

STUDENT MOBILITY AND CHALLENGES IN VIETNAM EDUCATION

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1. Introduction

According to ESU (European students' union), *student mobility* refers to a study period taken mainly abroad and returning home afterwards. There are four main aspects on this issue¹: horizontal mobility, vertical mobility, EU program and brain mobility but because of limited time for preparation and presentation, this report only focuses on the widely controversial aspect, that is brain mobility.

Brain mobility or brain drain is the most popular and challenging trend those Southeast Asian countries in general and Vietnam in particular have had to encounter for many years. This phenomenon is defined as the process whereby the country loses its most talented and educated people to other countries because there is a lack of opportunities in their own. Brain drain is usually regarded as an economic cost, since brain drainer usually take with them the fraction of value of their training. It is a parallel of *capital flight* which refers to the same movement of financial capital².

From this above-mentioned information, this report is going to represent and analyze:

1. the status of Vietnamese student mobility;
2. the challenges of brain mobility; and
3. solutions to deal with the problems.

2. Methodology

The author utilizes these following methods: observation, investigation, statistics and analysis.

The process of collecting information was conducted by two pieces of work: desk research; and higher education case studies examined in Vietnam, mainly in Danang city.

Desk research

Desk research includes gathering and analyzing information both in print and on the Internet was carried out to identify patterns and measure Vietnamese student mobility. Specific issue explored included:

¹ <http://www.esib.org/index.php/issues/Mobility/95-student-mobility>

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brain_drain

- Detecting patterns and trends in Vietnamese student mobility
- Verifying whether increasing mobility in Vietnam has happened at a high and fast rate; and
- Determining how important English is as a pull factor.

Higher Education Case Studies taken from Danang city

This piece of work is to deliver questionnaires to both colleges of Danang university and to the Department of Education and Training for the purpose of confirming the number of students studying abroad sponsored by the government or on their own and verifying whether they have returned to Vietnam for working or not.

Questionnaires were completed by a total of 7 colleges of Danang university, and 10 agencies working on study-abroad counseling of the Department of Education and Training in Danang city.

3. The status of Vietnamese student mobility

3.1. Within Vietnam in general

In recent year, there has come a sharp increase in going abroad to study among students with a higher rate each year, especially since Vietnam joined WTO, which has offered more and more opportunities for Vietnamese citizens to be trained overseas. The chairman of the Vietnam International Education Consultants Association Tran Xuan Nhi also asserted that “Studying abroad is getting more and more popular among Vietnamese students. Some 10,000 Vietnamese people study overseas every year.”³

Studying abroad has occurred in three primary ways:

3.1.1. State scholarship programs (322 project, the IITA, KRF, Fulbright scholarship...)

Excellent students who are in tertiary level or in higher education are offered government-sponsored scholarships to be trained in foreign countries and they must be committed to return and serve their home country for certain years after their courses are finished.

For example: Project 322 allows Vietnamese students who achieve its criteria for brilliant excellence, like top students in the university entrance exam, asks students to immediately return home after graduation.

Students who go in this way just make up about 2% of the total across the country.

3.1.2. Seeking scholarships on their own

³ <http://www.thanhniennews.com/education/?catid=4&newsid=42227>

Many excellent students who mainly do not want to depend on government scholarships and some are not eligible to the criteria for state scholarships can find merit-based scholarships by themselves. Their traditional education destinations are developed countries or countries famous for their educational environments including the United States, the UK, Singapore, Japan.etc.

Students who follow this way do not have to come home after graduation so they attempt to stay and work for foreign countries instead for better living conditions.

For example: some Vietnamese students apply for and win scholarships from the United World College, some colleges or university in the US or Singapore.

The student number of this kind is even smaller than the previous one, which constitutes about 0,5% of the total and only 0,02% of them may return to home.

3.1.3. Self-initiated study abroad

This form can be classified into 3 smaller kinds: cultural exchange program, through study-abroad consulting services and self-application of students without help from consulting services.

Students engaging in this study form must have families with potential finance that can support them during their applying process and courses. None of them volunteer to come back to the home country and try every attempt to remain at the destination countries to make up the huge amount of money for studying abroad they had spent.

3.1.3.1. Cultural exchange program

This kind of oversea study is becoming the most widespread choice for parents and children in Vietnam. In particular, students who are attending in secondary schools and upper secondary schools usually choose to study overseas through participating in cultural exchange program that extends to 1 year. In this program, students enjoy living with native people that we call home-stay to actively exchange and understand cultures with local people within 1 year and learners is obliged to return home afterwards. Their favourite destinations are often major developed countries, mainly the US. Students follow this way, accounting for 10% in the number of students learning from 6th grade to 12th grade.

