Chapter 10

International students' aspirations to contribute to socioeconomic development in Vietnam

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Introduction

Employability is often associated with international students' motivations for studying abroad. Yet studies about international graduates and returnees remain scarce with fragmented findings about their aspirations and opportunities for relevant jobs and career pathways when they return home. This chapter aims to understand Vietnamese international graduates' aspirations to contribute to socioeconomic development in Vietnam upon returning home. The chapter explores the Vietnamese returnees' conception and development of aspirations for themselves and their local communities in their work and community participation. It analyses the nature of aspiration as a *process of aspiring* in two dimensions. First, aspiration is a process of *being* - where a person expresses her selfhood in relation to her society. Second, aspiration is a process of *functioning* - what a person does and can achieve in that society. These two dimensions operate dialectically in that what a person does is determined by her aspiration, which in turn, shapes what she can aspire to. Understanding aspiration as a dialectic process, not just a state of being, is helpful in telling us how aspirations are conditioned, as well as telling us about the opportunities that a person might have to pursue her future. The chapter extends on the goal-oriented idea of aspirations as determining factors in achievement (Hart, 2013).

The chapter begins with a brief discussion of literature about aspirations of international students broadly, and specifically for returnees. The next section discusses Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* in guiding the analysis of the process of aspiring. This is followed by the discussion of the Vietnamese returnees' aspirations at three levels of social fields: the national State level, the institutional level of work place, and the individual level of interactions with others. The chapter concludes with some implications for research about returnees' aspirations to contribute to socioeconomic development of their country.

Current literature about aspirations of international students, graduates and returnees

With a goal-oriented focus, the literature about international students' aspirations often centre on motivations for studying abroad in terms of what they will be able to achieve as a result of their education. The majority of such research focus on student mobility and often draw

attention to the push-and-pull factors from home countries to host countries. Pull factors are job opportunities in the local and global markets; push factors are lower educational quality or lack of access to universities in their home countries (Altbach, 2004; Li & Bray, 2007; Mazzarol & Sutar, 2001). These push-and-pull factors are viewed as external forces that are often presented as generalised interests, rather than attending to the individuals and how they may respond to these push-and-pull factors. Using such a viewpoint, there is an assumed homogeneity of international students' aspirations, and their capability to aspire and take actions to realise their aspirations.

Similarly, research about graduates' aspirations when they return home tends to focus on job outcomes and employability. Within a small and highly fragmented body of research that enquires about returnees, the emphasis is around the benefits of acquired international education - particularly Western universities - in providing graduates' positional advantage in the employment markets. International education is often framed as a status marker in home countries, and valuable cultural capital for returning Asian students - especially those in East Asia (Chen & Zimiatat, 2006; Matthews & Sidhu, 2005; Ong, 1999; Waters, 2006). Furthermore, international education is seen as returnees' aspirations for positional opportunities for work and employment because of its potential to change professional and personal identities (Pyvis & Chapman, 2007).

However, as Lewis (1992) noted, while there tends to be positive reports in regards to jobs and employability for graduates as a result of the elite status of overseas education, the assumptions in this body of research tend to be about benefits of overseas-acquired work-related skills which are beneficial for jobs access - and the findings remain fuzzy in establishing directions and connections between accessing local jobs and overseas-acquired skills. Furthermore, there are also studies that point to the insignificance of international education prestige in the local environment, or that positional advantage is dependent on various other institutional, cultural, social and political factors (Campbell, 2010; Canon, 2000; Crossman & Clark, 2010; Kiley, 1999). It is these factors in the local contexts that actually contribute to transformative benefits of studying overseas such as fostering career goals, personal and professional development, and new perspectives on life and work.

Another dominant theme in research about the outcomes of international education is international students' changed viewpoints, beliefs and attitudes. Again, the discussion of personal changes emphasises returnees' adaptability for the industrialised workforces such as communication skills, flexibility to work in different environments, international mindedness or flexible citizenship (Ong, 1999). The idea of overseas education as conducive to "self" transformation has also been put forward as potential for returnees to act upon their acquired self-actualisation attributes to modernise their society (Marginson, 2014; Morris & Sweeting, 1995). Drawing on Adler's (1975) idea of personal growth and transformation, Shougee (1998) claimed that international students develop self-awareness and self-discovery which lead to self-control, self-direction, self-reliance and self-confidence. Other studies have noted the autonomous identity and ability to form self-trajectories, gained from living in new culture and speaking new language (Alred, 2003; Barber, 1983; Gill, 2010; Ka et al., 1992; Ip, 2006; Murphy-LeJeune, 2003). However, these studies often focus on international

students from Western countries, where there are similar cultural values in the host country of education. Furthermore, despite the transformative focus on selfhood, these changed attitudes are seldom linked with returnees' aspirations for social development beyond personal economic pursuits.

