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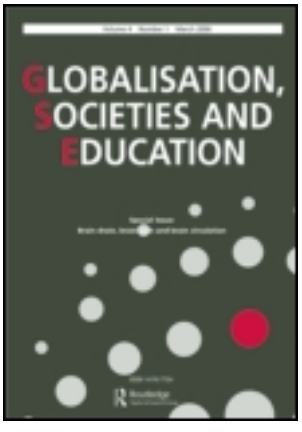

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Social structures in the economics of international education: perspectives from Vietnamese international tertiary students

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Social structures in the economics of international education: perspectives from Vietnamese international tertiary students

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Drawing on the findings from in-depth interviews with Vietnamese international students studying at Australian universities, this article presents insights into the sociological influences that stem from international students' social networks, at home and abroad, and how they impact on students' aspirations and engagement in international education. Underpinned by Bourdieu's social capital framework, this article critically challenges human capital ideology for its assumptions of individualism and utilitarian function of education as economic goals. The implication for international education providers is to create learning and living opportunities that consider students' social and cultural conditions so as to develop their capacity, self-determination and citizenship.

Keywords: Vietnamese international students; international education; human capital theory; social capital; cultural values

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Introduction

> The social world is present in its entirety in every 'economic' action. (Pierre Bourdieu)

Over the last century greater significance has been attached to the economic contribution of formal education and training. Knowledge, innovation and individual creativity have become a major source of competitive advantage in a knowledge economy (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2001). According to the notion of human capital theory, people acquire skills and knowledge which is perceived as a form of capital, and a substantial part of this acquisition is a deliberate investment (Schultz 1960). Education, therefore, has an economic value and human capital is an important part of economic progress in terms of increased productivity and participation in the labour force (World Bank 2002). Explicit in this viewpoint is the instrumental role of credentials in employment outcomes and economic growth, reducing

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education to a commodity in a consumer society. Implicit in this viewpoint is the attracting of students, especially from developing to developed countries, by the promise of employment and high income. Sojourning students then discover the economics of their education as a necessity to fulfil their dreams.

Human capital theory has received much criticism for its narrow economic ideologies yet economics still retains its dominance in shaping international education thinking. It is important to delve beneath economic reasons and consider the students' constitutive social networks because economic rationales are, in fact, constructs of an encounter of economic actions and motivations driven by students' dispositions, which are socially constituted within a set of social structures which themselves are socially constituted (Bourdieu 2005).

This article argues that investment in human capital must take into account the role of social and cultural networks in influencing dispositions of international students towards and hence their participation in international education. Informed by Bourdieu's (1986) social capital framework, a case study of Vietnamese students studying at Australian universities is used to illustrate the argument and frame the analysis. Specifically, the students' narratives are analysed to provide insights on how their cultural values, embedded in their social networks, both at home and abroad, interact with the economic landscape of international education in shaping their motivations and behaviours.

This article is organised as follows. The following section furnishes an overview of research literature on international education and international students as a response to economic forces from both within and outside education. This is followed by a discussion of human capital theory, its limitations and an alternative framework that emphasises the dynamics of social and cultural conditions in constructing international students' motivations and actions. Then the case study of Vietnamese tertiary students studying in Australia is discussed. The concluding section outlines the broader implications of the article in terms of theory, method and practice in international education.

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The marketisation of international education

Worldwide demand for higher education has been growing at an exponential rate, driven by increased globalisation of economies and societies (Murray et al. 2011). Universities, primarily from western countries, have responded to this demand by providing international education services to foreign students, who pay tuition fees to study at these universities. International education and international students are discussed in this article under the rubric of this practice of internationalisation of higher education.

Economic rationales began to dominate international education in the 1990s and have continued to drive the mode of international tertiary

education as a globalised trade, with universities competing for international student enrolment (de Wit 2008). Marginson and Considine (2000) and Rhoades and Torres (2006) argued that in countries like Australia and the United Kingdom, universities have to attract full-fee-paying international students to make up for decreased public funding in higher education, leading to the manifestation of an entrepreneurial approach to international education (Altbach and Knight 2007; Rhoades and Smart 1996; Xiaoying and Abbott 2006). In the USA and Canada, the approach is less commercial, but still reflective of a culture of higher education as a commodity for procurement of human capital (Rhoades and Smart 1996).

It is not surprising that research has emerged from the field of professional practices of international education that frames higher education as a private good in a global consumer market. Much research emphasises international education as a market, attributing the surging demand for global education to Asia's economic growth and the region's labour force requirement (Mazzarol, Soutar, and Seng 2003). The market perspectives of international tertiary education promote the importance of economic values of skilled employment and high income (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2001). The rise of the knowledge economy and global competition for skilled labour has been argued as the new driver for a strategy to recruit highly skilled immigrants, with countries where higher education is a major export industry such as Australia, the UK and New Zealand, offering permanent residency to attract students (Cantwell and Maldonado-Maldonado 2009; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2004; Ziguras and Law 2006).

