

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

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Abstract

Based on the findings from in-depth interviews with Vietnamese international students studying at Australian universities, this paper presents insights into the sociological influences that stem from international students' social networks, at home and abroad, and how they impact students' aspirations and behaviours. Informed by Bourdieu's (1986) social capital framework this paper argues that investment in human capital must take into account the role of social and cultural networks in influencing dispositions of students towards and hence their participation in international education. It critically challenges human capital theory for its assumptions of individualism and utilitarian function of education as economic goals. Understanding the sociological factors that influence international students will reveal how they engage with their learning, and present opportunities for universities to deliver programs that encourage students to participate in activities with local students and communities to improve their overseas educational experience. This paper presents a case for viewing social capital and human capital as mutual development of productive factors for human development in a globalised environment.

Key Words

Vietnamese international students, international education, human capital theory, social networks, cultural capital

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 (OECD 2001a). 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 education to that of a commodity in a consumer society. Implicit in this viewpoint is the attracting of students, especially from developing to developed countries, on 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 history of students' constitutive social networks because economic rationales, in reality, are defined within the social space of students and their communities. Economic rationales, referred to as human agents rationality in human capital theory, 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 paper argues that investment in human capital must take into account the role of social and cultural networks in influencing dispositions of students towards and hence their participation in international education. It aims to present insights into sociological influences that stem from international students' social networks and how they impact students' aspirations and behaviours.

The paper begins with a brief discussion of the limitations of human capital theory and a conceptual framework that emphasise the role of sociological dimensions in human capital development. The next section provides an overview of research about international students. This is followed by a discussion of case study findings of Vietnamese tertiary students studying in Australia to show how students' social networks, local and transnational, are constitutive constructs of their educational aspirations and actions. The paper concludes by presenting implications for international education providers to view both human capital and social capital as constitutive productive factors in human development, and develop policies and practices that provide a learning experience where multidimensional perspectives are developed and civic participation is encouraged.

Human capital theory and its limitations

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 decisions 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 the illusion that concepts and categories of costs and benefits of education are ahistorical and universal. These are in fact, historical culmination of students' values which are socially placed to

provide them dispositions to construct their notions of costs and benefits. The ‘autonomy’ that human capital theory surmises on 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, adhered to community expectations and hence 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 for engaging in 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).

The neo-classical perspective of human capital theory also assumes that students consume education as a commodity in a market of constant equilibrium, 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 multi-fold and more complex for international students in foreign land as they experience information gaps due to communication problems, perceived cultural differences that affect interactions and friendships with local students and communities (Marginson 2010).

Social capital in the creation of human capital

Contrary to the idea of absolute autonomy of humans as agents, Karl Polanyi (1957) argued that 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 “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, economic markets are characteristically normative as people are socialised into determinate social structures and with that carry a pervasive influence of differential

power between social groups (Fevre et al 1999). These structures shape their preferences and perceptions of feasible options. There are defined relationships between individual preferences and the corresponding choice, social networks and the placement of students within such networks that normalize the function of their social activities. People's social capital determines and is determined by their membership of a distinctive and self-referential social group (Waters 2007). Social capital is defined as the network of relationships that individuals have, which give rise to actual and potential resources that they may use individually and collectively (Bourdieu 1986). Social relations between students' cultural networks across local, national and global states are conducive and influential in students' participation in their learning, which extend beyond simple reactions as economic subjects.

The normative effects of family values, traditions, culture, common sense, tend to generate a generally homogenous set of social activities. 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 (Waters 2009). This implies a much more complex set of social processes through which education participation takes place, as that depicted from human capital theory.

According to Pierre Bourdieu, human agency is not universal (Bourdieu 1986). Individuals' preferences and actions are products of their positioning and movement within a social space and hence a collective and individual historical account of their social relations. Students' social class provide them access to financial, cultural and social resources that determines their strategies and practices of success in the accumulation of these academic credentials (Bourdieu 1984). 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).