Similarly, as Marginson (2014) noted, self-formation is inherently contradictory where international students are pulled between cultural flexibility and cultural uncertainty and confusion, and they may not all achieve confidence to realise their self-actualisation. The idea of self-orientation and self-trajectory that might lead to self-transformation thus depends on individuals' positions with their social relations within specific social settings, which are historically grounded. As Campbell (2010) noted, the relevance of self-attributes in shaping motivations and goals, depends on the extent to which the home culture has similar values to those underlying attributes of foreign societies of host universities, and the extent to which the graduate has invested in acquiring those overseas attributes. So while there is some evidence of students' self-discovery and development of some form of systemic thinking about their identities and practices (Carlson et al., 1990), there is not enough research evidence about whether these changes relate to academic, work or community integration upon re-entry, or how they construct returnees' aspirations in their work or in civic life. Likewise, Carruthers (2002) argued that research have yet to come to grips with embodied aspects of citizenship (indigeneity) and how can they be reconciled with flexible aspects of citizenship (international mindedness) acquired from overseas studies as advocated by Ong (1999). There is much needed research about the aspirations of international graduates from their self-formation perspective, as well as the opportunities and practices that they engage in, as a result of their aspirations and awareness of their local environment. As noted by Cuthbert et al (2008), the focus of research on international outcomes and benefits can be situated from the graduates' perspectives, and within the context of their local communities: what they aspire to do in respect of their acquired international education and what they can achieve for themselves and their local communities in the long run.

Against this research landscape, the chapter explores the aspirations of Vietnamese overseas-educated returnees to contribute to Vietnam's socioeconomic development. The discussion considers the influence of the historical, social, political, economic and institutional contexts in shaping the Vietnamese returnees' aspirations, and how they respond to these conditions as they see their "self" in relation to the State, the workplace, and the people they interact with in their daily experiences. The focus is on understanding the conditions that shape returnees' aspirations, which influence their capability to aspire to contribute to Vietnam's socioeconomic development.

This chapter draws on the findings of a case study about the experiences of Vietnamese overseas-educated returnees in their work and community work in Vietnam. The case study involved 280 surveys and 48 follow-up interviews conducted with overseas-educated Vietnamese academics and professional workers, and members of their networks, in various economic sectors across the four major cities of Vietnam. The findings discussed in this chapter draw primarily on the interview data with the returnees. A brief outline of the

conceptual framework that guides the analysis of these interviews is now presented, followed by the discussion of the findings.

Conceptual framework of aspiration and *habitus*

There are three dimensions of Bourdieu's *habitus* which are useful for the analysis of aspirations. First, *habitus* emerges from a "practical evaluation of the likelihood of the success of a given action in a given situation [which] brings into play a whole body of wisdom, sayings, commonplaces, ethical precepts" (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 77). For Bourdieu, people adjust their motivations and needs based on their assessment of their chances of success and failure common to them as members in the same social groups. This adjustment is "practical" rather than "conscious" because *habitus* predisposes actors to select forms of conduct that are most likely to succeed in light of their resources and past experiences (Swartz, 1997). In other words, *habitus* orients actions according to anticipated consequences in practical situations. In these practical situations, individuals are predisposed to conceive and develop their aspirations.

The second dimension of *habitus* that Bourdieu emphasises is time. He argues that actions must include time as an essential component because *habitus* is the linking of past experiences to present experiences (Bourdieu 1980). Bourdieu (1977) describes individuals' behaviour as *strategic* as they move through constraints and opportunities that they grasp through past experiences and through time.

The third dimension of *habitus* is its collective basis, where individuals bring a *habitus* to their interactions with others in social situations (Collyer, 2004). Individuals who internalise similar life chances share the same *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1977). Thus, it is worthwhile to examine *habitus* in order to understand how aspirations are formed and realised by individuals within their social fields.

Through Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, aspiration is the dispositions (*habitus*) of returnees to take choices and actions, and at the same time, aspiration also acts to construct a system of dispositions, or *habitus* of returnees (Pham, 2016). The dialectic nature of aspiration is that while individuals have to contend with *habitus* that may seem deterministic, their actions also serve as a means, or *strategies* for them to create future possibilities of change (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Aspirations, thus, should be seen as artefacts of culture - but not in static and deterministic ways. Rather, aspirations are part of the process of establishing and re-establishing culture (Billig, 1994) as individuals interact with others, and in response to surrounding economic, social and political, and institutional conditions. Using *habitus* to understand actions and dispositions as corresponding to past experiences and time, we can come to understand the nature of aspiration as a dialectic process that structure people's motivations; and at the same time their actions (to realise their motivations) shape the conditions that produce those motivations in the first place (Bourdieu, 1977).

In this chapter, aspiration is examined through the *habitus* of the Vietnamese overseas-educated returnees. The focus is on understanding the returnees' conception and development of aspiration as a *process of aspiring*, rather than a fixed state of aspiration: how might returnees appropriate and negotiate their overseas-acquired skills, knowledge and attributes as cultural capital to conceive their aspirations; and how might their choices and practices in realising their aspirations construct and reconstruct those aspirations that determine their goals in the first place. As suggested, analysing aspirations as a process highlights that aspirations are not context free. They are contextualised and formed from and through a person's recognition of, and her interactions with her surrounding social structures and relations. At all times, a person has to negotiate aspirations that are cultivated in relation to societal norms, as well as renegotiate those aspirations to make her own decision. In turn, and depending on the agency process and opportunities presented to her, she can develop her own aspirations, share them with others, conceal them from others, or adapt to the aspirations as expected or imposed on her (Hart, 2013).

The *process of aspiring* is therefore located within one's social relations and interactions with others. Noting the work of Hart (2013) on aspirations, there are two aspects within the *process of aspiring* that can be seen as separate yet immanently linked. First, the *being* aspect of aspiration: how one sees oneself in relation to one's society shapes one's dispositions to choices and practices. Second, the *functioning* of aspirations: what one does in society as one interacts with others in social fields; it is goal-oriented. Understanding aspirations as a process allows for identification of the social conditions of aspirations, how individuals respond to and shape those conditions, in order to create alternative conditions for them to aspire.

