

Coping strategies of Vietnamese overseas-trained returnees to do research in home university contexts

Coping
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overseas-trained
returnees

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Abstract

Purpose – This study focuses on Vietnamese international students who returned from their overseas doctoral education to home universities in Vietnam (henceforth Vietnamese overseas-trained returnees). The purpose is to explore the experience of these returnees “doing research” (i.e. being research active) when resuming a lecturing role at a Vietnamese regional university. In the context of research now receiving heightened attention in both the wider global higher education (HE) discourse and the Vietnamese HE sector, this study is timely and provides valuable insights.

Design/methodology/approach – In total, 76 Vietnamese overseas-trained returnees from varied disciplinary backgrounds completed a questionnaire on their research motivation and their perceived constraints doing research. Eighteen subsequently took part in semi-structured interviews. The study draws on the notion of human agency from the sociocultural perspective to understand the coping strategies of the Vietnamese overseas-educated returnees in response to the challenges they encountered.

Findings – The results show that the returnees’ motivations to conduct research varied, fuelled by passion, but constrained by multiple factors. Time constraints, heavy teaching loads, familial roles and lack of specialized equipment are key inhibiting factors in re-engaging in research for these returnees. Addressing them necessitated a great deal of readaptation, renegotiation and agentic resilience on the part of the returnees in employing different coping strategies to pursue research.

Practical implications – The paper argues for a subtle understanding of the returnees’ experience of re-engaging in research that is both complex and contextual. Implications are drawn for research development in the regional Vietnamese HE context and perhaps in other similar settings.

Originality/value – There is little empirical knowledge about how Vietnamese returned graduates – university lecturers – continue doing research after their return. Also underexplored in global discourse is research on foreign-educated returnees doing research, while they are an important source of human resources. The present study, therefore, fills these research gaps.

Keywords Vietnamese overseas-trained returnees, Research active, Agency, Research constraints, Readaptation, Coping strategies

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Increasing outbound mobility is one of the key targets of the internationalization of Vietnam’s higher education (Tran and Marginson, 2018). Every year a large number of Vietnamese

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students cross borders to further their studies in more industrially advanced foreign countries (Ashwill, 2018). It is projected that the number of Vietnamese students pursuing education overseas will increase in the years to come, driven by the growing economic prosperity of middle-class families (ICEF Monitor, 2018), and the expected greater availability of foreign and Vietnamese state-funded scholarships (Vietnamnet, 2017).

While there has been some growing literature about Vietnamese students in host Western countries (e.g. Nguyen and Pennycook, 2018; Wearing *et al.*, 2015), knowledge about Vietnamese students returning to Vietnam from their international education and how they cope upon their return is still limited. There is scarce research about how Vietnamese overseas-trained returnees continue doing research in their home contexts. The present study, therefore, fills these gaps. It is significant in the context of research now receiving heightened attention in both the wider global higher education (HE) communities and the Vietnamese HE sector.

Vietnam has particularly aspired to enhance research performance in HE institutions by launching different initiatives (Nguyen and Klopper, 2019). Among these are sending Vietnamese academics overseas for doctoral studies through state-funded projects, building research-intensive universities and creating research funds that aim to generate international peer-reviewed publications, such as the National Foundation for Science and Technology Development (NAFOSTED). Another related scheme is the Strategy for Science and Technology Development aiming to allocate greater funds to Science and Technology. According to Nguyen and Klopper (2019), these initiatives all specify research as a core component in driving the socio-economic development of Vietnam.

Given that “research is a complex set of intellectual, social, environmental and cultural activities” (Poole, 1991, p. 4, cited in Dever and Morrison, 2009, p. 59), it is important to understand how Vietnamese overseas-trained returnees navigated their research activities in their home contexts. We have found individual agency to emerge as a core driving force, which enabled the returnees to devise a wide range of coping strategies in response to the multiple constraints facing them. The paper argues for a subtle understanding of the Vietnamese overseas-trained returnees’ experience of re-engaging in research as being complex and contextual, and thus, it necessitates different paths of navigation and readaptation. In our study, Vietnamese overseas-trained returnees are defined as scholars who were university lecturers before studying abroad and who *returned* to their respective institutions in Vietnam after successfully completing their foreign doctoral education.

2. Literature review

To date, global research on returnees from overseas education has mainly focused on the re-entry experience or sociocultural adaptation (e.g. Gill, 2010; Le and LaCost, 2017), career opportunities (e.g. Hao *et al.*, 2016), psychological aspects such as nostalgia for the host country in the repatriation process (Zou *et al.*, 2018), personal readjustment (e.g. Haines, 2013) or the transfer of knowledge and skills (e.g. Franken *et al.*, 2016). Research on overseas-trained returnees in Asian contexts has targeted returnees who come from Asia as a broad region of origin (e.g. Butcher, 2002) or selected source countries in Asia (e.g. Collins *et al.*, 2017; Shin *et al.*, 2014). General findings from these studies include “detachment”, “undersupportedness” or difficulties in transferring skills and rebuilding relationships in home contexts. Shin *et al.* (2014), focusing on returnees in Malaysia, Hong Kong and Korea, show that overseas-trained scholars might not necessarily be more research-productive than their domestic counterparts, thus highlighting the role of reintegration and socializing into the home situations for the success of the returning journey. Other research (e.g. Shi and Rao, 2010; Yi, 2011) also suggests that the experience of returnees could be affected by how well they build their local social capital and how well they readapt to the home environment. In the Korean context, while Lee and Kim (2010) explored the reasons Korean academics returned upon completing

their studies in the USA, [Johnsrud \(1993\)](#) identified conflicts that Korean returnees experienced, between teaching and research, and between research and non-academic jobs (service to the institution and the country).

