Reflections on The Australian Higher Education and Vietnamese Skilled Migration Nexus

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Abstract

The growth of Australian international education has been sustained and enhanced by Australian subsequent skilled migration, making a nexus between the two. Within this context, the number of Vietnamese students in Australia has been increasing. This situation raises several issues of research concerns that may examine the lures of the link between Australian international education and migration policies and Vietnamese students' aspirations to apply for permanent residency. It also poses questions about the complex, contradictory, and hesitant experiences that the students may encounter. The purpose of this reflective essay is to draw attention to some of the aspects that current research has covered and some of the others that is still left unattended.

Key words: *Australian international education, two-step migration, skilled migration, Vietnamese skilled migration, brain drain, transnationalism*

1. The attraction of Australian growing international education

International education in Australia has grown faster since an economic approach has been applied in the public sector reforms in Australia since 1970s with the intention to eliminate resource waste and financial inefficiency to save public money (Lee, 2001). With regards to education as a kind of public service, "managerial efficiency" (Marginson, 1993, pp. 56-57) has been emphasized with the application of economic strategies such as privatization, commercialization and productivity management, and international education in Australia has been considered as a growing export industry.

In fact, international student enrolments at Australian higher education institutions have grown significantly over the past decade from around 22,000 (2,000 fee paying) in 1986 to about 54,000 (48,000 fee paying) in 1991 and to more than 200,000 in 2011 (Beazley, 1992; DIAC, 2011a). Asia remains Australia's main source of international students, accounting for more than three quarters of Australia's overseas student market. Overall, Australia ranks third behind the US and the UK as the destination of choice for international students (DIAC, 2011b). However, Australia is now facing more competition from countries like the UK, the US and Canada and neighboring countries. To deal with the increasing global competition for international students, the Government introduced in the 2003/2004 Budget worth $113 million to support (by organizing marketing campaigns) and expand Australia's international education and training industry (AEI, 2005).

International education brings Australia many benefits. First, because most foreign students pay their own living costs and tuition fees, governments of receiving countries view this type of international migration flows favorably as they bring in foreign exchange for expenditure which stimulates local economies. In fact, higher education in Australia has earned the country an economic benefit of $3.7 billion in 2000 (IDP, 2000). During 2001, the financial value of Australian international education increased by 10.8%, generating a revenue of $4.12 billion. In 2003, the total value of Australia's education exports was $5.030 billion in 2004, and this figure rose to more than 17 billion in 2009 (AEI, 2010; IDP, 2004). In addition to the financial benefits, the Government also recognized that international education is "an increasingly important part of Australia's international relations" (Beazley, 1992, p. 1), which has promoted the development of "trade and commercial links" especially in the fast-growing Asia-Pacific region. It has also enriched Australia's education and training systems by encouraging a more international outlook which involves making courses and teaching methodologies more authentic and competitive in the world's education market. Studying and working with international students can also widen Australian teachers and students' intercultural experiences, perspectives and views about the world (Hyam, 2002), and research done by international postgraduate students also contributes a great deal to the production of knowledge in Australia.

There are many factors that attract foreign students to choose Australia as a study destination. First, qualifications conferred in Australia are recognized by employers and universities around the world, and the wide range of disciplines offered at Australian universities also attracts many international students. Moreover, Australia has laws to protect the rights of international students, which also tend to treat them as equally as domestic students apart from the matter of tuition fees. Since 1991, the Government has taken an important step to stabilize regulations by introducing the Education Services for Overseas Students Act to provide legal financial protection and quality assurance for international students (ESOS Act, 2000). Further, the peaceful and beautiful environment is another factor which has increased the number of international students especially after the September 11 event. The Government has also simplified visa requirements for students from Thailand, Taiwan, the Republic of Korea, Hong Kong, Papua New Guinea, and Vietnam who no longer have to apply for pre-visa requirements. More particularly, Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) find out six following main factors that motivate Asian students from Indonesia, Taiwan, India, and China to choose Australia as their destination:

- Australian universities recognize their previous qualifications.

- Australia has a worldwide reputation for quality.