Despite the interest and growth in the field, the ideology of neoliberalism in educational markets permeates the literature of international education and much assumes the market exchange as a normative framework without recognising that the social conditions of markets promote market exchange as a central role in shaping society and its institutions. Critical education research tends to describe the effects of free markets education without questioning the economic assumptions that underlie its practices and the structures through which it practices (Dolby and Rahman 2008).

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International students: sojourners and consumers

The commercial perspective overhangs research literature about international students (Marginson et al. 2010) with much focus on student mobility and its trend (Murray et al. 2011). International students are seen as consumers of education who value overseas education as pathways to overseas employment and residency, and make choices of host countries based on better life choices and employment options (Pick and Taylor 2009; Sidhu 2004).

The majority of international students are from East Asia, with China as the leading source country followed by India, South Korea and Malaysia (Marginson et al. 2010). Thus there has been considerable research that

analyses the push and pull factors that draw students from this region and their perceptions and attitudes prior to going overseas (Bodycott 2009; Chow 2010; Mazzarol and Soutar 2002; Salisbury et al. 2009). Much research discusses international students aspiring to live and work in western countries who are attracted to incentives of immigration embedded in recruitment policies of the universities in these countries. However, little research provides insight into the arrays of influences that shape students' viewpoints and dispositions towards overseas education, or questions how these incentives affect students' motivations and behaviours.

Research about international students' experiences is oriented to surveys and multivariate analysis for cross-regions rather than accounting for diversity differences based on nationality, religion and gender differences (Marginson et al. 2010). On the other hand, qualitative research tends to focus on students' satisfaction and well-being in relation to needs such as accommodation, language foundations, academic performance and cultural adjustments. For example, Ichimoto (2004) investigated the experiences of Japanese women in Australian universities; Rosenthaal, Russell, and Thomson (2006) discussed the health and well-being of international students at the University of Melbourne; Sawir et al. (2008) explored the issues of personal safety and security, isolation and loneliness that international students experience. There is much said about the cultural differences and how they contribute to social barriers with local students but there is little said about how these cultural factors are constituted in the social context surrounding international students that gives rise to their social behaviours.

Concerns about quality assurance of international education as a trade commodity portray international students as buyers in markets rather than people with rights and needs who live and learn according to their own ways of being and doing. Under this landscape, student experiences are observed rather than understood. There is scant research about international students from their perspectives that considers the influence of the economic settings of international education in which students position themselves, the normative factors and how these dimensions shape their motivations, goals and actions (Pick and Taylor 2009; Tomlinson 2008).

Human capital theory and its limitations

The economic landscape of international education is often justified using a human capital framework. The assumption that underpins human capital theory is that people undertake education as an investment to gain economic returns in the form of higher individual earnings and better employment opportunities (Becker 1993). This posits that people are rational and self-optimising in their decision-making, that they act autonomously with perfect knowledge of the costs and benefits of their education investments, and that they will acquire their labour market potential (Lauder et al. 2006). This gives

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the illusion that concepts and categories of costs and benefits of education are ahistorical and universal. These are in fact, the historical culmination of students' values which are socially placed to provide them with dispositions to construct their notions of costs and benefits. The 'autonomy' that human capital theory surmises is paradoxically cultivated on the accumulation of thinking, perception and action within a set of social structures that give rise to people's subjective aspirations (Bourdieu 2005).

The genesis of economic rationality to undertake education, that is, students' needs, attitudes and aptitudes, is bound within the history of their prior education, social and cultural values which are governed by their family obligations, and adhered-to community expectations; hence this is differentially constructed between students. The calculation of individual economic gain is predicated on the collectively imposed set of norms and values that surround students. In this way, the model of rationality and self-optimising in students' decision-making is mythical because it is dependent on the social structures surrounding students and their acquired dispositions within these social structures. The representation of 'economic reason' or 'rational action' only acts as a scholastic illusion and moral hazard for universities to engage in international education practices (Bourdieu 2005). Furthermore, research evidence of the role of international education in creating wealth is less clear than its role in creating social opportunity (Marginson 2011; Pan 2010).

The neo-classical perspective of human capital theory also assumes that students consume education as a commodity in a market of constant equilibrium and perfect competition and are not subject to any constraint. But in any economy, particularly a globalised economy with differing geopolitical, cultural and social order, and rapid technological changes, students never have perfect information and are constantly called upon to respond to disequilibrium. The constraints are manifold and more complex for international students in a foreign land as they experience information gaps due to communication problems, and perceived cultural differences that affect interactions and friendships with local students and communities (Marginson 2011).