Regarding the Vietnamese context, formal research attention has only recently been directed to the cohort of Vietnamese returnees from overseas education. For example, [Le and LaCost \(2017\)](#) focused on Vietnamese “repatriates” who returned home from American education, and the challenges facing them included lacking local relationships and connections that affected job opportunities and differing world views leading to family conflicts. [Pham \(2019\)](#) examined the transfer of knowledge and contributions of Vietnamese students returning home from overseas education. [Ho et al. \(2016, 2017\)](#) identified factors that impacted upon the Vietnamese returnees’ intention to leave Vietnam again, but not their actual returning experiences. The Vietnamese returnees in these latter studies were those who returned from studying or working abroad. No research to date on Vietnamese overseas-trained returnees has specifically explored their agency in pursuing research. Similarly, under-researched in the international literature on foreign-educated returnees is their experience of doing research in the home contexts. The present study, thus, explores the challenges Vietnamese overseas-trained returnees encountered and their agency in devising coping strategies to re-engage in research.

3. Theoretical background

The present paper draws on the concept of human agency from a sociocultural theory perspective to understand and interpret the data. Our intention was not to test any given hypothesis or theoretical framework, but rather to inductively explore the data and themes as they emerged. Our data show individual agency was crucial in enabling the Vietnamese overseas-trained returnees to navigate their return and, in particular, for doing research in their home workplace context.

One core tenet of the sociocultural approach to agency that is central to our research is that “*humans possess agency*” ([Heng, 2018](#), p. 7, italics added). This tenet asserts that humans are not viewed as passive beings, but active actors who are capable of “improvising” and acting responsively upon their social milieu. Their capability to respond and what “they actually respond to [and] why” ([Edwards, 2015](#), p. 781) is very important for understanding their agency. This view on agency is crucial for understanding the coping strategies the Vietnamese foreign-educated returnees employed to pursue research back in their home contexts. Agency is denoted in the ways humans act, view and respond to the social environment ([Edwards, 2000](#)).

Another important tenet of the sociocultural approach is that agency is mediated by tools to achieve the set goal, and this is termed “mediated agency”, short for “individual(s)-operating-with-mediational-means” ([Wertsch et al., 1996](#), p. 342). In the present study, these tools could be materials, equipment, resources and support that mediate the returnees’ act of re-engaging in research. Agency in the lens of sociocultural theory is *not* “the property of the individual” ([Wertsch et al., 1996](#), p. 336), but it “extends beyond the skin” to take into account the role of mediational tools. A mediated agency provides a useful window to understand what factors mediate Vietnamese overseas-trained returnees re-engaging in doing research and the challenges they encountered. It highlights the interdependence of human agency, the capability to act and the sociocultural milieu or “how humans operate by means of their social and material environments” ([Priestley et al., 2015](#), p. 20). For the present study, this points to the need to consider Vietnamese overseas-trained returnees’ personal, institutional and cultural contexts in shaping how they responded to the challenges they encountered. [Edwards \(2015\)](#) emphasizes the importance of understanding the actors or the returnees’ “motives”, “commitment” and “responsibilities”. Therefore, we also analyzed the returnees’ motivation

for doing research as well as their multiple “identities” to enable a fuller understanding of their agency. In the present study, the Vietnamese returnees interpreted their multiple identities as their multiple roles/responsibilities in their specific work and personal life contexts.

“As individuals’ identities are multiple, each identity [claims] a place in a specific context” (Robertson and Nguyen, 2021, p. 314). This suggests the importance of considering the Vietnamese home culture, through which the returnees navigated. Vietnamese culture, as with other Asian cultures, has been conceptually referred to as a collectivist culture (Markus and Kitayama, 1991), where the ideology of Confucianism is believed to guide how people behave personally and in the wider social community. In this view, the self is seen in relation to others, and a high value is placed on the harmony between individuals (Nguyen-Phuong-Mai, 2019). The interests and benefits of the family, others and the community are often prioritized over individual ones. This might impact women more than men in terms of career development in Asian Confucian-influenced societies. Research (e.g. Kim and Kim, 2021), though not on returnees, found that female Korean academics were vulnerable in their research career because of the influence of Confucian values and patriarchy in Korean society. It is, therefore, crucial to explore how the personal cultural context impacts upon the Vietnamese foreign-educated returnees re-engaging in research and how they responded to the challenges facing them. For the Vietnamese returnees in the present study, returning might not be a mere physical or spatial shift, but rather returning *to* and *back into* their own home culture of work. In this particular regard, they might need to rework their way of *being* and *doing*, especially when it comes to research, a distinctive form of intellectual and academic undertaking in tertiary education.