- Australian universities and colleges offer qualifications that will be recognized by employers.

- There are high-quality teaching staff members.

- Most Australian universities have international alliances and alumni bases.

- There is a large existing international student population in most universities.

In general, there are many influences that affect students' decision to study abroad. Davies (1997 cited in Sidhu, 2003, p. 16) asserts that "push factors" can result from the reduced capacity of universities in sending countries while students can be pulled to universities in receiving countries by promotional and marketing activities, and this fact holds true for Vietnam's context where the number of regional and national universities is modest. Other factors such as the flexibility of admission policies to universities and immigration laws in receiving countries also create favorable conditions for students to migrate (Cummings, 1991 cited in Sidhu, 2003, p. 16). Out of the above factors, a chance to secure a permanent residency (PR) permit in Australia is widely known as the most attractive pull factor to overseas students. In fact, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the US are the leading nations in receiving international students, and Australia itself offers foreign students various chances to become permanent residents via their points test system for residency and skilled visa schemes. For students from developing countries like Vietnam, such a study journey which is seen as a two-step migration strategy (Hawthorne, 2010) seems to turn their lives to a new chapter.

2. Two-step migration opportunities for overseas students

Australia has had a shortage of skills as caused by its aging population and market growth. Prime Minister Julia Gillard makes clear that migration programs in Australia have changed over time to fit the changing needs to build a sustainable Australia and to refresh the aging Australian population (Press Office, August 12, 2011). In this vein, Australia needs to gain more skilled migrants to meet regional demands and enterprise demands. Recognizing that international students at Australian colleges and universities could be attracted to join the aging workforce, Australia offers different types of visas for them to apply onshore with no more than six months after they finish their studies. In fact, skilled migrants can apply for either one of the four main residence visa categories in Australia: General Skilled Migration (GSM), Employer Nomination, Business Skills, and Distinguished Talent (DIAC, 2011b).

Generally speaking, international students who are over 18 and under 50 years old and have completed at least two years of approved full-time study at an Australian provider with CRICOS (the Commonwealth Register of Institutions and Courses for Overseas Students) can apply for a PR onshore under the Skilled Independent Visa (Subclass 885) which is part of the GSM Scheme. The purpose of the GSM Scheme is to grant residence visas to general skilled migrants who are selected on the basis of their nominated occupations out of the 192 high value occupations in the Skilled Occupation List (SOL), age, skills, qualifications, English language ability, and employability that can be used to contribute quickly to the Australian economy. Besides the Skilled Independent Visa, overseas students can also apply for one of the following visas: Skilled Regional Sponsored (Subclass 475), Skilled Sponsored (Subclass 176), or Skilled Sponsored (Subclass 886). To apply for these visas, student applicants must generally be under 50 years of age, meet the English language requirement (IELTS of at least 6), hold a skilled assessment for an occupation on the SOL, and have evidence of recent skilled employment in a skilled occupation or have completed an Australian degree.

Applicants must also meet the points test pass mark of 65 out of 120. Nevertheless, extra points have no longer been awarded for their nominated occupations in the SOL since July 1, 2011. Instead, the points test awards extra points to those who are proficient at credentialed community languages and

have held higher academic qualifications (e.g. Bachelor's degree, honors and master's students are awarded 15 points, and those with a PhD are awarded 20 points). In addition, an extra point of 5 will be given to those who have completed a Professional Year at an Australian provider to gain an understanding of the norms and values at the Australian workplace, to improve their social and professional communication skills, and to obtain authentic work experience. If they fail to meet the pass mark, they may be able to apply for the Skilled Graduate Temporary Visa (Subclass 485) which is granted to overseas students, who have completed at least two years study in Australia but who do not meet the requirements for a permanent GSM visa. This visa subclass gives them the opportunity to stay in Australia for up to 18 months to gain skilled work experience or improve their English language skills. Then they can apply for a residence visa under either the Employer Nomination Scheme or the Regional Sponsored Migration Scheme. In other words, it is obvious that Australia aims to recruit skilled workforce to quickly meet the labor demand in the market, and overseas students in Australia who hold Australian qualifications, are proficient in English and have already been adjusted socially and culturally to Australian lifestyle are one of the main sources for immigration (Hawthorne, 2005).