As a result, human capital theory presents only a partial explanation for the international educational phenomenon. In order to provide a more comprehensive account, it is important to understand or explore the sociocultural conditions that shape international students' values and the dynamics of their economic and non-economic motivations for their pursuit of international education.

An alternative framework: social and cultural networks in the creation of human capital

According to Polanyi (1957), there exist continuous economic actions between institutions and wider social networks and organisations. Hence individuals' behaviours in markets are embedded in their systems of social relations and particular networks of interpersonal relations (Polanyi 1957). This

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'embeddedness' implores a conception of economic practice as a social fact rather than an abstraction from social order in which human practice is immersed (Bourdieu 2005).

Moreover, the normative effects of family values, traditions, culture, and common sense tend to generate a generally homogenous set of social activities (Coleman 1988). Students' decisions and actions are choices defined by the limit of the relationships between them and their parents, families and communities. Students are bound by their wider structured social relations, which may present social exclusion or interaction, and in turn filter their preferences and actions. The social relations of international students span across cultural networks of their home and host countries which are influential in students' participation in their learning (Waters 2009). This implies a much more complex set of social processes through which education participation takes place, than that depicted from human capital theory (Vandenberghe 1999). As Bourdieu argues, strictly utilitarian rationales cannot account for aspirations and actions that are steeped in non-economics and thus cannot explain how such behaviours come about (Bourdieu 2005).

The values of cultural capital that overseas-educated graduates possess are embedded in their localised social relations. Cultural capital, embraced in academic qualification, is conferred upon individuals, with attached monetary value that they can then exchange in the labour market (Webb, Schirato, and Danaher 2002). Social networks signify and assign particular monetary value to academic credentials in order for this form of cultural capital to be exchangeable as economic capital (Bourdieu 1986). It is within these social networks that people act to maintain the socially derived economic value of their credentials. In that way, students' social networks construct the intrinsic factors of motivation for pursuit of economic rewards. Any analysis of human capital development ought to consider individuals' behaviour with respect to human subjectivity and social conditions that extend beyond the goal rational dimension of actions (Fevre et al. 1997; Menon and Carspecken 1990). The following section provides a case study to illustrate the sociological influences that stem from international students' social networks, at home and abroad, and how they impact on students' motivations, goals and behaviours.

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Focus of study

This study sets out to explore the cultural norms, social attributes, values and preferences of Vietnamese tertiary students in Australia and how they formalise these social parameters in constructing their aspirations, goals and actions. From that follows the main research question: How do Vietnamese students' social networks, both at home and abroad, influence their motivations and actions in respect of their tertiary education in Australia? In addressing this question, this article explores the familial networks of Vietnamese students in Vietnam and their influence upon students' decision about host country and

university, how students formalise social networks in Australia and how those networks shape their perception of opportunities and behaviours while studying in Australia.

A case study of Vietnamese students allows exploration of sociological influences upon students that takes account of Vietnam's cultural and societal characteristics. Furthermore, there has been a surge of Vietnamese students pursuing overseas education in the past 10 years due to an increase in personal wealth associated with Vietnam's strong economic growth. As of September 2011, there were 10,788 Vietnamese students enrolled in Australian universities, representing 4.5% of total international enrolment in the Australian higher education sector, and placing Vietnam in fourth position as a source country behind China, Malaysia and India (AEI 2011).

To better understand how Vietnamese students are predisposed to perceive and construct their international education goals and actions, the following section describes the social and cultural values embedded within social networks in Vietnam.

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The transnational context: education, family values and social capital in Vietnam

Education values

Vietnamese society is deep set in the Confucian values with great significance placed on learning. For thousands of years, imperialism maintained their status quo and social eliteness through studying classical material and meritocratic examinations. The Confucian education system was highly elitist, provided for social mobility and encouraged dedicated study. It conferred aspirations among Vietnamese people to attain advanced education for its social eliteness rather than economic enrichment (Pham and Fry 2004).

After 1954, when the United States occupied South Vietnam, there was emphasis on making higher education more practical and less elite. The US's goal was to reform the education system to provide greater access to higher education to facilitate Vietnamese economic development. So they provided more scholarship for students to study in the USA and the Vietnamese Government also subsidised many students to study abroad. This is how the Vietnamese society developed the values of education as a linkage to business entrepreneurial ideas and pragmatism (Fry 2009). Advanced education gives rise to competitive advantage in business activity which provides social mobility (Pham and Fry 2004). A key reform in higher education following 'doi moi' (economic renovation) in 1986 also saw the government promoting higher education as a private good (Pham and Fry 2004). This has encouraged studiousness and industry in the Vietnamese people and stimulated the youth to study actively and to seek opportunities to enhance their competitive skills and

competencies. Overseas education is attractive to Vietnamese students and their parents (Pham and Fry 2004).