Literature about aspiration tends to view aspiration in terms of the *functioning* aspect that is goal driven. For example, government policies for education and training often view individual achievement and outcomes as determined or constrained by aspirations. As discussed in the previous section, literature about international education outcomes that focus on jobs and employability often assume that international students' aspirations are somehow raised due to their ability to utilise their acquired skills, knowledge and attributes to achieve their objectives of jobs and employability. Acquiring international education is thus seen in research literature as a means to encourage international students to function in a particular way, that is to work in industrialised economies and in terms of Western ideals of neoliberalist flexible workforce. Somehow they are able to do this anywhere and everywhere as if it is a linear process of creating aspirations, which then leads to pursuit and achievement of goals (Pham, 2015). In this chapter, the analysis of the returnees' aspirations takes account of the functioning of aspirations or the returnees' goals, as well as how and why these aspirations are constructed. This is achieved through the relational analysis of their perception of their "self" in their society, at the three levels of national, institutional and individual.

Self and the State

Economic actor

At the national level, the main aspirations of the Vietnamese returnees seem to be about acquiring jobs and career advancement for personal economic betterment rather than improving Vietnam's social development. Almost every returnee interviewed views wealth accumulation as the main purpose of education in Vietnam, to accord with his or her family or community expectations about overseas education. Minh says:

> The view about education in Vietnam is to get a degree and a good job in society, which will lead to having a lot of money. In Vietnam, people do not really choose a job based on their career direction, or passion but more because of high salaries because of their need for money. They would choose whatever job that gives them a good income. Minh

Minh's comment suggests that education is a means to achieve jobs and income. Choices of job are based on an instrumental goal to accumulate wealth rather than individual interest and direction. This idea of wealth attached to education also echoes Pham Minh Hac's (2012) claim that wealth is valued for personal benefits rather than for the whole society (personal includes family in Vietnamese society). Such aspirations reveal the embedded economic values of education in general, and particularly the idea of international education as a step towards job opportunities and economic benefits. Minh's comment is similar to many returnees interviewed. Their expressions overwhelmingly reflect the sentiment of economic pragmatism of Vietnamese society broadly, as a societal response to the *Doi Moi* economic reform to foster a market-based economy, incentivised by their perceived positional advantage of overseas education in the labour market (Pham, 2016).

More than half of the returnees said that they returned to Vietnam because they would be more advantaged in Vietnam's labour market compared to overseas, in regards to accessing jobs and business opportunities with high economic rewards;

> For me, I returned to Vietnam because there are many more opportunities here for me. Thanh

> To a certain extent, overseas educated people have more jobs opportunities here than overseas. My

As Long comments below, the pursuit of wealth is beyond economic necessity as most Vietnamese international students are well established in society. Rather, such desire reflects the fervent materialist outlook in society, which predisposes returnees to taking choices that prioritise economic benefits;

> The focus on money is now habitual. Even if their salary is raised, their greed also rises. They would do anything to gain material benefits. The more money there is for them, the better it is. Long

While Long comments on the possibilities of institutional factors like salary scales as a driver for economic motivations, he seems to emphasise an internalised set of values about economic betterment as a cultural disposition. Long's idea of materialism is close to Bourdieu's (1998) idea of "economic necessity as a virtue". His expression of "greed that rises with salary as habitual" is similar to Bourdieu's idea that economic betterment is cultivated from internalised experiences, rather than a result of exogenous conditions of actual economic needs (Bourdieu, 1998). These comments of Minh and Long suggest that returnees are predisposed to view overseas education as opportunities to gain economic betterment.

Many other interviewees also speak about the Vietnamese society's value of overseas education for money making opportunity. Moreover, they perceive the instrumental value of education to be embedded in societal values, not just something newly acquired from overseas studies. As Thu says:

> Economic necessity has to be questioned in terms of the broader social context. Material needs have always been around, but why is it that in olden times, people study overseas and come back and want to do something for their country, but now the young generation come back and want to earn high salary for themselves? Thu

Thu's comment suggests there are conflicted objectives between the materialist view of education and the traditional view of education to develop a person's substance. This is a point of vigorous debate in the Vietnamese literature. Hoang Tuy, a public intellectual noted the contradiction in Vietnam's current vision of education between the economic value of education in modern Vietnamese society and abstract knowledge as the substance of a person in the Confucian era where education was valued for the sake of education (Hoang Tuy, 2011). Similarly, the private benefits undergirding the motivations for international education have also been questioned by some Vietnamese nationalists. Le Thi (2013) argued that the public intellectuals who studied in France in colonial times had higher ideals of nationalism compared to those who studied and grew up in the socialist world of the Soviet Union or in the current education system despite the State's promotion of nationalism and national identity (London, 2010; Salomon & Vu, 2007). For these scholars, the seemingly lack of desire to contribute to Vietnam's national development diverges from the historical trajectory of overseas-educated anti-colonialists in the early 20th century.

While the aspirations of the returnees in this study may echo the economic goals often noted in the literature about student mobility and the emphasis on jobs and employability, they seem to be contested rather than uniform, and are embedded in how they view themselves in relation to the State. Nga says:

> That's all there is, getting a good job whether or not it pays back the investment by their parents. That's because that is all we could do. Nga

Nga's comment suggests seeking a return on investment of education is not the main reason for aspiring to jobs and economic benefits, but that a lack of possibilities for social development engagement beyond jobs. Other returnees also question the economic objectives

of education generally, and resolve their own questions by reasoning their aspirations as a response to their scepticism about the State's intention to provide a social safety net for citizens, which force them to seek opportunities to secure their own economic wellbeing. The consistent expression of economic objectives among returnees reflects Bourdieu's idea of *habitus* as "transforming social and economic necessity into virtue by leading individuals to a kind of immediate submission to order" (Bourdieu, 1977, p 82). While for some returnees, this kind of submission legitimates economic aspirations, the fit between dispositions to and positions of economic wants are varied between individuals, and seem more than just unconscious adjustment in practical situations (Bourdieu, 1977). In other words, returnees are conscious of their economic objectives, the competing ideals of economic betterment, and how they influence their aspirations.