4. Methodology

4.1 Participants

Data for this study were collected from returned university lecturers in a Vietnamese regional university. It aims to become a research-intensive university in alignment with the national goals of Vietnam to enhance research performance and establish universities of global status (Nguyen, 2016; Le and Hayden, 2017). According to Altbach (2013), for developing countries like Vietnam, research universities are “the key to gaining entry into the knowledge economy of the twenty-first century” (p. 317). As such, the regional university in our study has allocated a larger fund for research grants and rewards for international peer-reviewed publications indexed in ISI and Scopus. It is also very supportive of staff pursuing foreign postgraduate education through various governmental scholarships, as well as foreign aid with the obligation that its staff must return to their institution after completion of their overseas studies, to contribute to research and teaching. Given the context of research realignment and refocusing, our research site, the above regional university, presents an interesting and timely case study.

This regional university comprises constituent institutions differentiated by broad specialized disciplines such as medicine, economics, sciences, law, education, foreign languages, forestry and agriculture. It is useful to note that a regional university (“Đại học”) in Vietnam is composed of many different member universities (Trường đại học), which are “more narrowly focused in their programme offerings, to the point where they may provide programmes in only a single subject area” (ICEF Monitor, 2015).

Vietnamese overseas-trained returnees in different universities across a wide range of fields at this regional university were invited to participate in the research on a voluntary basis. The focus was on university lecturers with a PhD degree, who had been educated overseas in either English- or non-English-speaking countries. For the latter, they undertook their study programmes in English as a medium of instruction. Only Vietnamese returnees who were part of the university as lecturers before studying abroad for a doctoral degree were

included. They were both recent and long-standing returnees irrespective of their research productivity. The purpose was to understand them from different perspectives of their post-return experience of research activity. Since our study aimed to understand returnees who had been on a student visa to study in a foreign nation and returned to Vietnam, it, therefore, excluded Vietnamese returned academics who had permanent residence in or held citizenship of other countries. Those who had overseas business-related experience as assignments from their employers were also excluded in the present study. Ethics approval was obtained before data collection began.

4.2 Research instruments

Most studies on research and research productivity have mainly looked at the correlation between predictive variables (e.g. individual characteristics, collaboration and funding) and research performance as measured by the number of publications (e.g. [Bland et al., 2005](#); [Shin et al., 2014](#)). “This strategy provides a picture of knowledge production that is far removed from the context of action and interaction” ([Aguilar et al., 2013](#), p. 47). The present study employed both questionnaires and interviews to understand “the context of action and interaction” and seek richer and more in-depth insights into the experience of the Vietnamese overseas-educated returnees reengaging in research.

4.2.1 Questionnaire. In this study, Vietnamese overseas-trained returnees were invited to complete a 15-min questionnaire on a voluntary basis. The questionnaire was in Vietnamese to facilitate understanding. Invitations, information sheets and consent forms were first distributed to different member universities, together with hard copy questionnaires. Those who were willing to participate completed and returned the questionnaires through the assistance of a third-party contact person in the respective universities. The questionnaires were completed as hard copies to ensure a higher response rate than would have occurred using electronic versions. The instrument comprised both closed and open-ended questions, which were organized into six main sections: (1) research output, (2) research roles, (3) reasons for conducting research, (4) constraints in doing research, (5) difficulties in writing for scholarly publications and (6) support returnees reported they needed for writing for international publications. For the focus of the present paper, only the data related to doing research were included (i.e. [Sections 2 to 4](#) inclusive). These six constructs were developed based on the insights gained from previous research related to returnees in general (e.g. [Johnsrud, 1993](#); [Lee and Kim, 2010](#)), academics in general (e.g. [Moore, 2011a, b](#); [Bland et al., 2005](#); [Borg and Alshumaimeri, 2012](#)) and Vietnamese academics in particular ([Nguyen, 2013, 2016](#); [Pham, 2006](#)). In total, 130 questionnaires were distributed, of which 85 were returned. Of the collected questionnaires, nine were not useable due to having significant parts incomplete. The remaining 76 responses were used for the analysis of this paper. The background information of the returnees is summarized in [Table 1](#).

A large majority of the participants (70/76 or 92%) were married and had children. Male dominance was traditional in all disciplines, except social sciences. Of the female returnees, most of them (17) were married and in motherhood. Presumably, married lecturers have less time for research than their single counterparts. Moreover, in the case of women, the difference could be more marked. The married status of the Vietnamese female returnees in this study, in fact, posed greater challenges for them than male colleagues due to the multiple family obligations they construed for themselves through their Vietnamese cultural practices (see *Renegotiating multiple identities*, pp. 19–22). It is of note that this cohort of returnees is diverse in disciplinary background and international educational experience. They completed their PhD degrees in a wide range of countries, and some had multiple overseas experiences for studies of different degrees. Their time after return varied from several months to 30 years.

Discipline	N	Gender		Marital status		Years after PhD	
		Female	Male	Married	Single	Min	Max
Natural sciences	13	1	12	13	0	2	30
Social sciences	10	7	3	9	1	0.2	5
Medicine	9	2	7	8	1	4	11
Agriculture–forestry	10	2	8	9	1	4	18
Engineering	9	3	6	8	1	1	13
Economics	9	2	7	8	1	1	10
Environmental studies	7	1	6	7	0	0.5	11
Information technology (IT)	9	1	8	8	1	1	14
<i>Total</i>	<i>76</i>	<i>19</i>	<i>57</i>	<i>70</i>	<i>6</i>		

Note(s): Natural sciences: maths, chemistry, biology, physics; social sciences: education, TESOL and (applied) linguistics

Table 1.
Participants'
background
information

4.2.2 Interviews. Besides the questionnaire data, semi-structured interviews were employed to further understand the personal experiences of Vietnamese overseas-trained returnees doing research in different disciplinary contexts after their return. Interviews are essential in providing a forum for participants to “open their heart”, thus enabling more nuanced insights into their experience of doing research upon return. In other words, interviews help “make the invisible visible” (Kvale, 1996, p. 53).