Family values and social capital

Through teaching and learning, the values of Vietnamese Confucianism foster the moral formation of students and set examples of how to fulfil one's social and familial obligations (Pham and Fry 2004). Core values of Vietnamese life remain veneration for ancestors and filial piety, gratitude and respect for parents. Importance is placed on the interest of the community such as family organisation and the whole society, which always precede the interests of the individual. Family is the prototype of all social organisations and a person is primarily a member of a family, rather than an individual (Dalton et al. 2002).

Vietnamese people rely on interpersonal ties that favour relations and social obligations to kinship and one's wider family (Fry 2009). Trusted networks are within the narrow realm of the family and are important channels for learning and investment and help to keep information within the extended family. Vietnamese people endeavour to sustain and protect their family name as a matter of honour and impetus to contribute to the family's long-term security, thus income and employment are key concerns for one's family. Many emphasise the values of thrift, hard work, obedience to parents and gratitude for their financial support (Pham and Fry 2004).

The World Values Survey conducted by the Institute of Human Studies in 2001 in Vietnam found that participation in social groups in Vietnam is extensive even though these networks were still narrowly defined within the family life (Dalton et al. 2002). Even in comparison with other East Asian states, Vietnam ranked the highest in terms of respect for parents, with 97.5% of respondents stating that one of their main goals is to make their parents proud (Dalton and Ong 2003). Despite the influence of social modernisations and activity on social networks, reflected in substantial involvement in education and cultural groups, unions, professional associations, youth groups, sports groups, local community groups and social welfare groups, the ascribed importance of the family is not eroded (Dalton and Ong 2003).

This pattern of social interaction is also found in studies of Vietnamese migrants in the USA where economic activities tend to serve community needs and economic pooling of resources is concentrated among family members and closely linked friends (Zhou and Bankston 1994). It is important for Vietnamese migrants to rely on the family for social learning and resources to enhance their adaptability in the new country. Thus, the Vietnamese networks overseas tend to be based on extended family with loyalty to one's home region.

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Methodology

The data for this article are drawn from in-depth interviews with Vietnamese students studying at New South Wales (NSW) universities in Australia. The case study consisted of three interview phases, each lasting 45–50 minutes. The initial phase focused on students' decision-making process prior to coming to Australia, the second phase examined students' goals and actions after some time in Australia and the third phase explored their constructs of identity as international students. This article is based on the findings from the first two phases.

The study employed a case study approach drawing on aspects of ethnography and grounded theory (Yin 1981). Deliberate reflection of the interviews process and its conversational partners, and examination of concepts and themes from the interviews, were used to inform the next layer of interviews, and so forth, to form an understanding of students' perceptions of their opportunities and experiences (Rubin and Rubin 2005). In-depth interview was chosen because it provides a mechanism through which subjective understandings of people's interpretation of their social worlds can be conveyed (Ruane 2005). Through interviews, personal perceptions and meanings can emerge that allow the researcher to uncover information that is unique to individuals.

The in-depth interview methodology employed in this case study was informed by the model of constructing narratives for critical social inquiry, with the view to generate detailed accounts rather than brief answers or general statements (Riessman 2008). Narratives are experiences that are constructed by the teller of these experiences of what the tellers do in their world as well as what their world does to them (Riessman 2008). The central idea of this framework is that narrated experiences are socially constructed, and there can be many different constructions of events, each of which is true and unique (Rubin and Rubin 2005). The aim of this study was to uncover these different experiences. Thus the interview questions were broadly structured to understand the cluster of social networks that students formalise and maintain and how these networks influence their goals and actions. The questions were open-ended to offer the opportunity for opening up students' memories and reflection of experiences, explanation and elaboration of ideas and clarification of responses. This article highlights their perceptions, understanding and reflections as related to their values and experiences of overseas education.

Participants and the interview process

Participants were invited via postings at international student offices at two public universities in NSW, Australia; postings on two social media websites of Vietnamese student organisations of those universities; advertisement in the Vietnamese Herald, a Vietnamese newspaper; and through referrals from the researcher's personal networks. The majority of respondents were referred to

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the researcher, suggesting a preference by Vietnamese students to participate in interviews within trusted networks of family and friends.