3. Australia as a popular study destination for Vietnamese students

According to the result of an online survey done by Institute of International Education (IIE) in March 2009 in Vietnam, a majority of Vietnamese student respondents choose the US as the first choice study destination, and Australia as the second alternate destination (IIE, 2011). In quite a similar vein, Australian Education International (AEI)'s survey reports that Australia is one of the first choice study destinations for Vietnamese students with more than 30% of the market share which is led by the US (AEI, 2010). More specifically, the number of temporary entry with Vietnamese student visa holders in Australia from July to December 2010 was 7,659, ranking Vietnam the 5th source country in the Southeast Asian region, and 7th in the world list. In June 2010, the number of Vietnamese students in Australia increased to 8,376, ranking it the 9th in which two-thirds of the visas were granted to those who intended to pursue undergraduate or postgraduate courses (DIAC, 2011a). Vietnam now ranks the 4th for the total sectors, 6th for higher education and vocational training education (VET), 3rd for English training, and 5th for schools and foundations in the top source sending country list (IDP, 2010). When taken Vietnam alone, according to AEI (2010), the number of Vietnamese students in Australia in the four sectors is 39.7% in higher education, 21.2% in VET, 24.9% in ELICOS, and 10.5% in schools. It is clear from this statistics that a bigger proportion of students are in the higher education sector.

There are many reasons for the growing number of international students coming to Australia as mentioned in the previous section. Students are now considered as consumers who have the right to choose what and where to study. Sidhu (2003) states that students usually choose countries with dynamic economies, whose educational credentials can be internationally recognized. Again, a majority of Vietnamese people prefer a *Western* degree to an *Eastern* one, and this is one of the reasons why rich Vietnamese parents always want to send their children to developed countries for education even though this study journey is costly and tough as discussed later. Besides the reputation of Australian education quality and the economic attraction of employment and many other reasons, this fact can be partly explained by the positive changes in visa assessment levels in the higher education and English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS)

sectors which have been effective since May 2007, and the various skilled migration visa options are available for onshore students.

Vietnamese students (except those who hold Australian citizenship or citizenships other than Vietnamese) come to Australia to study in four main types of educational programs: high school, vocational training, university-degree, and postgraduate levels. These groups also include ELICOS students who are required to meet English language proficiency requirements posed by schools, colleges, and universities prior to their mainstream courses. In terms of finance, they belong to three main groups: self-financing, partially-funded, and fully-funded students.

Many fully-funded students or scholarship students are those who undertake their Master's and doctoral degrees with the financial assistance of Australian Development Scholarships (ADS), Endeavour Postgraduate Awards (EPA), International Postgraduate Research Scholarships (IPRS) (now known as university scholarships for international postgraduate students), university-based scholarships, multinational corporations' scholarships (such as the World Bank), Vietnamese Government's Scholarships (called Program 911 which has been managed by Vietnam International Education Development Program, a sub-unit belonging to Ministry of Education and Training), or provincial sponsorships (such as Mekong 1,000 Project). Apart from those IPRS and university-based scholarship holders whose student visa conditions ask them to return home after graduation but the sponsors do not explicitly state those requirements in the sponsorship conditions, students of the other scholarship programs are required to return to Vietnam upon the completion of their study programs to contribute their expertise and knowledge received during the training journey in Australia to the national development. A violation of this condition will lead to a legal requirement of serious financial compensation equivalent to the amount of money spent for their training program (e.g. ADS in Vietnam - Conditions, 2011; Chapter III of Decree 54/2005/ND-CP, 2005; Pledge of Students' Completion of Overseas Study Duties, 2011). However, a small number of them do violate and seek chances to reside in Australia or move to live in another developed country such as the US or Singapore, and this number is statistically unknown. Among this group, there are students who were previously awarded scholarships to study in Australia and then come back for another higher degree either under the support of a scholarship program or by their own money. The latter are classified as self-financing students.