Civic actors

Despite a high level of membership in community organisations, the majority of returnees neither aspire to participate in political or community activism, nor do they see these activities as goals or expectations for overseas education. Ngoc says:

> The focus for most returnees is upon benefits from jobs brought about from studying abroad rather than reforming society. I myself do not care about the society. Ngoc

Ngoc is an active volunteer in an informal community group educating young people about AIDS and HIV. In this comment, she notes that overseas education is not an impetus for making social reform. In talking about "reforming society", she is referring to national development issues, rather than the types of community activities that she does in her close networks of families and friends. This highlights the need to understand motivations for community work in the context of Vietnamese *habitus* where families are viewed as part of small communities, rather than through organised civil groups (Pham, 2016). As Kim explains:

> Helping the people in need is part of our culture. It is reflective of the traditional Vietnamese culture of looking after each other, as the laudatory proverbial "La lanh dum la rach" [meaning whole leaves protect torn leaves]. It is not because of overseas education. Kim

According to Kim, the value of doing community work is embedded in the *habitus* of Vietnamese people - part of the culture - rather than newly acquired. However, overseas education has brought about her sense of opportunities, confidence and willingness to engage in community work;

> I can see how I may realise my values, what I can do to help students to achieve those things, to follow this career. Maybe it's the confidence. Before I did not dare to try, did not know how to try. But after studying overseas, I can see something as opportunities and I grasp those opportunities. I also feel that I want to improve and change myself. In Vietnam, I feel that there are many people like me, who initially had dreams but they cannot realise their potential. They are not given the opportunity to develop that drive to change them or find out things to change themselves. I think

> it's the opportunities. I think the opportunities that I had overseas gave me more advantages than those trained in Vietnam. The advantage is that when you are overseas, you are able to find your values, realise those are your values and follow though. Kim

Kim is talking about her recognition of opportunities and self-determination to take on those opportunities, which she sees as more important than the aspirations themselves. What is insightful in this comment is that opportunities are also derived from her perceived advantage compared to others. There seems to be a sense of strategic motivation that is a combination of bounded agency in civic activities and personal desire to develop new forms of knowledge and skills that is spoken about by Lan Thi in chapter 13. Kim's civic values have always been within her, but it is her sense of advantage over others that enables her to perceive and take opportunities to engage in community work. This suggests aspiration is shaped by one's actions and perception of opportunities to act - a *functioning* process of aspiration.

The returnees' views about community participation also reflect contested perceptions about their loyalty to the State, which stem from the State's strict policy on political activism, and their scepticism about the State's responsibility for social development of Vietnam. The returnees seem to view the State as the authority that has the legitimacy, and actual power to make rules, set directions and policies about social development, rather than citizens at the grassroots level. As Hoang notes:

> It is very difficult to do any advocacy work here. To get your group registered requires much scrutiny and surveillance by the authorities. It becomes a burden and deters people from engaging. People also distrust any formal group because they are seen to be affiliated with the State, to be driving the State's political ideology, rather than enabling social change. Hoang

Hoang's comment suggests a reluctance to be involved in civic activities because of the rigorous administrative processes involved. Moreover, he perceives the lack of possible achievements in social change as a result of the State involvement in formal community groups.

On the rare occasion, as in the case of Quan below, his sojourn in Germany changed his political viewpoint and political aspiration. For Quan, political participation as an instrument of social change and social justice has always been valuable to him, but overseas education seems to influence how he sees the direction and deliberation of his political aspirations:

> After a period of time that I lived in Germany, I understood that a one-party regime will not be able to develop society in socially just ways. Making change to bring about social justice is impossible if I continue to be conservative with those thoughts. Actually, I also realise that history also has its right and left sides. Of course because this State is protecting this regime, it must make this regime appears beautiful. Sometimes we Vietnamese people are blind to its left side. When I lived overseas, I looked back and saw Vietnam and I saw that our society has too many injustices. That was a great change in me, my political outlook changed dramatically. Quan

In this comment, Quan expresses a change in political viewpoints and a perception that Vietnam's society can actually be changed. This propelled him to later on engage in social media blogging to express his political voice. Quan's values for political participation may not be newly acquired from overseas studies as he comes from a Party-affiliated background, which predisposes him to see and take up opportunity to participate politically. But living overseas and observing the German society allowed him to see how political regimes can function in different ways to achieve different outcomes, which changed his political ideology. His comment about "society's blind to the State's political regime" is a metaphor for the lack of citizens' political voice against the State. Rather than following set pathways along the Party's political career structure, Quan now has the aspiration to use his political voice to encourage others to see that public discussion about the State's political regime may bring about different social outcomes.