Six students participated in the interviews. They were chosen purposely from a pool of 10 respondents to achieve a variation of undergraduates and postgraduates, universities, disciplines, stages of study programmes and lengths of time in Australia. These students were not selected to be representative statistically but instead to develop a theoretical argument: the social dimensions of students' motivations, goals and actions in respect of their tertiary education in Australia. Two students were from Ho Chi Minh City and four from Southern Vietnam provinces. All except one student were depending on their parents for financial support. They all held various part-time and low-skilled jobs for additional income to meet living costs in Australia. All details of the students are real except for their names, which are pseudonyms in order to preserve their confidentiality.

Four students chose to be interviewed in English and two chose to speak in Vietnamese. The interviews were conducted at public libraries, universities' libraries and students' homes. The interviews were audio taped and the students were assured of the confidentiality of their identities prior to conduct of interviews. The author of this article (researcher) conducted, transcribed and translated the interviews. The translation was localised to ensure ideas were not lost during the process of translation. The researcher's perspectives about relations between meaning and speech in Vietnamese and relevant aspects of Vietnamese language structure, are embedded in these translated transcripts.

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Data source and analysis

The study adopted a narrative approach to thematic analysis that focuses exclusively on the content of the narratives produced (Riessman 2008). Each interview was analysed holistically and individually, drawing on what was told, rather than the context of questions and language used. Thus, the analysis did not focus on English skills, the context of the interview and the complexities of transcription and translation. Transcribing was done word-for-word; however, quoted speeches were adjusted grammatically in order to convey the meaning of the text.

Using Bourdieu's (1986) social capital framework to frame the analysis suggests that Vietnamese students' perceptions and values for education arise from their social interactions and patterns of interactions. The data were consequently examined for ways that these students constructed goals and motivations in their daily lives in Australia. These goals and motivations were interpreted within the broader contexts of their social networks and universities' settings. An interpretive examination of the social contexts of their community, families and universities provides an understanding of social and cultural factors that empower and constrain students, offering more

nuanced perspectives on the ways these social dimensions influence these students' viewpoint of their overseas education.

Findings

Familial networks and students' aspiration for overseas education and decision to come to Australia

Concurrent with the findings of Mazzarol and Soutar's (2002) study that parents and community exert strong influence in students' decision to study abroad, this study found that Vietnamese students' aspiration for overseas education was based on values and perceptions that were shaped by their families and wider familial networks in Vietnam. Students' responses suggest that the Vietnamese community attaches social prestige to attainment of overseas tertiary education. Vietnamese graduates with overseas credentials are perceived to have better skills and high employability prospects and Vietnamese parents wish for their children to attend offshore universities (Fry 2009; Pham and Fry 2004). Similarly, Menon and Carspecken (1990) argued that families in East Asian society are willing to invest in their children's education with a view that it would position their children in a favourable social position and bring honour to the family. The cultural milieu of students in India, carried by the social class and specific families into which students were born, provided their values and aspirations. The value of overseas credentials, that is, cultural capital, is conferred upon students by their families and secures their position in their society (Menon and Carspecken 1990).

Echoing the findings in Bass (2005), Fam and Gray (2000), Hiu (2001), Hung et al. (2005) and Mazzarol and Soutar (2002), this study found students and their parents made decisions about host country and university based on economic and other enrolment criteria that they obtained from families, friends and education agents, such as cost of living, part-time work opportunities, tuition fees, English competency level, employment and immigration prospects rather than considering individual learning styles, degree preferences or educational needs. This suggests that choice is a multifaceted process that is shaped by the social context of the educational good and of the people making the choice:

> I came to agents (education) in Vietnam who specialise in studying abroad in Australia, Singapore, and Canada. I intended to go to Singapore. My parents don't know much about Australian society but the agent knew. The agent is very close to my family. Then, I was told to go to Australia for better education. The agent told us about the advantages of Australia. It's better in Australia. So I transferred to Australia. They asked me what area I wanted to study. I studied business so I could continue to study business or commerce. There are many majors, but I studied more on International Trade. Universities needed students, so they liaised with agents, and agents referred students there. Students are like white rats. The education agent is the decision maker, the one that influences

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> your decision to go to Australia, to choose the course. Actually, I don't know why I came here. (Tuan, male, 2nd year Postgraduate, Applied Finance)

Traditional agrarian and Confucian traditions often encourage trust in a relatively narrow circle of family and close friends and this is typified in Vietnamese society (Montgomery 1997). The findings suggest recommendations from education agents were often a decisive factor in students' choices of host country and university. In this way, their preferences were constituted within the boundary of their relationship and pattern of interaction with these agents, whose dispositions to give advice were dependent on their partnership with various universities.