Those with partial scholarships who account for a small number are normally students at Master's, bachelor's, vocational and high school levels who are not asked to return home after graduation in compliance with the scholarship conditions. Due to the nature of most partial scholarships as universities' marketing strategies in prolific markets that cover part of their tuition fees, these students must present to the Australian Embassy or Consulate General in Vietnam legal financial evidence for the rest of the tuition and living expenses in the first year of their studies. Therefore, in terms of finance this group somehow shares some common characteristics with the third cohort consisting of self-funded students.

Young self-financing students belong to other subgroups. First, there are students who have failed university entrance examinations in Vietnam and choose to go to Australia as a second chance to study. Their study sojourns can be seen as one of the measures for male students not to be asked to enlist in the army, and this overseas study program may also keep face for both the students and

parents with other people. Second, some younger students go to Australia to study high school and spend the first 6 or 12 months studying English prior to the mainstream program. After Year 12 in Australia, some can go directly to year 1 at university, some choose to study at Technical and Further Education (TAFE) institutions and then proceed to year 1 or 2 at university, and others choose to enter TAFE after finishing Year 11 as a safe way to go to year 1 or 2 at university later. Others first begin the study journey as self-financing students and later are able to get partial scholarships because of their excellent performance at school or university but again, the amount of the scholarship is small. In addition, mature students usually arrive as students at bachelor's and postgraduate levels. A major number of students studying at university, TAFE, high school, Master's and a very small number at doctoral levels constitute this third group. This group has to prove the most demanding financial evidence to the Australian Embassy or Consulate General and spends the most money of their families. According to the researcher's personal observations as both an Australia-educated Vietnamese student and a deputy director working for an overseas study consultancy company in Vietnam, these students are the most likely to apply for PR after the completion of their studies as a return to their investment.

4. Financial issues for self-financing students and students' financial paradox

According to the Australian Embassy in Ha Noi (Australian Embassy in Vietnam, 2011), in order to be granted a student visa, students must present genuine documents related to their studies one of which is a financial affidavit showing that they have at least: (1) 18,000AUD for their first year's living expenses, (2) money sufficient for the first year's tuition fees (around 12,000AUD, depending on the study program), (3) 420AUD for Overseas Students Health Cover (OSHC) in the first year, and (4) 1,000AUD for the return airfare (it is a condition that students are required to return home after they complete their studies). The more important issue is that the students' families or the students' sponsors (who must be in the first or second level of relationship, i.e. those who are the students' parents, husbands or wives, or close relatives) have to prove the origin of the financial sources from their legal business or salary evidence. What is more, they must prove that sending their children overseas does not cause any negative impact or financial suffer to their business and living in Vietnam by showing their extra money in a certified bank. In addition to writing a study plan for the whole study period in which students must pledge that they will return to Vietnam after graduation, they and their families must show the amount of properties they possess in Vietnam such as land, houses, cars, business assets, etc. as a proof of bond that they will certainly come back to Vietnam. In other words, the total amount of money for the whole study duration from ELICOS, mainstream high school, TAFE, and to university is enormous: at least 250,000AUD.

Most students' families are successful entrepreneurs in Vietnam, where the annual average income per Vietnamese family is 21,297,000 VND (approximately 1,010 USD) in urban areas and 10,705,000VND in rural areas (505 USD) (General Statistics Office of Vietnam, 2010). A worker or a state employee can live a comfortable material life with an annual income of around 8,400 USD in large cities, 6,000 USD in provinces, or just 3,000 USD in villages. With such a big sum of money for studies, they could definitely live well in Vietnam for a long period of time. These self-financing students still choose to study in Australia and then try to secure a PR after graduation although they are aware that this journey always takes long, is expansive and tough. They are also aware that such

an investment could be risky for their families (personal conversations with Vietnamese students and migrants).