Self and Workplace

Cultural capital of overseas-acquired skills and attributes

There is a generally accepted viewpoint and expectation by the Vietnamese returnees that overseas education develops work-ready generic soft skills and attributes that will be advantageous for employment because of the experiential learning that integrate work experiences with theoretical learning. In the quote below, Hien talks about various skills sets that overseas-educated staff have:

> Vietnamese people value overseas education because of better education systems in the West. For example, the format of education delivery, the types of training, the skills they instil like creative thinking and critical thinking. They can solve problems better with their lateral thinking. Hien

In this comment, Hien directly attributes Western universities to equipping creative and critical thinking skills. Her perception of advantage arises from the lack of quality higher education and production of quality human resources in Vietnam. This is similar with research that found that beneficial skills for employability often relate to generic soft skills such as communication, problem solving, and attributes such as responsibility, positive attitude, interpersonal skills and ability to work independently and in a team (Adams, 2002; ADB, 2001; Brabant et al, 1990; Cassidy, 2006; Cox & King, 2006; Leckey & McGuigan, 1997). The majority of interviewees also acknowledge the benefits of these types of skills. Bang and My say:

> Overseas education gives graduates better communication skills, especially presentation skills. The overseas education systems prepare students well in these areas. Bang

> It is without a doubt that overseas-educated graduates can think more laterally and openly. That means they can see problems from different perspectives and can solve problems too. It comes from living overseas and having to encounter different people from different cultures. My

My's comment resonates with other returnees in claiming that openness in thinking is a significant attribute acquired from living overseas, which gives them the flexibility to work in different environments. The ability to see things from different perspectives comes from living in diverse cultural contexts. This is similar to other research findings about international graduates gaining more open and flexible ways of thinking and communicating, which is beneficial for improving their commitment to their workplace and attainment of work related goals (Kim, 2011). What seems to be different in the case of the Vietnamese returnees in this study is that they perceive their lateral thinking to be advantageous only in certain social contexts, mainly where there are foreigners and other overseas-trained workers;

> Certainly these types of skills and attributes are much better appreciated in foreign firms. Foreign firms also employ us because they perceive that we have these skills because we studied overseas. Hien

Hien's sentiment is also expressed by many returnees in industries where there are large foreign companies operating, suggesting that overseas-acquired attributes are not perceived as forms of cultural capital that can be mobilised in all workplaces;

> Overseas-trained people might think that their assertiveness is good for work but not necessarily. It can be a disadvantage because other Vietnamese people might not receive it well. They have to be careful that they use their skills appropriately in certain environments. Trinh

> Overseas-trained people are very good in expressing their views, but this is not always good in Vietnamese firms. Vietnamese bosses prefer to have their say rather than being told by young graduates what to do. Whether these skills can be seen as good skills depend on the company. Chien

These comments highlight that the idea of advantage rests in the "distinction" or cultural capital of these skills and attributes in the social situations, which is granted by members of the social group, not with the returnees even though they may have full knowledge of the types of skills and attributes they have. It is this perception of distinction that fosters the value of international education. In other words, the values that inform job decisions are embedded profoundly in returnees' perception and grasp of social norms. The point here is that cultural capital is about positional goals that a person takes up, rather than making a person a better person.

English is another overseas-acquired skill that returnees perceive as significant in providing them with employment advantage. As Nga and Thu say:

> It is for sure that English is our biggest advantage because we can read English rather than having to wait for translated text. Nga

> Since I came back, my position in my firm is enhanced because people think that my English skills are better. Thu

Returnees aspire to seek jobs in foreign firms, particularly with multinational corporations (MNCs), because these workplaces are perceived as sites where they can utilise their overseas acquired skills and attributes - especially English skills - to enhance their positional advantage. In the next chapter, Anh Pham also found that in her study on employers perspectives of returning students, those Vietnamese graduates who worked in a large US-based IT company in Vietnam wrote their resumes to demonstrate their good communication skills to potential employers.

In addition, the returnees in this study are willing to take on soft management roles in trade-off for technical roles to leverage their language and generic soft skills, rather than developing their technical skills;

> To be honest with you, I just want to work for foreign firms. So I don't care so much that I don't use my technical skills in engineering. I am happy doing quality assurance. It gives me management skills. Khanh.

Khanh's comment suggests that cultural capital (of soft skills) may be seen as overriding technical knowledge because the former enable him to work in foreign firms. Yet, many returnees also appreciate the technical skills for improving their professional practices, even though they cannot fully utilise them. Khanh's willingness to trade off his technical skills for a management job in a support role may also be reflective of the lack of job opportunities to apply technical skills that are geared towards advanced economies. In Vietnam, the MNCs operate mainly in manufacturing or information and technology sectors, and are generally in production, supply chain, and distribution rather than research and development.

These findings suggest that the economic aspirations of overseas education, as discussed in the previous section, also stem from the returnees' perception of advantage associated with their overseas-acquired transferable skills and work-ready attributes in the workplace. Their perception of advantage seems to arise from their consciousness of society's high regards for these skills and attributes, which they internalise as embodied cultural capital. This, in turn, instils their expectations about their acquired overseas education. In other words, aspirations are constructed by returnees' perception about opportunities to mobilise their skills, which they then seek to realise. In pursuing their goals, they also reinforce the conditions and experiences which construct the aspirations in the first place. This finding reflects Bourdieu's model of choice and actions that draws on *habitus* of past experiences and time (Bourdieu, 1977). The analysis gives insight into how the process of internalising anticipated consequences becomes activated into a process of externalisation. Returnees externalise their preference for foreign firms, which is based on their predispositions to select foreign firms because they are likely to succeed in utilising their overseas acquired resources in these settings.