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Social networks and their influence on Vietnamese students' goals and behaviours in Australia

Familial networks naturally bond individuals together through kinship, producing high levels of social networks that improve the health and safety of the community member (Coleman 1988; Zhou 2009). It seems that Vietnamese students in this study displayed such positive effects stemming from family ties and they placed importance on generalising those effects to the networks surrounding their families. The consensus finding that emerged from students' responses was the importance on having established connections with Vietnamese people in potential host countries, which was a decisive factor in choosing Australia as a place to study. For these students and their parents, having family or relative networks abroad represented a comfort factor in terms of physical safety and settlement into a different country. Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) referred to these networks as social links that were an influential factor in motivating students' selection of a host country:

> I had my cousin here so I think if you have family here, it would be easy to start a new life in a new country. (Kim, female, 3rd year, Undergraduate, Commerce)

> I already have my aunties here. So I thought if I have a relative here and she already applied for me to attend school, it was not necessary to find out information or other living conditions. (Thu, female, 1st year, Undergraduate, Nuclear Physics)

The study found that students built upon this established familial network during their time in Australia and they rarely moved away from it. The clusters of students' social networks were identified as work relations, university friends, non-university friends, housemates, family and relatives. All six students spent the majority of their time with co-nationals, housemates being the leading social group, followed by non-university friends and family or relatives. Work relations and university academics were mostly Australians whom students spent the least time with. Contrary to the high level of

participation in social groups in Vietnam (Dalton et al. 2002), students in this study did not participate in any structured social or civic groups or volunteering activities in Australia, attributing the reason to lack of time, information and interest in the type of activities offered in these membership groups.

Vietnamese students' social activities were centred around family gatherings and similar to those conducted in Vietnam such as cooking, dining and singing. It was important for these students to create a similar social and cultural environment to that in Vietnam. Sabatini (2009) referred to this as social bonding capital. Students spoke about the benefits of living with Vietnamese families and friends for information sharing, social interaction, support and emotional well-being as they were able to communicate and share experiences with each other. As these students come from a culture of high need for family environment, trusted social networks in the new country were necessary to replace the familial networks which they were accustomed to (Sabatini 2009):

> In my apartment there are four students, all are Vietnamese international students and we speak Vietnamese all the time. I think it's good initially because we can convey information but not in the long term. We are independent in our studies. When I came here it was holiday time so there were parties every weekend. It was very good. At that time I did not have any culture shock. It was easier to settle in. I didn't feel too sad when I was far away from my home. I did not have much to worry about. My landlord has been very kind to me. She cooks something and asks me to go to her house to eat. She asks me to teach her daughter maths. It feels like she cares as family. Maybe from small gestures, she makes me happy. (Khu)

These findings are similar to those in Stritikus and Nguyen's (2007) study of Vietnamese immigrant students in the USA, where students use their time and space with their Vietnamese networks to exchange stories about universities, clarify ideas, exchange information about jobs and day-to-day matters and to reminisce about life in Vietnam. The findings of this study suggest that the supportive Vietnamese community in Australia became a transnational space that provided students with a sense of network and safety to explore the meanings and purposes of their cultural practices which they observed from classrooms and other social contexts. More importantly, this social capital provided students with a sense of value and perception about their education in Australia, why they were there and what they could do after graduation.

Consistent with Zhou and Bankston (1994), Kim (2002), Neri and Ville (2008) and Gu, Schweisfurth, and Day (2010), the study found that all six students were highly motivated to achieve good grades and find employment in Australia. Their perceptions of good living and working conditions in Australia were influenced by their Vietnamese social relations. Their aspirations for education, social status and income security were fostered by their Vietnamese

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values and heightened by the Vietnamese community in Australia. Despite the cultural differences that Vietnamese students experienced in their interaction with local students, they spoke about a common ground in viewing education as a linkage to employment. The difference is that for Vietnamese students, it was not just the economics of education but also the respect for their parents which necessitated vocational goals as pay-backs for their financial support:

> I want to graduate from university with a Distinction because I really love the subjects. I do really well until now, up to now. Actually I want to study accounting. Part of that is I want to say here . . . the environment here is very good if you compare to others, it is peaceful here . . . I want to stay here, so I want to try very hard, do everything to stay here. Someone is expecting from you so much and they pay for you. So you have to do something to pay back for them. (Dung, female, 1st Year, Undergraduate, Accounting)

> Well I think if I just get a pass then it's not worth the money because my parents are still supporting me. I am kinda using their money. I also think after you graduate you get GPA and they look at GPA so it's good to get high GPA. You only get one opportunity to get high GPA. (Kim)