Some Vietnamese students in Australia go to work part-time to earn extra money for their living, but this income is humble and they are often exploited. In fact, if they work for an Australian enterprise, they can earn from 18 AUD to 20 AUD (before tax) per hour and can work no more than 20 hours per week as complied to the visa conditions, and they can receive around 10 AUD per hour if they work for Asian companies or shops. The part-time jobs that students often choose to do and can do are mostly laborious and manual in terms of both work quality and time constraints. Their families back in Vietnam must continue to support them financially to the end of their study programs. In short, students' families in Vietnam are legal, rich and successful business people who can send their all or some children to study overseas and offer them financial assistance for a long time without suffering any serious impact upon their livelihood in Vietnam. On the one hand, it is reasonable that parents want their children to acquire internationally recognized qualifications, but on the other why do they and students themselves want to reside in Australia with many challenges and pressure even when the difficulties sometimes seem insurmountable and the desire may go unachievable?

Further, with the huge amount of money (it could be little to some super-rich families as far as I know), students could live in Vietnam, go to a Vietnamese university, and spend the rest of the money for future business investment, but instead they "invest" it in their educational business. It is not because they (both parents and students) want to have a foreign degree to get a well-paid job with a high social position with high respect in Vietnam. It is because a majority of them choose to reside in Australia with the reason that they have invested too much money and it is time for them to get a return on it. How much will they be able to get as a return when the likelihood of a PR is not rosy enough for every student? This is a paradox in terms of financial investment.

The number of those who do not return is not properly controlled or surveyed. The stories behind their residency decision cannot be simply explained with regards to economic reasons for financial investment and economic satisfaction from their qualifications due to two reasons. First, with their degrees obtained in Australia and residence in Australia, they share the same opportunities and challenges as Vietnamese graduates living and looking for a job in Vietnam. This proposition implies that recognition of a "foreign" degree does not happen in the Australian context where career competition is intense even among local graduates. Second, parents with their intelligence and experiences in doing successful business must be able to recognize that this investment is huge, so why do they and again students themselves want to take a risk with this investment which will give them nothing tangible apart from the paper qualifications? Simply put, their educational investment is completely different from an economic investment where it is always expected to yield a financial return.

5. Contradictory experiences of non-returning students

Given that their study is like an investment, why do some Vietnamese students neglect a bigger chance to earn money in Vietnam, where in their national culture they and their parents have already established essential business relationships without having to start from the beginning like in Australia? While their families do not have to suffer any economic pressure in Vietnam, does their decision to stay on in Australia result from a political force which pushes them to move to a

democratic country with full respect to freedom of speech and human rights? However, it is also evident that in order to establish and lead a successful business, they must have solid relationships and possess a certain voice in the community and with those in authority. Therefore, it may be unlikely to assume that they feel so dissatisfied with these relationships and their political standing that they must urge their children to study overseas and reside there as an exit measure from this dissatisfaction. In other words, as student migrants who have acquired Australian academic qualifications and face no economic, political or religious pressure back home, what do they really desire from their residence endeavors in this host country?

Vietnamese students in Australia face many difficulties regarding language, culture, study pressure, lack of background knowledge, climate, job seek, isolation feeling, etc. Life in a small rented room which does not provide as many facilities as their home in Vietnam and life in a suburb where there are not suitable entertainment facilities often make them think of Australia as "a prison", "a place to eat your regret", "a deserted oasis", etc. in the first stage after their arrival, and then express "no feeling", "no care", "whatever" after a while, and finally begin to appreciate this journey with sayings like "I miss…", "Out there [Australia] people do this…", or "Lovely country" during their regular visits back in Vietnam (personal communication with Vietnamese students in Australia and Vietnam). Their academic journey is full of contradictory experiences which last until the end of the path. Nevertheless, when asked if they intend to return to Vietnam after a long time of struggling against difficulties which may never be faced in the same extent if they were in Vietnam, most students and those who have already succeeded in getting an Australian citizenship give a definite answer "No!" (personal communication with Vietnamese students and migrants in Australia). Again, what indeed governs their determination to reside in Australia? Their switch between university settings to workplace contexts and to a new residency status causes many changes, so what changes does their relocation mean for them?

