

ARTICLE

STUDYING OVERSEAS AND FUTURE PROSPECTS OF VIETNAMESE STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Studying abroad has been regarded as an academic luxury; however, it has become more popular as the consequence of higher education globalization and internationalization in many countries across the globe, including Vietnam. Researchers have realized a variety of factors that significantly influence international students' decisions of study destinations in different countries, but there is still a lack of similar studies in Vietnam. This paper was conducted to explore prospective international Vietnamese students' perceptions of factors that they take into account when deciding a study destination. The study employed semi-structured interviews to draw qualitative data from 50 participants. The data were analyzed using the content analysis approach and double coding technique. The results indicated that the participants considered various factors - both in terms of pull and push factors - in making decisions of the study destination, which included both Western and Asian ones. In addition, the findings highlighted that the participants would like to study abroad because of extrinsic rather than intrinsic motivations and that they were not fully aware of challenges waiting them ahead in the study journey. Finally, the findings suggested a minor risk of brain drain among the participants.

INTRODUCTION

KEY WORDS

Pull and push Factors,
future, study overseas,
students

Education in general and higher education in particular play crucial roles in the existence and advancement of a country. Without education, our society would not develop and attain great achievements as what we have witnessed.

In the past, general education has received a lot of attention because of it was realized to bring benefits in a variety of fields. Most importantly, education has positively contributed to the economic growth of a nation [1]. In cultural dimension, general education has functioned in transmitting, perpetuating, modifying, and elevating the culture [2]. In social aspect, it has preserved the culture and the structure of the society [3]. Politically, education could contribute to the justice practice and sustain the stability of a country [4].

In the last few decades, higher education has emerged as a manufacturer of skilled labor to supply for the knowledge economy. The benefits of higher education have been recognized to surpass those of the general education. Economic and social benefits are among the most highlighted benefits of higher education. Higher education has increased individuals' awareness, knowledge, skills, and values that have helped them attain a sustainable future [5]. Higher education was also found to provide individuals with better careers, higher salaries, and a greater ability to consume and save. In a broader sense, higher education has promoted technological catch-up and improved a nation's ability to greatly increase its economic development [6].

Many authors have argued that we are moving toward a so-called 'knowledge economy', one in which the productivity no longer relies on physical or machinery strength, and natural resources but would depend on the power of human brains. The university where newest knowledge and insights, and skilled labor were produced has become significant in that economy [7]. The more skilled labor with higher education qualifications, the higher and more sustainable an economy would be.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Many studies into international students indicate that they gain many benefits during and after their studies including personal growth, academic attainment, second language improvement, intercultural development, and career prospect [8].

Personal growth. International students become more mature in their perception alongside with their overseas study. They can independently build up their own perception of values such as cultural norms, identity, prejudice, etc. The students can also become more confident, self-control of their behavior and future, tolerant of ambiguity, aware of political issues, and engaged in community [8].

Academic attainment. Dwyer (2004) reports that full-time students were able to participate in foreign university courses while studying in the overseas countries [8]. They also appear to have increased confidence in linguistic competence. Besides, full-time students were more tendentious to develop their present or new majors, heighten their interest in academic study, and even be influenced in their subsequent educational experiences. Furthermore, they reported that they were more twice likely to acquire graduate degree in comparison with shorter-term students.

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Second language improvement. Many studies have found that international students can improve their second language during the time they study abroad [9,10]. The students are found to better express themselves in both written and oral communication, although the researchers recognize that their proficiency in the language is dependent on various factors such as study length, exposure to the language, students' practice, and work opportunities [11].

Intercultural communication development. The culture mentioned here includes some components such as perception, behavior that one expects and is willing to accept, attitudes, values, the sense for one's identity, and belief system. Exposure to a new culture, international students are found to improve their intercultural communication with their study [8].

SOCIO-ECONOMIC GROWTH AND THE CONTEXT OF VIETNAMESE HIGHER EDUCATION

In Vietnam, the economy has changed dramatically since 1986. The 6th Party Congress with an economic renovation, known as Doi Moi, created more changes in agricultural and rural policies that lead to the market economy Vietnam has followed up to present. As a result, Vietnam has gradually overcome many severe obstacles and achieved more significant advancement, most obviously seen through GDP growth. From 1990 to 1995, the average rate growth of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in Vietnam reached almost 8 percent per year, especially the rate continued rising up to peak 9.5 percent in 1995 in comparison with the period 1986-1990 of 3.9 percent per year in average [12]. Although there was a sharp reduction in GDP growth rate from about 8 percent in 1997 to around 4 percent in 1999 because of the regional crisis, the country's GDP growth rate has gradually gone up since 2000 [9]. Reported by the General Statistics Office of Vietnam, Vietnam GDP growth rate was 6.2 percent in average from 2000 to 2013 and at the year of 2017, the growth went up to 6.81%.