All respondents who completed the questionnaire were invited to participate in a subsequent interview with the first author, and 18, aged from 40 onwards (seven male and 11 female lecturers) were willing. Of these, eight were senior researchers and ten were in their early careers – within a period of from a few months to five years after their PhD completions. They specialized in different disciplinary domains: education (four), environmental studies (three), (applied) linguistics (three), engineering (two), biology (two), chemistry (two) and teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) (two). The interviews were carried out in the Vietnamese language for comfort and efficiency, except for two participants who preferred to be interviewed in English. Seven interviews were conducted face-to-face, four were through phone calls and, for logistical reasons, seven were by email. The purpose of the interviews was for the participants to elaborate on their experience of doing research back home and how they coped with conducting research in their workplace settings. The face-to-face interviews, which lasted about 25–45 min, were audio recorded (with the participants’ permission) for accuracy. In line with ethical guidelines, the participants were financially compensated for their time and effort in participating.

4.3 Data analysis

The questionnaire data were processed quantitatively to derive frequency counts and percentages. Each returnee participant’s response to the open-ended question as to what motivated them to pursue research was coded by means of an iterative process of assigning themes to each response, and then the responses from all the participants were brought together to determine themes that were common or different. The interview data were analyzed in a similarly iterative thematic manner with codes given for themes that emerged. The interviews were transcribed in their entirety, and analysis was undertaken in the original (Vietnamese) language (Casanave, 2010). Translation samples were double-checked by a Vietnamese teacher of English for accuracy and inter-rater reliability. Yin (2011) recommends that the original language of interviews should be presented alongside the translated excerpts for readers to judge the accuracy of the

translation or interpret the data themselves. However, due to space limitations, only translated themes and quotes are presented, with pseudonyms ascribed to the returnees to protect their identities.

5. Findings and discussion

The present study explores the experience of Vietnamese overseas-trained returnees re-engaging in research by means of both questionnaire and interview data. The findings show the different reasons for their pursuit of research ranging from internal drive to job requirements. They encountered numerous challenges from a wide range of personal, institutional and sociocultural factors. Above all, the returnees employed different coping strategies in response to the constraints facing them. Through their own agency, they readapted to the realities of their research conditions and culture, and renegotiated their multiple identities, suggesting both resilience and compromise. These findings are presented and discussed in detail below.

5.1 *Reasons for re-engaging in research*

The results from the questionnaire show that the returnees in the present study undertook many different research roles, such as research supervisor of BA, MA or PhD theses (reported by 66 out of 76 returnees or 87%); research evaluation panel member (88%); research project leader (79%); and reviewer of domestic and international journals (87 and 40% respectively). While two respondents worked in the role of research director, 15 respondents (about 20%) reported working as research assistants. Other returnees also provided consultancies for businesses and informal advice for colleagues. Thus, this group of returnees were re-engaged in research activities in a variety of ways.

The reasons they gave for continuing research were varied. Notably, intrinsic motivation (Ryan and Deci, 2000) was expressed in many ways. Most often mentioned were “passion” (25), followed by a felt need to “enhance expertise and knowledge” (14) and “personal needs and interests” (11). Interestingly, many Vietnamese returnees also perceived it as their responsibility or obligation to continue conducting research. Academics in economics and agriculture–forestry notably cited this responsibility most often. This could be because these sciences are closely related to the practical needs of human life. Some typical comments given include “responsibility to make practical contributions to society”, “duty to do research that in turn serves human beings” and “duty to develop the local economy”. Additionally, the need to do research for many returnees was to support teaching and to train postgraduate students.

At the same time, many returnees reported undertaking research for reasons of extrinsic motivation (Ryan and Deci, 2000), a desire to do research to achieve a specific outcome, for example, “to complete job requirements” (16) and “to earn extra income” (6). Several others indicated they conducted research “to exchange knowledge with other researchers” and “to integrate into the world”. “To get published”, “to increase academic rank” and to claim “prestige” were also mentioned by some Vietnamese-overseas returnees.

It could be seen that the reasons for pursuing research by the returnees in the present study broadly echo other studies on research motivation by academics (e.g. Moore, 2011b; Chen, *et al.*, 2010; Dever and Morrison, 2009). For the current group of Vietnamese returnees, intrinsic factors such as passion and personal interests were identified as overriding, which shows that their research motivation is internally driven. This is not surprising given that the Vietnamese overseas-trained returnees in the present study were self-motivated academics who had sought scholarships to study overseas.