6. Return home or stay on in Australia? A transnational perspective

In terms of career and residency aspirations after graduation, most Vietnamese high school graduates in Australia – a majority of whom self-finance their studies by mobilizing their parents' money – choose to continue to take either TAFE or university programs and even then proceed to postgraduate programs. They tend to prolong their study sojourn in Australia in order to be more qualified for their PR application at a later stage. Similarly, some privately-funded university students choose to spend some more time studying for a postgraduate qualification before applying for a PR while others seek employment with an Australia-based organization to improve the scores in their PR process (personal conversations with Vietnamese students and student migrants). In contrast, most sponsored students are asked to return to Vietnam as required by their scholarship conditions, but as mentioned briefly earlier, some do still manage to remain in Australia legally via marriages or employment.

As a sponsored student studying in Australia, the researcher has observed that a large number of partially-funded and self-funded students choose not to return to Vietnam upon the completion of their studies although most of self-financing students' parents are successful entrepreneurs who have a very high income to lead a comfortable life without worries about finance back in Vietnam. It may be presumably assumed that by becoming Australian, American, or Singaporean citizens, self-

financing students want to get more practical benefits offered by the Australian government for their retirement life and their children's schooling at a later stage, and sponsored students want to earn a better material life and be able to advance their professional ability in these developed countries. On the other hand, in recent conversations with several student-migrants, the researcher has found that after living in Australia for a while, many self-financing students want to return to Vietnam to live and work or take charge of their parents' business, and formerly-sponsored postgraduate student-migrants want to live in Australia but contribute their expertise to Vietnam's national development by running professional workshops, giving lectures, and doing research. I began to wonder what has indeed happened to these migrants when they wish to become transnational citizens whose mobility and locality are closely linked to their life and career desires, their obligations to the families back in Vietnam, and in general to their roots as Vietnamese citizens.

Though most of academic migrants' transnational work is voluntary as remuneration for academics in Vietnam is always low, their contribution remains publicly unrecognized. One typical example of such a transnational return is the project called *Engaging with Vietnam* managed by a group of Vietnamese expatriates (e.g. Professor. Phan Le Ha), Vietnamese professionals in Vietnam (e.g. Associate Professor Pham Quang Minh), and international academics such as Professor Stephanie Fahey from Monash University, Professor Carlyle Thayer from the University of New South Wales, etc. This conference aims to feature Vietnam-related research work by Vietnamese and international researchers and research students in Australian universities and organizations. This project which is in the form of academic dialogue and seminars aims to investigate how knowledge about Vietnam is created and managed with regards to globalization, mobility and transnationality. It also brings in different perspectives regarding the issues of brain drain and brain exchange to make useful contributions to Vietnam through research work. Besides this widely-known academic project, there are other Australia-educated Vietnamese migrants returning to Vietnam for both visits and doing business, but their stories are little known. There are also stories about Vietnamese skilled migrants who have not returned to Vietnam but have kept close contacts with their relatives and friends back home. Their stories are always complex, sometimes contradictory, but worth listening.

In Vietnamese culture, no matter where people reside and no matter why they left the country, their root as "Vietnamese" always ties them back to the home country which is seen as *the place to bury their placenta and cut their umbilical cord (nơi chôn rau cắt rốn)*. Forgetting the root is seen as vice and treason, and this perception of loyalty is considered as the true nature of the Vietnamese. In fact, the past two decades have seen many returns of famous Vietnamese returnees such as the posthumous Professor Tran Van Khe (traditional music expert) from France, Professor Ngo Bao Chau (mathematician) from France and the US, to name but a few. In the meantime, there are others whose achievements in foreign countries are not sound, but who have returned and intend to return to contribute back to Vietnam's development or simply to reside with dual nationalities due to their Vietnamese roots. These migrants' stories which should be heard and examined could offer us a better understanding of migration which does not solely happen in one direction. Particularly with regard to professional migrants, it can be seen that no matter where they reside, their residency aspirations are linked to the desire to apply their knowledge to their professions across borders. The more educated they are, the more mobile they become.