Understanding international students and the economics of their education

Despite the growth and interest in the field, the normative framework of international education is still dominated by the importance of economic values with emphasis on revenue, skilled employment, increased labour productivity and high income (OECD 2010a, 2010b). Economic rationales have continued to drive the mode of international education as a globalised trade, with universities competing for international student enrolment (de Wit 2008). International students are discussed in this paper as those that pay to study abroad at universities that offer international education. According to OECD 2011 Education at a Glance report, United States, United Kingdom, Australia, Germany,

Japan and Canada are the top six countries that host 83% of the world's foreign students. While 33% of all foreign students are in the United States, they represent only 3.5% of the country's tertiary students. In the United Kingdom foreign students make up 15% of total tertiary enrolments. In Australia it is 22%. The majority of international students in these countries are from Asia, China being the leading source country followed by India, South Korea and Malaysia (OECD 2011).

Under the expanding commercial market of international education, international students are seen as consumers of education who are valued as a global exchange for revenue, research labour and international market positioning (Smart and Ang 1993; Rhoades and Smart 1996). Much research about international students discuss the push and pull factors that draw students from Asia, their perceptions and attitudes prior to going overseas, and the variables that impact their decision about host country and university such as tuition fee, cost of living, immigration and employment prospects after graduation (Mazzarol and Soutar 2002; Bodycott 2009; Salisbury et al 2009; IIE 2010). Within this social space, students' values of their international education are associated with pathways to overseas employment and residency. Their goals and attitudes towards their overseas education have mostly been framed within economic motivations. The relationship between universities and international students as suppliers and consumers of education, as advocated by neoclassical framework of human capital theory and responded by global education providers, characterise and legitimise their economic reasonings for engaging in international education.

There is scant research about international students from their perspectives and the sociological factors influencing their aspiration and decision to study abroad, and how these dimensions may shape their viewpoints and dispositions towards overseas education, or question how these incentives affect students' motivations and behaviours. As Waters (2009) argued in her study, acquisition of an overseas education carries symbolic meanings and prestige which brings about material consequences for aspiring middle class families from East Asia. 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 (Bourdieu 1986). 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 pursuits of economic rewards. Any analysis of individuals' behaviour with

respect to learning ought to consider human subjectivity and social conditions that extend beyond goal rational dimension of actions (Menon and Caspecken 1990; Fevre et al 1997).

Cantwell and Maldonado-Maldonado (2009) argued that the underlying utilitarian viewpoint is flawed by the simplistic assumption of rationality and its ignorance of the social conditions that surround individuals. Political policies of recruiting graduates and allowing them permanent residence by countries offering international education are attractive sweeteners for students whose view of future living and working abroad is directly connected with better life choices and employment options. As Pick and Taylor (2009) pointed out, the framing of economic drive as the underlying factor for mass international education creates a culture of profit motive and limits the value of higher education to narrow economic rewards.

While there is research evidence of students ascribing high value of economic rewards through expectations of employment and income opportunities as outcomes of their overseas education, there must be equal emphasis on the simultaneous presence of normative components in students' actions presented in these studies, and the effect that an economic landscape of international education, in which students position themselves, has in constructing their economic motivational factors (Tomlinson 2008; Pick and Taylor 2009).

The economic behaviour recognised as 'rational' in human capital theory is a product of certain economic and social conditions. By considering the economic, social and cultural conditions within the cultural milieu of international students being studied so as to understand their interlink and the impact of this interlink upon students and their educational outcomes, this paper echoes the viewpoint of vast writings by leading thinkers in sociology, social economics and education (Durkeim 1956; Polanyi 1957; Bourdieu 1984, 1986, 2005; Coleman 1988; Sen 1999), and scholars in international education (Menon and Caspecken 1990; Monkman 1997; Fevre et al 1997, 1999; Salisbury et al 2009; Pan 2010; Marginson 2011).

Focus of study

Drawing on theoretical perspectives and studies that examined sociological dimensions of students' decision and motivation for offshore education, this paper focuses on the sociological influences that stem from international students' social networks and how they impact students' motivations, goals and behaviours in respect of their overseas education. From that follows the main research question: How do students' social networks, both at home and abroad, influence their aspirations, decisions and actions in respect of their

overseas education? In addressing this question, this paper seeks to explore students' decision making process about host countries and universities, and how students change or maintain their motivations and objectives during their time overseas. It particular focuses on how international students build upon their social networks in their home country to create new networks in the host country, and how those networks shape their motivations, goals and actions while studying overseas.