It is also worthwhile to note that the returnees' ideas of positional advantage rest in the cultural capital of these skills, which is associated with what is accepted by employers, not with the returnees themselves. Their aspirations to work for certain employers – particularly foreign firms - are constructed by their perception that these foreign employers view their

owned skills and attributes as cultural capital, and that they can mobilise these forms of cultural capital. Again, this highlights that it is the perception of advantage that gives rise to perception of opportunity, rather than the opportunity itself, which in turn construct aspirations. In other words, aspirations that inform individuals' decisions or justify their actions are embedded profoundly in their perception and grasp of their power positions within the institution they operate in. This puts power and legitimation at the heart of structure of *habitus* in shaping people's aspirations. For Bourdieu, "the virtue-of-necessity dynamic of *habitus* stresses that not all social worlds are equally available to everyone. Not all courses of actions are equally possible for everyone; only some are plausible, whereas others are unthinkable" (Swartz, 1997 p. 107).

Symbolic capital of Western education

Symbolic capital also seems to be associated with overseas education - particular Western education - that is beyond the utilitarian application of overseas-acquired skills and attributes for work application. The interviewees' comments seem to reflect a societal sense of superiority in Western education and workplace. Tam's comment below about Vietnamese employers' willingness to recruit foreigners instead of Vietnamese staff suggests a high regards for foreigners. Here, she talks about the trust in foreigners as embedded in the mindset of Vietnamese people;

> Why do Vietnamese employers hire a foreigner instead of a Vietnamese person even though the foreigner might not be as good in dealing with the government? Because they have more trust in a foreigner, because in their mind, a foreigner is better than a Vietnamese. Tam

Khang, in the below quote, reflects on Vietnam's colonised history by the West which has continued to cultivate a preference for the West.

> Preference for Western things is natural thinking for Vietnamese people. I think there is a historical reason as well. Vietnamese people love anything overseas, *sinh ngoai*. Part of it comes from that history of being colonised. Khang

Khang's comment suggests the sense of "West is best" is internalised as tacit knowledge. His recognition of the colonial history suggests that the motivations to study overseas also have a historical trajectory of colonialisation that create a "pull" of the West, that is beyond the exogenous economic pull factors of host countries as often discussed in the literature. It also highlights that the symbolic capital of overseas education - particularly in Western countries - is linked with economic capital because of a societal high value of the West. It supports the idea that time is an essential element in shaping dispositions for certain aspirations (Bourdieu, 1977).

Self and Others

Family responsibility and the virtue of filial piety

Reflections by the interviewees in this study suggest that their economic drive is embedded in their family commitments and expectations. Thus, they are predisposed to hold economic aspirations for international education, rather than a result of acquired international education. Duy, in the below quote speaks from a parent's perspective. He explains the wish to ensure economic prosperity for his daughters as a sense of responsibility that is embedded in the Vietnamese values of filial piety;

> From a cultural perspective, parents in Vietnam buy houses for their children so they [returnees] as members of society have to follow that norm. He has a house but he needs to also buy and give a house to each of his two daughters. Duy

This comment suggests that filial piety imposes responsibility upon Vietnamese people to acquire wealth for their families. Duy considers the social status of his families to be a "*structured and structuring structure*" (Maton, 2008). It is structured by the traditional values of filial responsibility, and social position ascertained by families' achievement of education and wealth. It is structuring in that such values shape returnees' economic motivations and goals. In this regards, the returnees' aspiration for wealth is not simply a consequence of international education but dispositions to thinking about the values of international education. This is distinctly different to the literature on international students' motivations that often attribute economic goals as exogenous push-and-pull factors of host countries and universities (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). As argued by Pham (2013) in her analysis of the economic motivations of Vietnamese students in Australia, filial piety is an important factor in international students' perception of the economic value of international education, which in turn shapes their aspirations for international education. Similarly, Hong comments:

> Parents will try to give their children the opportunity to study overseas because it is seen as their responsibility to provide a good education for their children, in order for them to get good jobs. Hong

In the above comment, Hong regards family responsibility to be the reason why parents seek to provide international education opportunity for their children. She seems to imply that having wealth is a good life; international education is about materialist values of jobs; provision of material well-being is parents' responsibility, and thus international education is about gaining the advantage to ensure their children's wealth accumulation.

These comments suggest that the root of returnees' economic drive is anchored in the intrinsic value of family commitment and expectation. In addition, the social status connected with international education fosters their aspirations to achieve social distinction for their families. Their economic objectives reflect not only individualistic wants but embedded aspirations for social standings of their families. They see themselves as part of their families, which anchor their materialist aspirations and systematically order their goals and choice of jobs and employers. This finding supports Bourdieu's emphasis on the collective basis of *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1990). The integration of the Vietnamese family value in constructing aspiration for overseas education, suggests aspiration is a product of a class situation (Bourdieu, 1977). As Bourdieu says, *habitus* represents a cultural matrix that generates the

returnees' motivations according to their class opportunities, and their want to maintain the social class standing that structure their motivations (Bourdieu, 1977 p. 79).