THE INCREASING DEMAND OF INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION IN VIETNAM

In the circumstance that the home higher education is low in quality, the number of Vietnamese international students has been increasing in number. Such an increase is found due to the following reasons: increase in household income, increasing awareness of the benefits of international education, the encouraging policies of the government, and availability of financial aids from local and international organizations.

It can be seen that Vietnamese student population studying abroad has been increasing constantly year after year. In 2010-2011, there were 98,536 international Vietnamese students while the number rose to 106,104 in the 2011-2012 academic years. As reported by the MOET, in 2010-2011 Vietnamese students were studying in 49 countries and territories, with the largest number in Australia, United States, China, Singapore, United Kingdom, France, Russia, and Japan. There are 130,000 Vietnamese students studying abroad, which increased 15% compared to the year of 2016 at 110,000.

In general, although the number of Vietnamese students in Australia decreased by 4.4 percent in 2012 in comparison with the same period previous year, Australia remained as the top country with the highest percentage of Vietnamese students from 2006 to 2012 and was followed by the US with 4.6 percent of the increase and China.

METHOD

Formulation of the research problem

There have been many studies about international students, but there are just a few associated with Vietnamese students - among which virtually no study has focused on the motives and demands of Vietnamese international students to a host country and/ or institution. Thus, it is necessary to make an investigation to prospective Vietnamese international students to understand more about them so that higher education providers may assist them to achieve the best outcomes of their international study experience.

More specifically, regardless of many causes to the increase of Vietnamese international students year by year, it is interesting to note that the distribution of the students in foreign countries varies: some of which is dense, and others are few. For many years, some countries such as Australia, the US, China for instance, have remained increasing figures of Vietnamese students while other countries have not yet. Why is there such unequal distribution? Or what are the factors affecting Vietnamese international students' decision of host country? Among the factors, which is the most influential? If these questions are answered, new insights to predict the flow of Vietnamese students to foreign institutions will be gained.

Research aim and research question

The research aims at investigating Vietnamese students' opinions about their reasons for choosing a destination for their overseas study. From then on, the most influential factors would be highlighted. This research was carried out to seek answers for the following question: What factors do prospective international Vietnamese students take into account when making decisions of the study destination?

Data collection process

As planned, data were collected in Ho Chi Minh City within two weeks. Specifically, the interview process started on the 30th of August 2018 and ended on the 15th of September 2018. There were fifty interview participants including university students and employees.

All of twenty-five interviews were conducted within two days, from August 10th to 11th September in 2018. On the first day, thirty face-to-face interviews were conducted in Gifu Software Company. On the second day, twenty interviews were conducted in some universities using the same method. Most of the interviews were done inside the institution because of convenient reasons. The process of conducting interviews was not easy because many students hesitated to participate in the interview, however, employees working for Gifu Software Company felt confident in the interview. In addition, the researchers had to involve data collected in Ho Chi Minh city simultaneously with the in processing the interviews. The remaining ones were carried out via telephone from September 12th to 15th, 2018 both as requested by the participant for convenient reasons.

In each interview, only one participant was invited to discuss the research issue with the researcher. The participant was first asked for his or her permission of recording the interview. The interviews only occurred and were recorded when the researchers received participants' approval. At that time, the demographical information was first asked, then followed by prepared interview questions. The same tasks were repeated for other face-to-face interviews. However, in phone interviews, data were gathered by the researchers by the way of calling every participant and interacting with them directly. Again these interviews were recorded as well. All of the interviews need recording in order to ensure that qualitative information is ready for checking and repeatedly exploited for the research purpose only. Therefore, a well specialized tape-recorder was used to record the interviewing process. Besides, quiet places were prior to make the interviews in order to ensure the best quality for each interview. All data of recorded interviews were then saved in both memories of personal computer and memory cards to avoid data loss.

Information collected from the interviews has been stored in both personal computer memory and a portable drive in order to avoid data loss. In addition, the information from the interviews has been exploited by the researchers only for the research purpose.