To achieve this focus, findings from a case study using in-depth interviews with Vietnamese students studying at Australian universities will be drawn upon. A case study of Vietnamese students allows exploration of sociological influences upon students that takes into account the country's cultural and societal characteristics. Furthermore, there has been a surge of Vietnamese students pursuing overseas education in the last 10 years due to increase in personal wealth associated with Vietnam's strong economic growth. Prior to claiming independence in 1975, Vietnam had an incredibly dynamic history of colonization, by the Chinese in the first 1000 years, followed by succession of French and US colonization. This has cultivated an East-West culture that is committed to higher learning with deeply rooted emulation for Western education. As at September 2011, there were 10,788 Vietnamese students enrolled in Australian universities, representing 4.5% of total international enrolment in the higher education sector, and placing Vietnam at fourth position as source country in Australian international tertiary education enrolment, behind China, Malaysia and India (AEI 2011).

Methodology

In-depth interview was the main method of data collection. In-depth interview was chosen because it provides a mechanism through which subjective and understanding of people's interpretation of their social worlds can be conveyed (Ruane 2005). 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 do 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.

Participants and the interview process

Participants were invited via postings at international student offices at various universities in NSW; postings on social media websites of Vietnamese students organizations; advertisement in the Vietnamese Herald, a Vietnamese newspaper; and referrals from the researcher's personal networks.

Six students participated in the interviews. One student responded to the message posted on Facebook page of Vietnamese Students in Australia (VSA), an organization of Vietnamese students in Australia, and five students replied through personal referrals. The students were chosen purposely to achieve a variation of undergraduates and postgraduates, universities, disciplines, stages of study programs 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. 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 audio taped and the students were assured of the confidentiality of their identities prior to conduct of interviews. The author of this paper (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.

Analysis

The study adopted a narrative approach to thematic analysis that focused exclusively on the content of the narratives produced. The story was kept intact by theorising from the case rather than from the categories across cases (Reissman 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 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 was 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 provided an understanding of social and cultural factors that empower and constrain students, offering more nuanced perspectives on the ways these social dimensions influenced these students' viewpoint of their overseas education. These perspectives were used to generate thematic categories, which are discussed in the paper as stories of instances, in order to make conceptual inferences (Reissman 2008).

Findings

Aspiration for overseas education and decision to come to Australia

The study found that Vietnamese students' aspiration for overseas education was based on values and perceptions that were shaped by their families, communities and education environments in Vietnam. Students' responses suggest that the Vietnamese community perceives attainment of overseas tertiary education as social prestige which is advantageous in seeking employment in Vietnam. Thus Vietnamese parents wish for their children to attend offshore universities for their higher education program. This is congruent with Menon and Caspecken's (1990) findings that suggest the cultural milieu of Indian's students, carried by the social class and specific families into which students were born, provided the values and aspirations of students. This is reflective of the East Asian society where families are willing to invest in their children's education with a view that it would position their children in favourable social position and bring honour to the family. The value of overseas credentials, that is cultural capital, is conferred upon students by their families and secures their position in their society.

All students in this study visited education agents in Vietnam to obtain advice in relation to host countries, universities and study programs. The findings suggest that students and their parents relied on education agents to examine and evaluate academic programs, with relatively little importance placed on students' learning styles, degree preferences or educational needs. Education agents supplied students and parents with information about prospective host countries and it seems that recommendations and referrals from these agents were a decisive factor in their decision about destination country. Implicit in students' responses was the overriding importance of gaining entry to an offshore university rather than meeting their learning needs or preferences at that point in time. In this way, students' propensities to choose their host country and university was limited to the relationship with and information supplied by education agents whose dispositions to give advice were dependent on the relationship that they had with the universities they were in partnership with.

I came to Vietnam agents (education) who specialize 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 influence 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)

Students' decision making processes varied depending on their personality, prior learning, and social networks. Thu, who was decisive about her choice of discipline, expressed a clear view of academic interest and career goal. She attributed her desire to study Nuclear Physics to follow in the footsteps of her brother whom she looked up to. She decided to pursue this field after researching about the discipline and universities from the Internet and receiving advice from her professors in Vietnam.