Professional identities

Returnees who work in professional services and industries also see themselves as having professional identities with responsibility to improve work standards. However, they tend to observe differences between the work culture in foreign firms and Vietnamese organisations, rather than aspire to making real changes in the workplace. Their choice of working for foreign firms (as discussed above) is based on their goals of better salaries, as well as to mediate the working culture in Vietnamese firms that present barriers to utilising their overseas-acquired skills and attributes. Duy and Thien say:

> Relationships with colleagues (in foreign firms) also place importance with relationships with other people, but they are not personal. These relationships focus on how we may solve problems, how we mix in with others and motivate others. These are professional relationships. Duy

> In general, the overseas trained employees are very clear in dealing with any problems in job or we can say they are very professional. It shows a higher awareness, if we cannot cooperate with each other, we are still friends. We still keep a standard. For overseas trained people, they can deal with things in a more professional way. Thien

These comments suggest that embedded in these returnees' conception of professionalism and ethical high quality standards of work, is a sense of superiority of foreign firms. They view the relations between Vietnamese-trained colleagues to be more personal, rather than professional, which they see as resulting in a lack of clear standards, and a lack of adherence to standards. Foreign firms are perceived as sites where there are shared responsibilities and ethical work practices. The returnees seem to see themselves as different to locally-trained colleagues and leaders, in terms of professionalism and having work ethics. Thus they prefer to work in an environment where there are foreign-trained colleagues. Nhu comments:

> On the basis of working style of foreigners, they are ready to take all responsibility for their work or task. Instead of shifting blame on the other, they will focus on solving problem. Finally, they care about reasons why these incidents occur. Passing the buck to the others is not good way to find out good solutions for problems. Those who study abroad and foreigners are similar in that aspect. They have more ethics. However, because I am in business so I have to go along with the Vietnamese ways. Nhu

In the above comment, Nhu notes his dispositions to adapting to the Vietnamese working culture and how he has to mediate that culture of "personal relationships". The kind of responsibility that Nhu is talking about is responsibility to society (or community at large) - a form of personal accountability - which he sees as different to the kind of responsibility owed to families and personal relations. There seems to be an implicit recognition of competing aspirations, on the one hand to meet his professional responsibility to improve work

practices, and on the other hand his responsibility to further family interests. This comment suggests a paradox of cultural adjustment in that affiliation with social networks and family fosters his aspirations in accordance with his responsibilities to these relations. But in adapting to the culture, he precludes himself from implementing practices that he sees as enabling for his professional identities. Again, the fit between dispositions and positions that Bourdieu's *habitus* presupposes is not so clear here, because returnees have to appropriate different cultural attributes.

Academic identities

The overseas-educated academics in this research aspire to transfer their acquired knowledge - particular Western ideas - in their teaching practices. For some overseas-educated academics, the use of Western texts and pedagogy in their teaching is a step towards delivering better quality education. My's quote below shows a sense of affiliation with the intrinsic value of research knowledge and skills that she wants to cultivate in Vietnamese students, and with that, the attention to foreign scholars as subjects of knowledge;

> Vietnamese students here don't really understand what research methodology is. They talk about things like dialectical materialism, historical materialism, which are very general and are in every thesis but they do not really know how to apply. From these workshops that I hold with foreign scholars, it's slowly changing. So I can say that I am happy to have been able to learn from these programs and share it with a small group and then bigger groups. My

The superiority of the Euro-Western pedagogical models of universities may be perceived by these returnees partly by their own desire to utilise what they learnt overseas and reflect the embedded 'West is best' mindset discussed in the previous section. It could also be their response to the imported models of programme structure, design, and management and curriculum ideologies and content that Tran, Pham & Marginson note in chapter 4. Even though they aspire to Western knowledge, the overseas-educated academics in this study have to use material acquired from overseas learning selectively to make that material relevant to the Vietnamese students. This allows them to be involved in the process of knowledge construction in their engagement with their students, rather than simply importing Western ideas without thought;

> I cannot use everything because the case studies used in overseas universities are very different. In Vietnam, firms do not have data that we can use. So what I can apply is the methods, for example accounting methods, which I then ask students to apply using Vietnamese firms. It is hard and creates more work for me, but I get a sense of satisfaction. Mai

Mai's comment suggests that it is the space where she has to appropriate her overseas learning to make it relevant for her Vietnamese students that fosters her sense of being an education reformer. There seems to be a connection between personal economic betterment and social development vis-à-vis application and transfer of overseas-acquired skills and knowledge. While some returnees may see their teaching using overseas-acquired material as

contributing to the Higher Education Reform Agenda (HERA), they also see their aspiration of being an education reformer laden with practical challenges in which their teaching takes place (Pham, 2016).

Returnees' interactions with others in the space of families and community suggest an embedded Vietnamese *habitus* which shapes their identities and uphold family values. In the workplace, their identities are shaped by their overseas-acquired ideas of independence, professionalism. They encounter tensions in trying to appropriate their newly acquired attitudes in their interactions with Vietnamese colleagues, which for some, lead to a preference for working in foreign firms. Similarly, those who work in universities see themselves as reformers because they can transfer knowledge gained from overseas. However, they also have to engage in teaching Western texts and pedagogy reflexively in order to accommodate to the Vietnamese teaching and learning environment. The findings point to the complexity in managing individual desires to apply overseas-acquired content and pedagogies within practical situations that straddle differences (as noted in chapter 4 by Tran et al.) in regards to educational cultures and institutional structures between Vietnamese universities and foreign universities where graduates studied.

Conclusions

Summary of findings

The aspirations of the Vietnamese returnees in this study are constitutive of their perception of the value of their overseas-acquired skills, knowledge and attributes in their work and community work, and undergirded by their views about their place in society, the State, their workplace, and their responsibilities to their families. The *functioning* aspect of aspiration refers to how they appropriate and mobilise their overseas-acquired resources to gain positional advantage in their workplace, which influence their choice of job, role, and employer. The *being* aspect of aspiration is reflective of their moral obligations to their families and economic instrumentality of overseas education. Both of the *functioning* and *being* aspects of aspiration are underlined with economic pragmatism for survival necessity, as well as the social status associated with Western education and workplace. This suggests an interdependence of Western superiority and instrumentality of international education, and for these returnees, contested aspirations between developing the substance of person, cultivating professional identities, and gaining economic betterment.