Data analysis process

The analysis process strictly followed the steps for qualitative data analysis developed by Hancock (1998). Accordingly, recorded interviews were verbatim transcribed into total 1 standard A4 pages (about 500 words). This allowed researcher not only to approach the research issue conveniently but also not to leave other important information out when analyzing the data. The researcher read the data repeatedly until getting familiar with the information provided by the interviewees. After all interviews had been already transcribed and read through, the researcher marked important information with a highlighter and wrote notes where necessary. Next, the researcher listed types of information found and began to code them against the theme identified in the literature. Information irrelevant to theme in the literature was coded independently, which may produce new insights into factors impact prospective Vietnamese students' decisions of study destination. The process was repeated for all 50 transcripts.

When the factors were identified, the researcher categorized them into political factors, socio-economic factors, and cultural factors. Some differences were detected and discussed to reach final agreement after analyzing. For each of the three categories of influential factors, the researcher decided to rank the factors in order of frequency. Factors that reached the consensus of above 40% among the participants, opinion were investigated for further details. The others would be reported briefly.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Almost all of the respondents, most of them were studying in Vietnamese university or had completed the study in Vietnam, indicated that they would like to study abroad to gain more international experience. It implies that the local education did not provide them with enough international experience. Therefore, it is suggested that international collaborations in Vietnamese universities should be enhanced, and international elements of the curricula must be embedded. For example, there should be more exchange programs between Vietnamese universities and a foreign partner university. Likewise, where possible, international teaching staff should be invited to lectures to local students so that they can open their perspectives. In addition, there should be incentives to attract international students to Vietnamese

universities to increase diversity in cultural backgrounds, which lays the foundation for cultural understanding between the foreign and Vietnamese students.

Almost two-thirds of the participants wanted to study abroad because they perceived that foreign higher education is better than that of the home country. This is a shocking finding that the respondents, who have experienced Vietnamese university education, appeared to have experienced the poor quality education in the university they were attending. It may also signify that the respondents were craving for foreign-degrees and looking down local education, which would turn into victims of degree-mills if they are not consulted clearly.

Are we facing brain drain?

Besides the benefits the home country receives from the returns of the overseas students, brain drain is among the drawbacks that should be noted. In the study, the data indicated that 74 percent of the respondents had intention to upon their graduation. Meanwhile, 26 percent of them wanted to stay abroad after their graduation to find a job and the rest was still confused of where they would go.

The respondents elaborated a number of reasons why they decided to return home upon the graduation. First, they hope to apply for a job with their overseas competitive degree and contribute what they have learnt abroad to the development in their home country. Second, the availability of their family, relatives, and friends is also the reason that pushes them to return home after completing university in the overseas. Finally, patriotism among the respondents is so great that staying in the overseas after graduation is sometimes never in the respondents' thought when they are asked to identify their decision.

For those who chose to stay abroad, they explained the reasons for their decisions as follows. First, they would like to work to get overseas experiences in the country where they have studied abroad. Second, some of the respondents hope to remain their study at a higher level. Last, but not least, a minority decided to stay in the overseas as their parents' expectation.

In brief, the majority of the respondents would like to work and live in Vietnam after completing their study in a foreign country. Nevertheless, the majority of them hoped to have a good job with a high salary in Vietnam. It is questionable how long those graduates would stay in our country if the salary, the working conditions do not match their expectation, especially when they have experienced such a transparent work practice in developed countries. There is still a risk that we would lose these graduates because with a qualification from a well-known institution and international experience, it is easy for them to fee to some country to work in an immediate future Besides, 26 percent of the respondents who decided to stay in host country is not a small number. One may argue that they would return in future, creating somewhat called 'brain circulation'. It may not be true because young people tend to adapt to a new environment quickly and it is doubtful that they would abandon a career that they have spent some ten years abroad to restart a new one in the home country.

As a result, our government should launch initiatives to reduce the brain drain. Accordingly, favored policies such as high salary, social welfares, good working regulations and environment, opportunities for career development, and other encouraged polices should be promulgated by both the state-owned companies, government agencies and private enterprises for those who return home with a good overseas credential. These favored policies not only base on these material values, a good favored mechanism is also witnessed through spiritual values such as reasonable commendations and glory, equal mediation among disputations. However, human capital flight of a home country depends on the host countries as well. If the host countries tighten immigration policies towards graduates, they may have no more different choice than returning their home country. Finally, brain drain issue is much subsidiary to the student's awareness. Therefore, one way to deal with the problem is to raise their sense of contributing to their home country development.