Initially I wanted to go to Australia to study this course because I know Australia has a big uranium mine and it provides uranium to USA and other countries so I think it will be very developed in nuclear area so I chose Australia. When I was at uni, my lecturers already said that South East Asian countries do not have this discipline. They do not have a degree in Radiation, only Diploma. (Thu, female, 1st year Postgraduate, Radiation)

The consensus finding that emerged from students' responses was the importance of established connections with Vietnamese people in potential host countries, and for most of the students interviewed, this was a decisive factor in choosing Australia to study. It seems that 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 aunts 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)

It was easier to settle in. I don't feel too sad when I am far away from my home. (Khu, Male, 1st year Postgraduate, IT Networks)

Education motivations and actions during students' learning experience in Australia

During their time in Australia, Vietnamese students found companionship predominantly within the Vietnamese community. They shared accommodation with other Vietnamese students or lived with Vietnamese-Australian families in suburbs with high population of Vietnamese immigrants. These students participated in social activities that matched their Vietnamese cultural interests and most expressed ease of settlement into the new life in Australia. It was important for these students to create the same social and cultural environment as that at home. Sabatini (2009) referred to this as social bonding capital.

Prior to coming to Australia, Vietnamese students' purpose was to follow their parents' expectation to acquire overseas degree. After sometime in Australia, they became motivated to attain good grades with a view to seeking employment in Australia after graduation. They perceived that living and working conditions are better in Australia compared to Vietnam even though most of them have not worked in Vietnam. They have internalized the expectation that employment in Australia or overseas can provide them higher income and social mobility within the Vietnamese community. Their aspiration for education, job and social status, which had been conceived from their social networks at home, was heightened by a similar social and cultural environment in a new country. The Vietnamese social surroundings constructed these students' perception of opportunities and they enacted appropriate pathways to achieve their goals. In doing so, they cemented their belonging within this social structure.

It seems that students' motivations for learning were based on the perception that good grades may enable them to access overseas employment opportunities, and thus represents a good payback for their parents' investment in their education.

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, 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)

While the motivation to achieve good grade and obtain employment in Australia were goal-oriented, its influences stemmed from their families and communities in Vietnam and

Australia. The materialistic values expressed by students, their notions of good life, prestige and success revealed a shared cultural norm of their Vietnamese communities both at home and abroad (Fry 2009).

Along with expectations, beliefs and values of a good life in Australia, these students faced the challenge of finding and following their personal goals rather than those of the people surrounding them. Thu lived with her aunt's family in a suburb with a high population of Vietnamese people. Thu's relatives advised her to choose her course to satisfy Australian skilled migration criteria which conflicted with her own career objective.

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 survive doing that job? In addition, 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)

Tuan experienced a similar conflict between following his personal goals and adhering to his community expectations.

My initial goal was to come back to Vietnam. But when I came here, everybody was talking about applying for permanent residency. 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 advices) 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)

Despite their motivation to obtain good grades and overseas employment as pay-backs for their parents' investment in their education, these Vietnamese students' actions were bound by their perceptions of opportunities that were available to them. They perceived that access to the Australian labour market was more favourable for local students thus they were not actively seeking employment.

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)

These students supposed differentiating salaries between local and international students which do not offer feasible and adequate monetary returns for cost of their education. Furthermore, they could not access professional networks effectively because they were not accustomed to the types and mechanisms of networking activities offered in these organisations.

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, Marketing)

The findings suggest that these students experienced cultural differences, embedded in their Vietnamese social networks, which shaped their preferences and choices of employment and at the same time created barriers that limited their capacity to achieve their vocational objectives.

Discussion

The findings reveal a wide range of social and cultural aspects influencing students' aspirations for studying abroad that extend beyond the instrumental goals assumed by human capital theory. In Vietnamese society, people value pursuit of tertiary education and view studying abroad as symbol of elite socio-economic status (Pham and Fry 2004). Qualifications gained from overseas institutions are often perceived as superior to those from similar Vietnamese institutions, and often lead to jobs and upward social mobility in Vietnam (Harcourt 2009). The traditional deep commitment to learning and perception of social eliteness towards overseas education, were embedded values in the Vietnamese students of this study, conferring upon them cultural capital, or wisdom of the class, and providing them with the aspiration to study overseas (Fevre et al 2007).

As Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) suggested, the decision to study abroad is frequently a family decision with parental and education agents exerting strong influence. For the Vietnamese students in this study, their choices of host country and university were constructed and bound within their relationship and patterns of interaction with education agents whose propensity to disseminate information was dependent on the relationship that they had with the various universities. Similar to the findings in Mazzarol and Soutar's (2002) study, it was evident that families and communities in Vietnam played a critical role

in students' decisions to study abroad, shaping their values and expectations of overseas learning experience and lifestyle.