5.2 *Constraints in re-engaging in research*

The returnees identified major constraints (Figure 1) impacting their research activity. Among them are lack of time and heavy teaching loads, reported by a majority of respondents

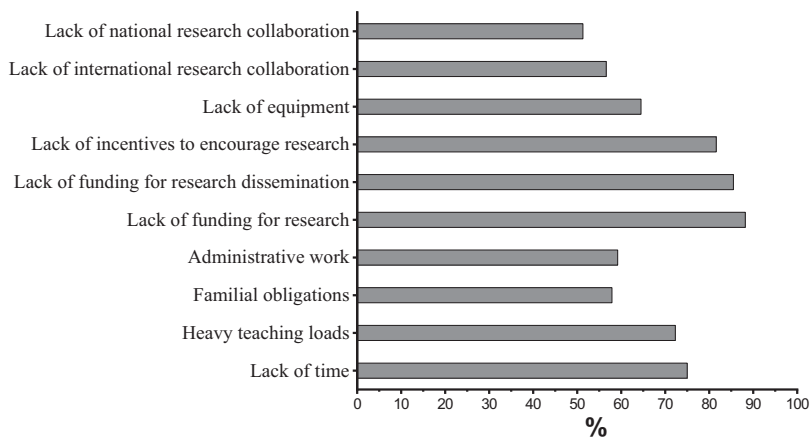


Figure 1.
Major constraints in
doing research

(75 and 72.3% respectively). Familial roles and administrative work added challenges as reported by more than half of the returnees, 57.9 and 59.2% respectively. These constraints broadly echo findings from previous studies (Borg and Alshumaimeri, 2012; Lee and Kim, 2010; Johnsrud, 1993).

Inadequate funding for research and for research dissemination received more widespread agreement as a major hindrance among the returnees (88.2 and 85.5% respectively), followed by a lack of incentives to encourage returnees to do research (81.6%). Lack of equipment was also perceived as an important constraint by 49 out of 76 returnees (64.5%), mainly in specialized fields such as environmental studies, medicine and natural sciences, but not in the social sciences.

The issue of insufficient collaboration was perceived quite differently amongst respondents, with slightly more than half of the returnees identifying that a lack of international collaboration (56.6%) and national collaboration (51.3%) were further hindrances. The mixed responses could be attributed to the different patterns of communication and networking in different disciplines (Vandermoere and Vanderstraeten, 2012). It seems that opportunities for collaboration vary in different disciplines, with greater access to collaborative projects or opportunities with foreign partnering organizations in medicine, economics, natural sciences, agriculture forestry and environmental studies at national and global levels. Meanwhile, social sciences, such as TESOL or applied linguistics research, do not typically involve specialized equipment or lab facilities, thus making collaboration a matter of low priority. That staff in these subjects at the regional university often undertake heavy teaching loads because of high demands of student enrolments and, coupled with the typical trends of having more female lecturers, further constrains collaboration (see also *Negotiating multiple identities*, pp. 19–22).

Overall, the questionnaire findings show that the returnees were engaged in research in different ways and for numerous reasons of which personal interests and passion were the major driving forces. At the same time, they reported encountering multiple challenges in conducting research. It was, therefore, crucial to obtain a nuanced understanding of the nature of the challenges they were confronted with, and how they, by their agentive resilience, devised coping strategies in doing research. Our study, especially through interviews, is illuminating in this regard.

5.3 Coping strategies in response to challenges

The returnees stated that *readapting* and *renegotiating* were key to their responses to the constraints embedded in the research environment they had to navigate.

5.3.1 Readapting to "low resources" research environments. Readaptation here, from the returnees' perspective, means the necessity to (re)adapt to the realities of low resources in home contexts to be able to conduct research. For many returnees, particularly in specialized fields, this readjustment is crucial, yet despite difficulties, undertaken with strength. One Vietnamese overseas-trained returnee, Hiên, who completed her doctoral degree in environmental studies, said:

I think the greatest challenge is a lack of facilities to do research, a lack of machines, equipment, chemical substances. It is one big obstacle to obtaining good data to be published in quality journals.

She continued:

Because of the poor facilities and equipment available, I have struggled for some time to find research directions that are suitable and feasible to be conducted in my own context.

This shows her hard struggle to cope with contextual constraints and, at the same time, her proactive agency to create research directions that are more do-able and that can yield quality publications. The struggling readjustment period, for many repatriates, could be prolonged up to four years, as Thu, a returnee specializing in the narrow disciplinary domain of stem cells (biology), commented:

Upon return, I had great difficulties. It took me about 3–4 years to gradually get used to the poor research environment here. We lack equipment and facilities. It's the greatest challenge.

Clearly, continued research "stagnation" due to lacking specialized resources might happen and could be threatening to the returnees' career paths. Nevertheless, the returnees in the present study employed a wide range of coping strategies to pursue research, from shifting research directions to better suit the local research conditions, to even creating equipment on their own initiative. Such agentic moves are further elaborated by Khánh, a returnee majoring in geotechnical engineering:

I'll need to gradually change my research directions into ones that rely less on modern equipment, otherwise in about a few years' time I'll come to a dead end. Some equipment is not available in Vietnam, so I have to build it myself; for example, for some engines I purchased measuring equipment and installed it and made it work.

It is evident that agency here is enacted by the individual returnee's own sense-making of the context in which he found himself regarding research, and his resilience and capability to cope with the context-specific barriers.

