean a prestigious university in the list of popular destinations for Vietnamese students, which may include Japan, the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, Singapore and a few others. However, one of the participants, considering the fact that this is the working environment in Vietnam, added that it would be best for securing a job if a candidate has both Vietnamese and foreign experience and skills, preferably from a Vietnamese undergraduate program and a foreign master or Ph.D. program.

Another reason urging students to study abroad is that they will have a higher income in the future job. It is normally the case that when people further their study and get a degree, they get a pay rise although how big the rise is depends on what field they work in, whether it is private or public, and in which city their organization is located. However, if they further their study in a foreign country, it is a big advantage:

> Having a foreign diploma does not only entail more opportunities for employment, it also means a higher income compared with a domestic one.

Some participants raised growing concerns among parents and employers that some employees had to be retrained for a specific job after they have graduated from a domestic institution and have been offered that job:

> I haven't seen this, but I have read in the news about businesses' complaints of having to hold short training courses for new employees although they have finished college.

It is true that some workers cannot do their jobs well. They have been trained to do the jobs but they lack the required knowledge to do it. This happens across many fields but is seen to be more common in the public sector and state organizations. This is less frequently seen in the private or foreign-invested sector due to their competitiveness and tighter recruiting process. Meanwhile, domestic institutions are recognized to have connected with businesses in an attempt to improve school-industry relationships

and increase their graduates' quality. However, some of their graduates have not met employers' expectations. That is the reason why some students choose to study abroad instead of going to a domestic institution.

Last, students study abroad to have better understanding of the world. In today's world of internationalization and integration, when improvements in technology and trade have brought people closer to each other, big companies are present in multiple countries. This requires global citizens to be responsible, flexible, and value diversity. Two participants pointed out that this can be achieved through study abroad. One stated that by living and working in a community of people coming from different places in the world, students learn to respect other people's viewpoints and preferences. Another participant claimed that the international students' environment is ideal for students to learn to be responsible and flexible. These participants agreed that study abroad helps students to understand why people do what they are doing, and therefore learn to be more tolerable.

5.2. Study abroad-specific issues

Despite students' determination and eagerness to study abroad, once they are in the foreign country, they soon discover that they are faced with several issues, one of which is their limited English-speaking ability. Many of the participants noticed the importance of English in communication and lectures. Although students have reached the required English standard, they still find it difficult to understand lectures or take part in class discussions. Although sometimes it is because students are not familiar with different accents or vocabulary, the issue arises due to students' inability to understand spoken language and lack of fluency in expressing themselves.

One more issue students in this study faced were learning styles in relation to coursework. Four of the six current students said that they are overwhelmed with the readings they must do every week. For each course they take, they were assigned with several book chapters and journal articles to read before class. Most of the time in class was for discussion, so they reflected on, if they did not finish these readings they would not understand what their peers are talking about, or would not be able to participate in discussions.

In addition, finances were an important issue while abroad. Participants claimed that there were many things they have to spend money on, but most of the money goes to tuition and fees, rent, airfares, and books. They added that some students may have funds from the university they are attending or support from programs in Vietnam, but most students are self-sponsored using money from their families' funds. For that reason, having enough to pay tuition fees and living expenses while abroad is really a challenge for most students.

Integrating into the target culture was identified by the study participants as the last issue. Many of them agreed that to communicate effectively, it is important to understand local people and

their habits. If not, the conversers may find themselves in an awkward situation:

> I know that in the U.S. you have to queue and wait for your turn. That's why I once stood behind a lady in a Chick-fil-A restaurant. Then I heard somebody say "Excuse me?" I turned round and saw several other people in line behind me.

It takes a while for foreign students to understand local people's cultural patterns.

5.3. Student concerns

Participants raised a few concerns from what they experienced during pre-departure leading up to the post-study stage that could be improved. First, some participants complained of the long and complicated preparation process. Three participants said they had to fill in a lot of forms for their study abroad program. Another participant noted that she had to get two different approvals for her study program, one from her institution and the other from the Ministry of Education, each of which took several months to get through. These examples seem to suggest that bureaucracy is still a problem.

There was growing concern about students' job after they return home. Two of the participants said they are basically doing the same things they did before going abroad. One observed that he does not need to spend time studying abroad just to do exactly what he has done before. In other words, what he has learned from abroad cannot be applied in his job. The other participant agreed with the first participants, adding that the institution where he is working does not

have the basic equipment (strong computers and Wi-Fi) for the software he needs in his work, nor does he have the support or encouragement from the institution administrators. As a result, they do not feel the effects of their study abroad at their institutions.