The returnees adjust their aspirations to accord with the social relations of their families, communities and workplace. They have to mediate between conforming to family values and norms, and finding a cultural fit in their organisations to gain acceptance and allow them to do what their social relations impose on them as aspirations. These findings explicate Bourdieu's idea that *habitus* of aspirations "continuously transforms necessity into virtue by instituting "choices" which correspond to condition of which it is the product" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 170). For these returnees, "the freedom to aspire" is constituted within their social relations in specific social fields. Across all sectors, the returnees view their contribution to socioeconomic development through their ability to improve the working standards and

professional practices. However, their choices and actions seem to focus on negotiating the conditions of their workplace to leverage their overseas-acquired resources for personal returns rather than implementing initiatives for new ways of working.

Implications for further research about Vietnamese higher education

The implications of these findings are particular for research about international education as well as higher education in Vietnam and are three fold. First, orientation towards Western ideals which shape returnees' aspirations for work practices has to be considered in the context of the colonial period and its influence on Vietnamese society, as well as postcolonial perspectives. In reasoning about their aspirations, these returnees come to understand that their motivations and expectations of international education stem from a perception of positional advantage associated with overseas-acquired skills, knowledge and attributes, which they seek to mobilise. In turn, their choice of foreign firms, or teaching Western texts and pedagogy, normalises the cultural capital of international education within the social structures of their workplace (Bourdieu, 2000). International education has always been highly valued in the Vietnamese society (Pham, 2016; Tibbetts, 2007). The contemporary dynamics of studying overseas have been propelled by Vietnam's economic growth and its middle class emergence; however, the aspirations for international education are embedded in returnees' historical trajectory of economic goals of better jobs based on neo-colonial perceptions of superiority of overseas education systems that are deeper than economic needs. As this chapter has shown, policies for internationalisation of Vietnamese higher education to develop the country's required workforce to be part of the global labour market, ought to consider and leverage aspirations that are embedded within the Vietnamese *habitus* of graduates and families, rather than external push and pull factors of contemporary global job markets and neoliberal framing of Western education.

Second, the nature of materialist emphasis on education is embedded and driven by the Vietnamese traditional values of social distinction between families that have historical trajectory, as well as contemporary social, political and economic influences. Their aspirations for the West embed the instrumental value of economic betterment and compelled by the Vietnamese ideas of social distinction and economic pragmatism. Rather than a Western import of neoliberalism, or that these Vietnamese returnees take the ideas of the West when they study overseas and import it into Vietnam, their economic aspirations arise from the values that are embedded in their unconsciousness and consciousness of tradition, and take shape in complex ways through their *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1977). The Western hegemony of knowledge and work practices may risk dominating the minds and souls of these returnees not because of a real cultural subscription to the Euro-West, but because of their economic aspirations. This chapter points to the need for further research to consider postcolonial as well as neoliberal discourses of international education for emerging economies, particularly the role of multinational corporations in Vietnam's economies and impacts of internationalisation policies of universities in Vietnam.

Third, the returnees' conception of low civic values and political participation is not simply due to lack of democratic freedom; nor are their economic motivations simply responses to economic push-and-pull factors (such as return on investment of their overseas education).

Their aspirations carry other complexities and unique nuances of the Vietnamese values - past and present - for family, community, civic and political actions, and loyalty to the State. Thus, political, civic and economic aspirations need to be evaluated in the local political, social and economic contexts of each nation in order to understand their impacts on people's actions towards national development. This also points to the need for further research about graduates' and returnees' aspirations in civic engagement and how might they utilise their higher education (local or overseas) to participate in community work and other forms of social development in their home country.

Even though the aspirations of these returnees seem either unshared by locally-trained colleagues and leaders, or are adapted to foreign employers' environments to gain positional advantage, there is a space for recognising possibilities for aspirations for social change. The power structures of the workplace and relations are clear to these Vietnamese returnees. Along with the aspirations for economic betterment, they also desire to improve the quality and standards of their workplace, particularly for those teaching in universities.

From a conceptual standpoint, the findings highlight the importance of considering both the *being* and *functioning* aspects of aspirations, in order to understand how and why a person has such goals or motivations. Looking at the *functioning* aspect of aspirations as goal oriented alone misses out on understanding the opportunities or lack of opportunities that a person has to aspire to something else. It is more fruitful to understand the systemic yet dialectic *process of aspiring* to see whether aspirations are created or adapted, and to understand the freedom and possibilities of aspiring as something that a person may develop and enjoy. To understand aspiration as a true enabler of individual goals, attention has to be paid to the opportunities that individuals have in the process of aspiring, not just the aspirations themselves, because their agency to do what they see as valuable is compromised, or can never be truly understood and realised otherwise.

This research is limited by the boundaries of the case study of Vietnamese overseas-educated returnees. However, the concepts and ideas of aspirations that arise from the findings can be applied to any society or group. The chapter presents significant insights about the aspirations of Vietnamese international graduates upon returning home. It highlights the importance of understanding the nature of aspirations of these returnees that takes account of local economic, political and cultural values. Much more research is required to further understand the systemic challenges and opportunities that returnees encounter when they return home, their sense of identities in their society, and what they do in establishing conditions to aspire to contribute to socioeconomic development of their country.

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