The premium placed on existing Vietnamese networks in Australia, a decisive factor in choosing Australia as host country, was driven by a family desire, rather than their own choice. This pre-established social structure that students were involuntarily placed in, formalised their social networks in Australia even before they arrived in Australia. Students' choices and decisions in respect of their overseas education were dispositions defined by their cultural and social capital in Vietnam which continued to drive their motivations and actions in the new country. The social networks in Vietnam constituted a historical cultivation of students' needs, propensities and aptitudes through which they viewed their potential opportunities in Australia.

During their time in Australia, Vietnamese students chose to live predominantly within the Vietnamese community, which they built upon from the established connections prior to coming to Australia. They retained their cultural milieu in which they felt secured and comfortable. The norms in Vietnamese society support and provide effective rewards for academic achievement in school (Pham and Fry 2004; Bankston and Zhou 2002). Students in this study internalised these norms of educational pragmatism and many aspired to high grades, jobs and migration prospects. They analysed the advantages and disadvantages of living abroad in their own ways but those reasonings were constituted by the Vietnamese networks that surrounded them. These students faced the duality of finding their own aims in life, which was part of their maturation and living independently in a different country, and adhering to traditional community values and expectations.

Moreover, Vietnamese students' attitudes towards the economics of education as a payback for their parents' investment reflected the social landscape of international education that they engaged in. Many felt that they were consumers of a commodified product and thus needed to fathom the economic necessity and financial benefits of their investment. They propelled to the cultural trend of Vietnamese society to seek overseas education and in response to initiatives of Western universities to sell education to raise revenue. In so doing, they justified their economic reasoning for grades and employment as essential to make their investment economically viable.

However these students faced many challenges while trying to seek employment opportunities such as lack of financial resources to participate in structured professional networking activities, communication difficulties, cultural differences, perception of racism and differential treatment compared to local students, lack of information or ability to source information because they had no connections. These were constraints placed upon them by the boundaries of their Vietnamese social networks. The dichotomy of social

capital lies in the cultural norms that are carried within the set of relations, which act to construct students' motivations for jobs and residency, and at the same time constrain their achievement of such goals. Their motivations and actions to achieve their educational goals are embedded and constrained within the boundaries of their social networks which subsume and extend beyond economic rationality.

Implications

This case study sheds light into the sociocultural factors that influence international students' motivation, goals and behaviours that extend beyond economic reasons. These findings provide insight into students' needs, attitudes and propensities to participate in academic and non-academic activities during their overseas learning experience.

The 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). Understanding the social and cultural factors that motivate international students will shed light on how they engage with academic advisors, tutors, career counselors and colleagues, and thus present opportunities for international education providers to deliver programs that would encourage international students to engage in activities with local students and communities to improve their overseas educational experience.

The challenge for universities offering international education is twofold. There must be a change of thinking about international education from means of economic necessity to objectives of quality education delivery. To achieve the latter, policies and processes must establish learning and living opportunities for international students to participate in educationally valuable programs that consider their accumulated social and cultural capital so as to enable them to develop their capacity, self-determination and citizenship.

This study's findings present 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 sociological dimensions taking into account countries' political, social and cultural specificities, universities can take internationalization of education beyond student recruitment objectives to quality education delivery that considers international students' social and cultural specificities. By looking outwards at other cultures and their social values of education, institutions that offer international education can reflect on their own context and purpose of internationalisation beyond economics, and set pace and direction

of research that considers the social reality of people who partake in international education.

While this study evidences the significance of social networks of Vietnamese international students in shaping their motivations, goals and actions during their learning and living experience in Australia, the study has limitations. The findings are not generalisable due to its small sample size, the boundaries of the case study, the premise that each student's narrative is unique in time, space, history, intellect, social and personal values, and the inherent limitations of methodology adopted. It does, however provides grounding for further research 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

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 students' social networks in Vietnam facilitate their perception of the social and economic importance of overseas education. 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. Students' preferences reflect their value positions, which are shaped within their normative structures, and provide them with dispositions to make decisions, set goals and determine appropriate pathways.

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 et al 1999). This study's findings show that acquiring offshore education is a reasonable rather than rational pursuit of action, and participation in labour market is a motivation of 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 various groups towards learning (Bourdieu 2005).

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