Many other returnees were both aware of logistical barriers and resilient in reaching out to relevant forms of support available to overcome challenges. Interestingly, they were able to coordinate with their former overseas supervisors to put resources in place to secure grants for research, as the returnee Khánh commented:

It is important to keep the relationship with our previous supervisors. In my case, I have to persuade the NAFOSTED committee that I would get the recommendation letter from my supervisor, who needed to clarify that if I were awarded this grant by the Vietnamese government, he would get me there to conduct experiments. He has equipment and I have patience and hard work. Without him, I would come to a dead end.

Clearly, Khánh coped, in an innovative manner, by renegotiating resources through liaising with and engaging his former supervisors in his research project. Networking with his former supervisor provided a source of support for him to act upon. Clearly, it involves mediated

agency where the individual returnee cannot be “reduced” from his or her own context; an interdependence between agency and the social milieu (Wertsch *et al.*, 1996) is crucial and impactful.

Khuong, a senior scholar in the field of chemistry, explained the need to readapt to the research conditions in Vietnam:

Even with fragmentation, they need to draw on a bit from this, another bit from that, just accept it, be persistent and keep passionate interest.

By this fragmentation, the returnee reiterated that his laboratory lacked suitable equipment, so he had to send bits of data samples for analysis and measurement to different laboratories in Vietnam that possessed the technology he needed for his research. In this regard, like Khánh, he displayed his individual agency or capability to reconnect in the local environment of disciplinary practice to arrange resources to be in place for use. Khu’ong emphasized the importance of readaptation, especially when the “ideals” acquired from a foreign education were not feasible or applicable in home conditions:

Readaptation is key; because they [Vietnamese returnees] move from a high to low resources place, the challenge is much greater. If they say ‘I cannot do with this condition, or my overseas supervisors said this and they said that, it is really hard to adapt. If they keep sticking to their ideals as in foreign countries, it is a real challenge’. . . . they will die out.

The same overseas-trained returnee made repeated references to the phenomenal research output of several domestic PhD holders at the regional university, having only post-doctoral experience overseas. In his experience, understanding and accepting the research conditions in the home context were crucial “to find a way out”.

The comments here are self-explanatory and further highlight that the local home conditions might hold returnees back significantly, and this further necessitates renegotiation. Words that indicate a likely halt to research such as “dead end”, “freeze”, “stuck”, “gone”, “move” or “cut off”, “die out”, “can’t find ways out” emerged repeatedly throughout the interviews. This highlights the hard, solitary struggle that these returnees endured, and it was unique, even poignant, in a regional university with low research infrastructure for specialized domains. This could be because national investment in research for regional universities is limited and not prioritized compared with large funds allocated to other national universities and research institutes in Vietnam (Nguyen and Van Gramberg, 2018). While it is important to develop research that is feasible within one’s own resources, the issue of insufficient equipment for research needs greater attention. The present findings point to the crucial role of agency development, capacity building and human resource management if institutions want to further enhance their research performance (e.g. Nguyen, 2016).

5.3.2 Readapting to the home work culture. Readaptation, articulated through the returnees’ voices, was also viewed from an intercultural perspective. In relation to obtaining grants, one returnee, Tién, majoring in environmental studies, explained:

It is very important to adapt and adjust . . . For some grants, relationship and networking are crucial; if you do not reach out to get to know them, the process is not facilitated.

The role of personal and social relationships is evident in this comment. The success of funding applications at higher levels in Vietnamese culture, according to many returnees, depends on how well the returnees “know them”. Another returnee elaborated:

Now back in Vietnam, besides the quality of the research proposal, I need to adapt, to build social relationships with departments and organizations involved to increase the likelihood of securing grants. For example, I need to present myself in person at the department involved so that they know who I am.

Social relationships or an element of “acquaintance”, according to Khánh, are “unwritten laws” for success in work contexts in Vietnamese culture. They matter more now that he has obtained a doctoral degree, to be competitive in applying for higher-level grants. In other words, he adopted conformity to social expectations as the norm (e.g. Shi and Rao, 2010). Once again agency is enacted in response to the social expectations in the returnees’ culture, which is now both “old and new” with “well-rounded norms” (Nguyen-Phuong-Mai, 2019, p. 69) and knowing “how to behave” coming into play. Agency as a readaptive move enacted by the returnees are revealing of their interpretation and response to “the demands” of the home country practice (Edwards, 2015, p. 781). It was also noted by the returnees that the situation now emphasizes “capability, research skills and knowledge” as one important criterion for grants applications. That said, the returnees are expected to show their modesty by still presenting themselves in order that “they know them”. “Who do you think you are, hah?” attitudes towards returnees can place them in a disadvantageous position.

Another returnee, Đạt, whose research expertise is in the field of education, seemed more cynical when talking about readjustment:

After return, from a professional research environment, a majority of us have to readjust, reintegrate into a research culture that is at times easy-going, or simplistic or just for the sake of coping, or an environment lacking understanding and sharing from colleagues.

The readjustment here seems unsatisfactory and indicates a number of issues in the returnee’s perceptions of doing research in his home context, such as a lack of a professional and supportive research environment, the quality of research and a community where academics share ideas and grow. While not all the returnees have negative perceptions of the home research culture in the sense portrayed above, those who do, tend to refrain from doing research. The challenges could be more acute, as many returnees shared, when the need to earn additional income through more teaching might gradually cause them to lose interest in research. This is understandable, given that university lecturers in Vietnam cannot live on their salaries (Nguyen, 2013; Pham, 2006). It is not just about research, as one returnee commented, “we need to care about making ends meet, that is, to attend to ‘cơm, áo, gạo, tiền’ (‘food, clothes, rice and money’).”