Participants were also concerned about what they called the current brain drain. Both administrators in the study noted that some of the students, upon finishing their study abroad or graduation from a program, decide to stay in the host countries. The presidents pointed out that institutions and the country lose a number of talents and researchers in this way. According to the dean, if a student wants to stay in the host country, it is because of the better working conditions in that country. One of the participants, however, insisted that it is also good for those students deciding to pursue a career in host countries. She argued that they will contribute to human development wherever they work. Moreover, it may be a better way to help the country because they can develop their talents and collaborate with colleagues and institutions in Vietnam.

Last, there was concern about a decision by the Ministry of Education, which requires the holder of foreign-issued diplomas to apply for a certificate from the Ministry. Starting 2018, graduates from all foreign institutions must have this certificate for their diplomas to be recognized. One participant said that there is too much paperwork required for this certificate, and that it might take up to six months to get the certificate from the Ministry of Education.

5.4. Student support

As international students benefit host institutions and countries in many ways, the most important of which is to contribute to institutions' revenues and the countries' economic development, institutions have a number of ways to support international students in dealing with the issues they have. First, there are programs to help those students struggling with English. English clubs are places where international students practice the language with local students. They can also join various on-campus activities such as contests, gatherings, and festivals to interact with English speakers. The collected data showed that institutions also have a pool of other activities from pre-arrival to graduation to help students integrate culturally and excel academically. In the initial stage, recruiting officials provide detailed instructions on application, immigration policy and the itinerary to the university; then there are volunteers to meet students at the airport and help with lodging. When students have arrived, there are orientation sessions to provide information of the university, the college, study programs, and regulations. Students also join various clubs and associations to socialize and get involved in campus activities, and participate in short training sessions on topics such as how international students file tax or how students get access to the databases in the institution's digital library. In addition, every year institutions offer scholarships provided by generous donors, many of whom are alumni. As some scholarships are merit-based and some others are need-based, and there are many such scholarships, international students can rely on these funds to help them overcome financial issues.

Home institutions help study abroad students with information sessions, paperwork, and collaboration with foreign institutions. Several participants stressed the role of information sessions and study abroad fairs held by home institutions with the presence of foreign institutions staff. The information they provide helps students decide the appropriate foreign institution and area of study. Participants also admitted that instructions given by study abroad staff on filling various forms in the application process are helpful. In particular, one participant noted that most home institutions are in collaboration with institutions from different countries, and their collaboration activities give students opportunities to come into contact with foreign staff and professors, which helps them decide potential study abroad destinations.

For those students under government programs, the support from the government is very important. At the national level, Program 332 and Program 911 have sent thousands of students to foreign countries for advanced study with tuition and living expenses covered. At the local level, such programs as Program 6 in Dong Nai also give rise to a lot of students studying in foreign countries.

6. Discussion

This study supported prior literature in study abroad for most of the findings are consistent with existing literature.

The study identified five factors motivating students to study abroad, three of which are training skills, better job opportunities, and better understanding of the world. These findings concur, respectively, with the reasons of gaining experience and skills (Alba & Sidhu, 2015; Botas & Huisman, 2013; Reilly & Senders, 2009; Vetter & Wingenbach, 2019), future employment (Chen, 2014; Potts, 2015; Tsang, 2013; Vetter & Wingenbach, 2019), and knowing a different culture (Botas & Huisman, 2013). The motivation of higher income found in this study would be stronger if workers in Vietnam had a bigger income. The last motivation, new employee retraining, adds one more reason for study abroad.

The findings of this study align with current literature of the issues, which include language barriers (Cowley & Hiams-Ssekasi, 2018; Khanal & Gaulee, 2019), inactive learners (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019; Young, 2017), financial issues (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019), and cultural adjustment (Adisa et al., 2019; Alba & Sidhu, 2015; Li & Zizzi, 2018). Although these findings are similar to existing literature, the study was different from prior studies. While Young (2017) indicated that students do not want to participate in class, this study found that Vietnamese learners are not familiar with so many readings before class, noting an important confliction and suggesting that the overwhelming feelings are attributed to students' inactiveness.