3.1.3.2. Study-abroad consulting services

The increasing demand of self-initiated study abroad results in the emergence and development of agencies and businesses selling their study-abroad consulting services. These companies play a key role in helping students apply to overseas colleges, mainly to middle-class or community colleges, because they assist students through the entire process with a full range of services, from choosing schools to applying for visas, even

they can arrange a transfer from one to another college in the same country. If parents and students are willing to pay more, consulting companies can help with renting apartments and provide pick-up services when students arrives at the airport of the destination country. As a bridge between students and foreign colleges, study-abroad consulting agencies make money from both students and the school. They receive not only consulting fees from students and parents but also commission fees from schools that hope to enroll more partly-paying or full-paying Vietnamese students. There are about 15% of secondary and high-school students prefer this kind of service.

3.1.3.3. Self-application of students without help from consulting services

Some students make a choice of applying to whatever university they like which they are eligible for without asking advice from consulting agencies. They follow the whole applying process on their own and they are likely to obtain a discount (i.e. an amount of money which is reduced for students) from the destination college or university as a kind of financial aid. In addition, students are able to get scholarships if they can give excellent academic performances. This type of studying abroad is employed by 5% of the total number over Vietnam.

Hardships students who get involved in self-initiated study abroad may endure:

1. Students normally find it very difficult to continue their study or they may feel unsatisfied with their schoolwork when coming back to Vietnam after ending their courses and their families cannot afford their study overseas anymore.
2. Students may be deceived by consulting services, which means that they are not admitted to any school or cannot gain access to the desirable academic environment that the medium company promises. For instance: large class size, old-fashioned studying equipment, no extracurricular activities...
3. Students face cultural shocks and language barrier so they cannot catch up with their study.
4. Students have troubles with accommodations, food or weather.
5. Students are unable to get along with native families in home-stay program.

Source of data

The source of data used here is secondary data, collected and reported directly by educational organizations other than the researcher and reused by the researcher to make his report. All the data was collected from 10 schools in the North, 5 schools from the Centre and 10 from the South of Vietnam to observe and investigate student mobility in Vietnam. The schools are secondary, upper secondary, universities.

3.2. Within Danang city (standing for the Centre of Vietnam)

Together with the tendency of studying abroad taking place all over Vietnam, the number of students seeking oversea training has also risen with a bigger and faster rate in Danang city. Like its national model, studying abroad of Danang's students is conducted under three main forms: state scholarship program, seeking scholarships on their own and self-initiated study abroad; however, with a smaller number in comparison with the Northern and Southern Vietnam represented by Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh city respectively because of the following reasons:

- slower transmission of study-abroad information than Hanoi and HCM city.
- less developed socio-economically than Hanoi and HCM city so there are less domestic and foreign investment in education including training inhabitants overseas.
- slower working style in colleges and universities.

Source of data

The source of data used here is secondary data. The data will be gathered from a total of 7 colleges of Danang university, and 10 agencies working on study-abroad counseling of the Department of Education and Training and then will be analyzed to figure out student mobility in Danang city.

4. The challenges caused by brain mobility

Many countries, especially developing nations have coped with brain mobility, the process also known as brain drain, as a consequence of student mobility. Brain drain can occur either when individuals who study abroad and complete their education do not return to their home country, or when individuals educated in their home country emigrate for higher wages or better opportunities. The second form is normally worse, because it drains more resources from the home country.

This phenomenon is perhaps most problematic for developing nations, where it is widespread. In these countries, higher education and professional certification are often viewed as the most certain path to escape from a troubled economy or difficult political situation.

And Vietnam is not an exception. In other words, a growing number of highly skilled Vietnamese's, especially people trained in foreign academic environments, in fields ranging from health and sciences to engineering and information technology,

emigrating to or preferring to stay in prosperous countries which can offer them more benefits.

4.1. Causes of brain mobility

4.1.1. Limited opportunities

It is clear that more and better opportunities in rich countries come as one of pull factors for student mobility in which brain drain get involved. Opportunity means different things to students attending different fields.

For example:

For majors in research and science, it means funding. Funding can be defined as more resources (in terms of research infrastructure and support), a bigger critical mass of research collaborators and a reduced teaching load. This condition, however, is far inferior to that overseas. Graduates as teachers or researchers cannot get exposure to modern scientific equipment like machines or laboratories or cannot seek funds for conducting research for further discoveries when coming back to Vietnam.

For students specializing in business, commerce or trade and then becoming entrepreneurs, opportunity implies immersing themselves in the whole entrepreneurial environment. This entails surrounding themselves with other entrepreneurs with whom they can share ideas and venture capitalists who can provide them with financing and much needed guidance in the early stages of their companies. There is a growing gap between Vietnam and developed countries' venture capital markets because of the limited ability of Vietnam to fund bright, new ideas of its entrepreneurs. In today's Internet speed world, the need for capital is rising at an incredible rate. As that demand continues to increase, many Vietnamese entrepreneurs are looking to fertile lands, where capital is more readily available and in greater amounts.