> I know that when people pay $AUD to acquire education, not many people would accept Vietnamese Dong for salary later on. Money is main factor (for wanting to remain in Australia) followed by working conditions. (Thu)

Social capital and its dichotomy

The findings suggest that the Vietnamese social networks were most influential in constructing Vietnamese students' perception of opportunities and they enacted appropriate pathways to achieve their goals. The consideration of permanent residency in choosing study programmes reflected the collective aspiration of their families and communities both in Australia and in Vietnam. At the same time, they were confronted with the challenge of following their personal career objectives:

> They say that studying accounting will allow you to get points to stay here, similar to hairdressing or chef. I was listening to that daily so I was influenced by that. But this friend directed me in right direction. She said what do I want to do? If I get to live here and work as a hairdresser, would I be able to keep on doing that job? I have responsibility towards my family. My parents always say they are old and it would be good to live here to have Medicare benefits and the medical network here is good. So I feel that I should stay here to help my parents. To deny them something like that is irresponsible so I always wonder what to do. If I want to live here then just study hairdressing for two years, tuition fee is cheap and I still earn money later on. Or do I follow this nuclear physics career, and see whether the law will change in three years' time. So this friend told me it does not matter where you live but you have to be comfortable with yourself and that is very good. Maybe I can live in Australia but I may be lonely, missing my home, cannot integrate so coming back to Vietnam is still good. Or I can go to other places like Singapore or Canada. (Thu)

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> My initial goal was to come back to Vietnam. But when I came here, everybody was talking about applying for permanent residency [PR]. I heard people talk about PR. It's better to apply for PR here. You can find jobs here. Or I can stay here or come back to Vietnam. So I decided to study accounting, but after a while it did not suit me so I changed (my mind) and switched back to Finance. I was confused because I had no information, just hearing from people studying here, international students with more experience here and local Vietnamese people. I did follow (other people's advice) but I changed my mind. My parents also had a say here. Although they didn't force me, they said it would be good to stay in Australia. Neighbours and relatives also said so. (Tuan)

Both Thu and Tuan contested the instrumentalism of education and jobs but they could not reject the respect and obligations towards their parents. They believed they had to satisfy both objectives to adhere to family loyalty. They recognised their differing viewpoints to those of their families. They observed the cultural differences to inform them of the Australian way of life and reflect on the Vietnamese cultural norms and rules of social structures that bind them as Vietnamese people. Yet they preserved the Vietnamese values by maintaining their close-knit Vietnamese social networks. The paradox of social capital is that social structures are set in the cultural and normative values that they carry within them (Bankston 2004). Vietnamese students acculturated to the Australian norms to adapt to daily practicalities but they maintained their familial piety.

These students' stories highlight the core Vietnamese values of education, quality of social life, hard work, and responsibility which rest with the self, as they adhere to family obligations through building economic security for the family (Fry 2009). Confucian values are not about the linkage of education to economic pragmatism, but about an individual as a member of a community with responsibility to maintain or improve family wealth (Montgomery 1997). The perception of education as economic wealth stems from the neoliberal idea of higher education as a private good with economic return. The economic goals are not rational action for a student's decision to undertake education as that depicted in human capital theory, but stem from family piety and loyalty. It is the collective reasonableness that underlines the economics of education for these students.

Despite their motivation to obtain good grades and overseas employment as returns for their parents' investment, these Vietnamese students' actions were bound by their perceptions of opportunities that were available to them. They perceived that the Australian labour market was more favourable for local students in terms of information, entry and remuneration, thus many did not actively seek employment through career centres or recruitment agencies:

> I get information from within the Vietnamese community. It's very limited. Maybe I am afraid to go outside because people may look down on me because I am an Asian or international student. I think Australians prefer local people. (Tuan)

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The study found that students were not able to access professional networks effectively because the mechanisms and formats of professional networking activities offered different ways of social interaction. In Vietnam, the public and private spheres blur. Business and jobs come from the close-knit and trusted networks of family and community (Dalton and Ong 2003):

> In Vietnam, you can meet professionals on websites and they give you contact number very easily, not confidential like in Australia. Professionals allow you to contact them easily and go out for a beer. It's like a social event. Even though it's professional, it's more like social relationship activities. In Vietnam I can attend offline activities and we get to know each other. But here you have to participate in structured programs, pay and attend and you can meet professionals. In Vietnam it's mostly free. It's also a financial factor. (Binh, male, Final year, Postgraduate, Commerce)

The dichotomy of social capital is that the cultural and social structures that these students relied on for motivations and well-being constructed the barriers to achieving their goals. Human capital theory assumes students are rational agents who can maximise returns for their investment but it does not consider the social conditions that may empower or disable students to achieve their economic objectives.