The present study found that both home and host institutions have done much to help international students deal with the issues when they are abroad. Institutions have created the environment for students to break through the language barriers, organized activities for them to integrate into the new culture, given the necessary support for them to succeed academically, and partially provided the means for them to survive financially. However, it all depends on individual students' determination, whether they decide to return home or pursue immigration in the foreign country, to take the opportunity to learn professional skills and soft skills to meet the expectations of potential employers.

This intrinsic case study is intended to shed more light about higher education in Vietnam. It is meaningful for individual students, institutions, and the higher education system. For individual students, study abroad is a chance to advance their education and get a job with a potentially higher income. For institutions, study abroad provides a source of human resources with higher quality. For the higher education system, this is a chance for administrators to consider solutions for their critical issue, i.e., how to improve the quality of graduates. However, the findings reveal that study abroad is also meaningful beyond Vietnam's higher education system. First, when students return from study abroad, they will not only be able to find a job with a higher income, but also contribute to the high-quality human resources of the country. Second, study abroad is the product of collaboration between institutions in the world. Both of these seem to suggest that the findings are also meaningful in

education for economic development and collaboration with other education systems in the world.

7. Implications for theory and practice

The results of the study contribute to the theory and practice of higher education in Vietnam, particularly in study abroad. First, the findings may be viewed through the lens of the theoretical framework. Social Capital Theory suggests that students' educational choices are influenced by their social context, which includes family, peers and schools. In the current Vietnamese context, the top destinations for study abroad are such popular Western countries as the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada due to their advanced education systems. However, more and more families and institutions are also interested in geographically closer destinations as Singapore, Japan, South Korea, and Australia, all of which also have advanced education but are more convenient for students can return home for a visit or parents can conveniently visit them. This suggests that when the social context changes, it is likely that students' choices will also shift from Western countries to Asia Pacific countries or a balance between them.

The findings of the study also suggest that bureaucracy still exists in Vietnam's education. Students fill out multiple forms in hard copies, get two approvals, one of which is from the Ministry of Education in the capital city, and wait several months to get the result. In this era of electronic devices and internet connections, filling an online form and sending via a website is a

matter of minutes. This is what policy makers should consider to make the application process simple.

Most importantly, the study indicates that there is a difference in the learning styles between Vietnamese and foreign students. While students in Western countries are very active in class, Vietnamese students, especially older generations, typically apply a passive learning style, going to class with an empty head and waiting for the teacher to teach them knowledge. It is also the case that they are ready to accept what is taught without much discussion and very rare criticism. For complete understanding of what they are studying, and applying it to practice, students should have an idea of what they are going to study and discuss it thoroughly to know all the aspects of it. Therefore, this may be a prompt for study abroad professionals, in the pre-departure stage, to coordinate with faculty in disseminating this learning style to help students prepare better for their overseas study.

8. Conclusion

Extensive research has been conducted on various aspects of study abroad, including factors influencing students' decision to participate, specific reasons for joining study abroad programs, issues students face, and support given by host institutions. However, little is known about study abroad by Vietnamese students, especially how institutions and governments have supported them. This study identified five reasons why Vietnamese want to study abroad, four most common issues they face while

studying abroad, four concerns about the program, and numerous ways institutions have done to support them. Based on the findings, this study recommends that, in addition to financial and language supports, paperwork on study abroad application be tailored to the minimum and wherever possible be submitted online, and that students' learning styles be changed in a way to make students more active in class discussion. All these would not only better prepare students for study abroad participation, but also help them get used to the typical class atmosphere in foreign countries, which would in turn contribute to their success while studying abroad.

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TẠO ĐIỀU KIỆN CHO SINH VIÊN VIỆT NAM DU HỌC NƯỚC NGOÀI

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TÓM TẮT

Bài nghiên cứu về công tác quản lý sinh viên này khảo sát những khó khăn sinh viên Việt Nam phải đối mặt khi đi du học nước ngoài. Dữ liệu thu thập được còn cho thấy những động cơ thúc đẩy sinh viên quyết định ra nước ngoài du học, những băn khoăn lo nghĩ trước và sau khi đi du học về, và các trường đại học trong lẫn ngoài nước đã tạo điều kiện như thế nào cho việc du học của sinh viên. Cuối cùng, bài nghiên cứu đưa ra một số gợi ý nhằm tham mưu cho các nhà hoạch định chính sách và các chuyên viên phụ trách du học ở các trường nên áp dụng nhằm chuẩn bị tốt nhất cho sinh viên khi đi du học.

Từ khóa: Du học, chính sách giáo dục, quản lý sinh viên