5.3.3 Renegotiating multiple identities. For many returnees, especially female lecturers in social sciences, the challenges do not primarily lie in inadequate infrastructure such as poor laboratory conditions as found in the sciences and other highly specialized fields (as also shown by the questionnaire findings). Rather, the multiple identities or roles the returnees construed for themselves, and differently by their perceived Vietnamese societal norms, represent further challenges, which prompted different responsive moves. Phương, one female returnee majoring in applied linguistics, described the challenges she felt, coupled with her self-formation of co-existing identities:

Other identities in me need more attention. My multiple co-existing identities [are]: as a mother who needs to play with my younger son, because he needs to play; a mother teacher who is supposed to teach my school-aged older son who needs help; a daughter who needs to spend some time with my parents, taking them somewhere; and an individual human being who needs time to rest otherwise I would drain out.

This narrative vividly depicts the multiple roles in the life of a female overseas-trained returnee: a mother, a mother teacher, a daughter and an individual human being. This might seemingly contrast with the more distinctive, well-defined research paths that strong, bold research-driven returned lecturers in other sciences tended to follow. For this returnee, it all comes down to more of a matter of life priorities and personal preferences in that temporal phase of life, though this is not to deny the tension female academics experience as they undertake the “dual role” (researcher/academic and mother) (Dever and Morrison, 2009).

Here, Phư'ng saw her coexisting identities as both constraining and enriching. She referred to her case as a “failure” in terms of research output, for not any international peer-review publications since returning. However, she enacted her agency by responsively redefining her continuing research through her roles as a supervisor of research students and an evaluator of research. Her self-perceived valuing of overseas education was evident in her thought, her ways of doing, teaching and supervising students:

I feel positive and things support each other. I can relate well how to supervise an MA thesis; My PhD years overseas not only helped develop my research skills but also other skills. I have grown more mature in thinking.

Like Phưong, some other female returnees elected to be research active in the roles of project leader, research supervisor and research evaluator while remaining committed to teaching, training and other non-research work assigned to them. They felt it was their moral responsibility to provide service to their institution after having been given an extended period of time off work to study abroad. The “interdependent self” (Markus and Kityama, 1991) featured clearly in the perceptions of these female returnees. One married female returnee, Nhi, in the discipline of linguistics narrated in more explicit detail about the challenges she encountered:

As women we always have difficulties in every aspect. We are occupied with so many things, taking care of the family, husband and children, especially in Vietnamese society, which is not like Western societies where there's gender equality. It's impossible to have gender equality here; Vietnamese women can never be equal to Vietnamese men. After I have completed all my work-related tasks, my household tasks, and my familial roles every day, there's some little time left, which I try to make for myself to spend on research. So life is hard and difficult in this sense.

Social norms and expectations of gender roles in Vietnamese culture seem to come to life in the narrative of this female returnee. While research requires focused time and intensive work, it is only the scarce time that this female returnee managed to spare after finishing all her teaching and family duties. The well-being of others – children and husband – was prioritized over the individual self's. Once again, it is a personal compromise that indicates both sacrifice and resilience.

The female returnees shared that even though they had been overseas and they should be more liberal about their views of life and gender roles, they were bound within the traditional role of a Vietnamese woman in their own culture where they were born and raised. In this small city of Vietnam where the regional university is located, the traditional deep-rooted belief that women “make the home” was felt strongly by many female returnees. They said that men in their city tended to be more patriarchal than those in other big modern cities in Vietnam. They, thus, naturally acquiesced to shopping for food, doing the housework and taking care of the children while having a lecturer's job too. This gender-bias norm, together with other multiple institutional duties and teaching/research responsibilities, has disadvantaged the female returnees in their research journeys. Confucianism and patriarchy might make female academics vulnerable, affecting their research performance (e.g. Kim and Kim, 2021). By stating this, we do not claim that Vietnamese male returnees do not also have this disposition. It was just that the latter did not in the slightest way voice this submission/compromise in the interviews as poignant. Nor do we claim this submission for all Vietnamese female returnees.

The findings here seem to echo other research (Armenti, 2004; O'Laughlin and Bischoff, 2005) in which married women with family and children are represented in terms of their adverse research performance. At the same time, they are also different and complex in the culturally embedded values that the female Vietnamese returnees construed for themselves. The present study reveals the personalized, humane aspects that call for understanding of the

richness and diversity involved in the experience of doing research by the Vietnamese overseas-trained returnees in their home disciplinary contexts. Their research experience reflects a special journey shaped by who they were, their educational and cultural background, and their interpretation of the sociocultural milieu in which they acted. Wearing an elite “I’m from there” badge conferred by a foreign education might be useful, but is not everything; renegotiation and readaptation are essential undertakings for the returnees to re-engage in research at their regional university.