Discussion and implications

This case study provides insights into the sociocultural factors that influence Vietnamese students' motivation and participation in international education. The study is situated in the context of Australian tertiary education and Vietnamese international students but couched in universal terms. The findings shed light into international students' needs, attitudes and propensities to participate in academic and non-academic activities during their sojourns.

Social capital depends on the structure of that set of relations and the beliefs and values that fit in that set of social structures (Bankston 2004). The narratives of Vietnamese students in this study suggest an ongoing interaction between social relations and culture. Families and communities in Vietnam constituted a historical cultivation of students' needs, propensities and aptitudes through which they viewed their potential opportunities in Australia. The premium placed on existing Vietnamese networks in Australia voluntarily formalised students' social networks in Australia. Their preferences were shaped within these normative structures, and provided them with dispositions to set goals and determine appropriate pathways in the host country. The students in this study presented a rather homogenous society who combined Confucian social values of family loyalty and free markets' influence of education as a means to economic prosperity. Explanation of international students' aspiration and outcome should not isolate cultural characteristics and the social groups that exemplify the structures of the groups or the location

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of the groups (Bankston 2004; Monkman 1997). It is important that theories of international education delve beneath the layers of cultural, social and economic capital to understand their interdependence in the process of learning and achievement for international students.

Building on the research of Bankston (2004), Kashima and Loh (2006), Stritikus and Nguyen (2007), Cantwell and Maldonado-Maldonado (2009) and Pick and Taylor (2009), the study's findings suggest that social and cultural factors work intricately, subtly and differently for individuals of different backgrounds. International students are social actors with complex strategies within social structures that construct and constrain their perceptions of opportunities and dispositions (Bourdieu 2005). The challenge for universities offering international education is twofold. There must be a change in ideology about international education from means of economic necessity to objectives of quality education delivery for human development. Policies and processes must establish learning and living opportunities for international students to participate in educationally valuable programmes that consider their accumulated social and cultural capital and how they impact students' constructs of international education opportunities. Understanding the values that shape students' choices would enable international education providers to engage international students in activities that develop their capability, self-determination and citizenship (Matthews and Sidhu 2005).

In line with the critical stance on instrumentalism of international education taken by scholars such as Knight (2004), Stier (2004), Raduntz (2005), Altbach and Knight (2007), de Wit (2008) and Marginson (2010) and in the attempt to fill the research gap identified by Dolby and Rahman (2008), this study explores the processes that underlie the economic imperatives for international education, and highlights the flawed assumptions of self-maximising and rational agency underpinning human capital theory. As argued by Fevre, Rees, and Gorard (1999), theoretical development in international education policy must recognise the social context that structures, constrains, guides and influences the actions taken by participants in the field. This article presents a case for viewing social capital and human capital as mutual development of productive factors for human development in a globalised environment. Only through this lens, and with further comprehensive research on sociocultural contexts surrounding international students, can universities take internationalisation of education beyond student recruitment objectives to shared capacity building and global partnership with countries that send students abroad.

There are of course limitations in the use of a single case study. The findings are not generalisable due to its small sample size, the boundaries of the case study, and the premise that each student's narrative is unique in time, space, history, intellect, social and personal values. However, if it is part of a comparative research and theory building programme, then its findings can be used in a disciplined comparison with other comparable case studies to sustain a conceptual construct. This case study provides grounding for further research

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into the sociological influences surrounding international students from other developing countries that takes into account each country's geopolitical, cultural, social and economic specificities.

Conclusion

Human capital theory envisages rational egoism, that students seek education to gain skills and knowledge in order to participate in the labour force and in expectation of future potential earnings. Such assumptions of rationalities ignore non-economic motives, knowledge, availability of choices and access to these choices, which are embedded in students' social structures and relations (Fevre, Rees, and Gorard 1999). Family and community influences shape an individual's accumulation of social, cultural, human and economic capital, and provide insight into their participation in educational activities (Bourdieu 1986).

This study shows that Vietnamese students' familial networks in Vietnam facilitate their perception of the social and economic importance of overseas education, thus acquiring offshore education is a reasonable rather than rational pursuit of action. Their motivations for economic and vocational outcomes of international education are socially constituted based on the values and expectations of their families and communities both at home and abroad, thus a motivation defined by social reasonableness rather than autonomous action. As economic as these actions may seem, they are grounded by a set of historical and continuous social and cultural norms surrounding students. The findings reinforce the ideas of sociological theory of patterns of participation in higher education in that historical, geographical, cultural and social factors influence the economic dispositions of individuals towards learning (Bourdieu 2005). This article presents the case for viewing human capital development in light of cultural norms, social values and preferences that are formalised through social networks.

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