SOME PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

The data showed that the respondents, although remained their strong hope to study abroad, they also expressed their anticipation of some obstacles they may face upon when they are abroad. There are two main barriers considered by the respondents. First, language and cultural barrier took the respondents into consideration. Some of the respondents expressed that although they are able to speak the language used in the country they would come; they could not totally understand the native people. The respondents showed that they also worry about the cultural differences between Vietnam and the host country as well. The difference between Vietnamese cultures and foreign country's cultures may make the respondents' life difficulty. Second, other respondents felt worried about the financial resources. Living and studying in the overseas is really a great challenge for those who are self-funded. However, they found it difficult to gain a scholarship offered by the overseas government, so they need the financial support from their family to make their study available.

To deal with the above problems, each individual should be aware of what they need to prepare for their future studying abroad. To overcome the language barrier, the best way is to master the language used in the host country before their departure. There are so many foreign language centers in Vietnam where train students foreign language skills to participate in international examinations. These place also may

also provide students with more opportunities to interact with the foreign teachers and the advanced programs so as to improve their language qualification from a low level to an advanced level. To overcome cultural barriers, no way is better than studying cultures before living in a certain foreign country. Nowadays, the internet is very common in Vietnam. It is the unlimited source of knowledge. Everybody can surf the net and learn a lot of useful information there. Therefore, studying the cultures of a certain country would not be a difficult task for the prospective students.

To solve the financial difficulties, prospective students should ensure that they are supported financially. A number of financial resources they can consider are scholarships and part-time jobs. They can search and apply for scholarships from the home or the host country. Equally important is that they should choose the host country where they are allowed to work part-time to earn some income for their study.

Finally, the respondents appeared to have inadequate awareness of practical challenges of their study such as cultural shock, differences between the climate of the home and the host country, active learning environment, skills for integrating into a new society, critical thinking skills for their academic life, etc. Therefore, there should be incentives to help inform and raise their understanding to these essentially practical issues before their departure.

LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

Because of time constraints, this study can only be conducted as a qualitative research. The purpose of the study, therefore, was to probe in depth the factors that influence potential international Vietnamese students' decisions of the study destination rather than to decide which factors are more significant. Although the findings in the study ranked the factors in an order of importance, they should not be used to generalize to the whole population of international Vietnamese students.

Secondly, this study is limited in its scope. As suggested in the literature review, the factors that international students take into account when they decide a destination can be influenced by the socio-economic, cultural, and political context of the home country, the findings of this study is only reliable in the current context of a city like Ho Chi Minh City of Vietnam. The findings could be different if it is conducted in the north or in a different time from now.

Finally, the dominant group of participants in the study was university students and some employees. It involved a limited number of graduates and did not include high school students. If the researcher had included the graduates and high school students, more influential factors would have been identified.

Based on the weaknesses of the study, the researcher would like to suggest the following directions for further studies of the same area. First, there should be a follow-up quantitative after the qualitative phase. That is, there should be a questionnaire survey to explore the opinion of a bigger population, based on which prominent factors that impact potential international Vietnamese students' decision of the host country for their overseas study would be highlighted statistically. Second, if this study is replicated, it is highly advised to explore the opinion of potential international students with a wider range of background such as age, geographical location, financial status, academic ability, etc. so that the data can be more diverse. Finally, as Vietnam has been changing tremendously in the past few decades and would keep relatively same pace of growth in the future, it is recommended that host institutions which target international Vietnamese students to conduct similar studies on a ten-year basis so that they can provide most compatible conditions to meet their demands.

CONCLUSION

There are numerous studies about international students, including ones that investigate into their decision making process of where to go as well as motivations behind their decisions. In general, existing literature suggests that international students tend to choose a host country or institutions based on their rational choice which takes into account many political, cultural, and socio-economic aspects of both the home and the host country. This point implies that international students from different countries with different political, socio-economic, and cultural circumstances would decide on the host country and institution differently. Despite existing research in the field, there is still an absence of similar studies in Vietnam where the number of students seeking international education is growing tremendously in recent years. Therefore, this study attempted to identify factors that influence prospective international Vietnamese students' decision of study destinations.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None

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None

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