6. Conclusions and implications

The present research aimed to understand Vietnamese overseas-trained returnees and their experience of doing research in their respective university contexts. The findings show that the returnees’ motivations to conduct research varied, fuelled by passion but constrained by multiple factors, including heavy teaching loads, familial roles and lack of specialized equipment. By drawing on both the questionnaire and interview data, the present study has been able to show not only the constraints facing the Vietnamese returnees who were trained overseas, but also the nature of the constraints and their coping strategies. For these Vietnamese returnees, the challenges could become even more acute to the extent they might disrupt returnees’ research career paths. In other words, returnees went through “a double disjunction” (Haines, 2013, p. 33) that necessarily involved restructuring and readaptation. Given the fact that the returnees had been exposed to the foreign research culture for a considerable amount of time and had acquired important research skills, the returning adjustment period could be long and complex (Le and LaCost, 2017). It is critical to support returnees to transition back into home conditions because a negative experience of returning is likely to prompt re-expatriation (Ho *et al.*, 2016, 2017). The equally important task is not only to attract more Vietnamese overseas-trained returnees, but also to motivate them to stay, work and make contributions in Vietnam (Tran and Marginson, 2018).

While returnees’ research initiative, resilience, agency and readaptation are essential, more assistance is also needed. Governmental and institutional support pathways could be shaped around creating national and international networks regarding the shared use of research resources and specialized equipment. This could be a useful immediate strategy and, as the returnees contended, collaborations with previous host supervisors could be another avenue for international cooperation and development. National investment could include maintaining connections with graduates who decide to remain in overseas destinations (Gribble and Tran, 2016).

Furthermore, support for returnees might also need to be differentiated. For recent returnees, this could involve facilitating their return transition, both prior to and in the early stage of returning home. It would be practical to equip returnees with awareness of anticipated dislocation of research environments and possible research disruption, and raise their awareness of possible challenges. Networking with senior returnees would provide a venue for further sharing and support, while continued support for lecturers who have returned and been settled for some time should also be in place to help enhance their research productivity. Regarding female overseas-trained returnees in married relationships, mentoring programmes or forums might assist them to handle the tension of both pursuing a research career and being a mother/wife among other parallel identities. It could also be useful to create a community of practice to enable them to keep up their personal passion in research while motivating others (Dever and Morrison, 2009). Research from neuroscience (e.g. Nguyen-Phuong-Mai, 2019) has begun to show the possibility that a “multicultural mind” might help in reshaping different opportunities for learners from collectivist cultures. In the particular case of female Vietnamese

overseas-trained returnees, apart from their individual coping strategies, support at different social, institutional and family levels is needed until more neuroscientific insights can be translated into practice.

Academic research “does not occur in a vacuum, it requires development and nurturing” (Poole, 1991, p. 4, cited in [Dever and Morrison, 2009](#), p. 59). For Vietnamese overseas-trained returnees, the development and nurturing might, therefore, initially need subtle understanding of the challenges they face so that concerted effort on the part of administrative staff, leaders and policy makers could provide suitable support. Removing barriers related to teaching workloads or incentivizing research should call for direct institutional, departmental and governmental assistance. It is essential that institutions rework their research mechanisms and human management policies (also see [Nguyen, 2013, 2016](#)) to motivate returnees to work to their greatest potential. There is no doubt that these academics returning home are very valuable human resources. Thus, understanding them and providing timely support would further assist the Vietnamese government to realize its agenda for promoting sustainable research development and university autonomy ([Le and Hayden, 2017](#)). Importantly, while the role of individual agency features prominently, doing research entails a whole package of conditions that sustain research. In the voice of a returnee in the discipline of education:

Meanwhile creating a sustainable research environment which includes an updated database, proper training, seminars, conferences and sabbatical leave or merit-based promotion has yet to receive adequate attention from administrators or leaders in the context of change or fluctuation in institutional incomes. The question of sustainable development of Vietnamese universities is still to be resolved.

This comment suggests the path that Vietnamese home institutions could take in the long term to motivate staff to do research and enhance research capacity. The wider social and workplace contexts “may determine their options and opportunities with respect to research” ([Dever and Morrison, 2009](#), p. 49). Coupled with the public concern about the “brain drain” voiced in media discourse ([Giao duc Vietnam, 2017](#)), appropriate research conditions and mechanisms are vital for encouraging the return of highly skilled academics. However, we caution that doing research as perceived by the returnees in the present study could be a highly individualized and personalized experience that requires flexibility in the application of any specific support policies.

Several limitations of the present study should be acknowledged. First, the sample sizes for both the questionnaire and the interviews were rather small. Thus, the findings do not claim representativeness of the research experience of other Vietnamese returnees in other HE contexts in Vietnam. The present study focuses on only one regional university, which is striving to become research-oriented, so more research on Vietnamese overseas-trained returnees in other universities of different types in other regions of Vietnam is needed to understand returnees as an important source of human resources. Voices of institutional leaders such as rectors, deans, administrators and policy makers with particular regard to overseas-returnees should be concurrently taken into consideration in future research. Future studies could also examine the possible impacts of individual factors such as age, years since completing the PhD or marital status on returnees’ perceived challenges. Despite the shortcomings, the current study has provided valuable insights into the Vietnamese overseas-trained returnees’ journey of re-engaging in research, the challenges they encountered and, importantly, their *agency*, reintegrative moves and resilient behaviours. The returning experience of doing research seems to be more complex and contextually mediated than is generally portrayed in the global literature about HE research and research productivity.

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Further reading

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