Consequently, the lack of opportunities in Vietnam prevents students from fulfilling their potentials and applying what they have acquired the most effectively to develop both themselves and the country in general.

4.1.2. Low salaries

As Deputy Pham Thi Thanh Huong from the central province of Binh Dinh said,⁴

⁴ <http://www.lookatvietnam.com/2008/10/draft-law-lacks-teeth-to-prevent-public-brain-drain.html>

“ Meager salaries have scared away many people from Vietnamese companies, especial public sector in which the education and health sectors discourage laborers the most in all provinces across the country.”

For instance:

Teachers working for Danang university who are trained overseas traditionally get an official salary of under 200 dollars each month.

Some newly graduates in Doctoral faculty just receive a very low monthly income of 150 dollars, which is incompatible to the tuition, time and effort they have spent and made during their college life.

4.1.3. Working environment

A talent-unfriendly structure and working environment in government agencies has also played a key role in discouraging students to remain at and return to their hometown. Corruption and bureaucracy occurring daily in public sector are getting popular and indifferent to government laws and public opinions, covering and destroying real talents and flattering powerful but incompetent public officers. This factor, although being improved actively for recent years, still lingers as one of the biggest impediment to **repatriates** who desire to serve their country, leading to drain mobility.

4.2. Challenges caused as a result of brain mobility

4.2.1. Brain mobility **diminishes the size of the labour force**. Overseas students hesitate to come home when what they need and expect to benefit from is guaranteed well by foreign countries. In fact, employers in Vietnam have difficulties recruiting talent people for senior position or the right candidates for the right vacancies.

Phuong Manh Linh, who is the director of the Viet Linh Media Company, said "When I started looking for a talented manager, I had no idea it would take so long,". It is six months since he first decided to recruit a marketing manager for his company, but he has not been able to find a suitable candidate.⁵.

He said many talented people had applied for the position, but most of them were looking for a salary that his company could not afford. Clearly, Vietnamese employers are encountering a serious shortage of skilled employees.

⁵ http://www.goliath.ecnext.com/coms2/browse_R_V001

4.2.2. Brain mobility **reduces competitiveness**. Talented Vietnamese's work for prosperous foreign countries that compete with our own firms and Vietnam has disadvantages in worldwide competition. Therefore, competitiveness in almost all areas from research to training, from technology to business has been threatened, leading to the incompetiveness in Vietnamese economy.

4.2.3. Since the size of manpower forces gets smaller, the development of Vietnam suffers from **missed opportunities**. In other words, the fact that brain drainers leave Vietnam for richer nations means that they refuse opportunities in their home country. Clearly, opportunities that are created to develop talents, to make the most use of bright and creative ideas of excellent students and through this practice to boost the national growth are missed and rejected.

4.2.4. All the above-mentioned consequences, the inevitable result of brain mobility is **threatened economic prospect**. The reduction in high-skilled laborers causes the decrease in productivity and product quality, preventing economic prosperity and Vietnam may remain as a developing country for a long period of time.

4.2.5. Another side-effect result from brain mobility is **the unsatisfaction among Vietnamese citizens and domestic corporations** towards the government's inability to stop this harmful trend. These people and companies are the ones who pay income taxes to subsidize talented students' education eligible for state scholarship projects and finally, see well-trained graduates leave for a more attractive opportunity in foreign countries.

5. Solutions to the problem (i.e. brain mobility)

- Local firms offer high salaries which deserve the talent and devotion of laborers and offer benefits or better treatment policy to attract potential candidates. For example: insurance system, annual holidays, appropriate bonus on holidays, appreciated commission to tasks, sick leave.etc.

- Provide opportunities to get promotion, to perfect the expertise and to fulfill the potentials for brilliant employees.

- Create the favorable working environment in local firms. This factor has played a decisive role in stopping well-trained employees from leaving because they cannot put up with slow and bureaucratic Vietnamese working style that has existed for a long time.

In conclusion, student mobility in Vietnam is reaching its blooming stage as a way to promote collaboration in education and development among Vietnam and other progressive countries which own ideal educational environments. This process gives a chance for culture cross, technological and strategic understanding and exporting and importing markets but it also triggers the newly found concern - brain mobility or also called brain drain. In recent years, many countries including Vietnam and Southeast-Asian countries has been working out possible solutions and this time through back-to-back discussion to fight against brain mobility with the aim of keeping gifted people who are well-trained inside or outside their countries for the national wealth and economic stability, which we can consider as the plan for brain gain.

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