Most of these migrants have migrated as adults who have already established social ties in both Australia, Vietnam, and even in other countries before and during their journeys. Such relationships which are sustained via transportation and communication technologies help them maintain their ties back home and facilitate more mobility between the two countries and even more. Their transnational practices show reciprocity and solidarity within their kinship networks not only in Australia but also Vietnam and even beyond such two countries' boundaries. A new agenda is reflected in the empowerment of these migrants at micro-level in response to citizenship and migration laws at macro-level and familial and communal obligations at meso-level. These migrants' transnational spaces, fields, and formations are formed within a set of dense and continuous social symbolic ties that include many kinds of social phenomena that are not properly researched in migration studies (Faist, 2010). In contrast, the potential transnationality of this new wave of migrants who always hold their routes back to their home countries should be addressed. Because some countries like Vietnam are generous in allowing them to hold dual citizenships, their legal connectedness with the home country could benefit both the sending and receiving country in terms of remittances, brain exchange and even positive external relationships. Student-turn-migrants' stories are usually complex as they involve the migrants' shifts in identities and status: from being transient students as legal resident aliens at educational contexts to being legal residents as "denizens" who are foreign residents with legal resident status (Hammar, 1990, p. 15) and to transnational citizens whose mobility transcends their lives as a global citizens moving across borders to meet their life and career aspirations. Further, being one of the largest communities in Australia due to different types of aggregate migration over the history, Vietnamese skilled migrants in Australia are still under-researched, and how they make sense of their transnational lives remains unknown. Therefore, this research aims to explore Vietnamese student-turn-migrants' naturalization and integration process where they are trying to negotiate their own identities in a transnational perspective with a consideration over their roots and routes (Clifford, 1994). More specifically, it will investigate what Vietnamese skilled migrants' desires for residency are in the Australian context with both opportunities and challenges in terms of employment and life, how they have formed their new transnational identities which link to their current life and career aspirations, and how they make sense of transnational ties in achieving these aspirations.

Currently, there is no official statistics on the number of non-returnee Vietnamese students in Australia or the number of temporary return migrants. In general, with the strong economic background and financial support from the families for self-financing students and certain social positions which are awaiting for sponsored students, why do these skilled migrants want to reside in Australia or move to another country to work where they always have to face many challenges and contradictory experiences in terms of language, culture, ethnicity, and even politics in the receiving country(ies)? Why do some of them want to return? How do they manage their transnational ties to achieve what they want from their new citizenship? How do these skilled migrants develop, maintain, and utilize the dense social networks as a currency to gain more capitals for their residency purposes?

7. Vietnam's shortage of skilled workforce and its perceived brain drain

Despite the recent growing number of students studying at both university and postgraduate levels both in Vietnam and overseas, the World Economic Forum's Global Competitiveness Report for

2008-2009 (World Economic Forum, 2008, p. 29) reveals that Vietnam is a "factor-driven economy" which is highly dependent on its availability of unskilled labor and natural resources while facing a high shortage of highly skilled workforce. It must be noted that there is almost no agreed international definition on highly skilled workers. For example, the OECD Canberra Manual on Measuring Human Resources in Science and Technology (OECD, 1995, p. 16 & p. 20) defines a highly skilled population as those who have completed the third level of education in a science and technology field of study or those who are not formally qualified but are employed in a science and technology occupation where related formal qualifications are normally required.

Different regions in Vietnam are employing different policies to attract skilled workers to quickly fill in the gaps in prioritized professions. For instance, Da Nang People's Committee (Decision Number 21/2009/QD-UBND DN, 2009) gives favorable priorities in buying houses, increasing financial incentives, and quicker access to tenure to those who hold at least a university degree in the fields that the city needs: information technology (IT), biotechnology, environmental engineering, construction, roadway infrastructure, architecture, medicine, law, public health, agriculture, and forestry. Hung Yen Province with Decision Number 03/2009/QD-UBND (2009) gives more financial priorities to "talents" to work in their place through generous offers of attractive incentives such as free accommodation, financial bonus, and ownership of land and a similar approach has been applied in Can Tho City (Decision 44/2010/QD-UBND CT, 2010). On the national level, Decision Number 579 on the ratification of human capacity building strategies for Vietnam dated on April 19, 2011 by Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung (Decision Number 579, 2011) places a strong focus on attracting those who have a high level of expertise in "breakthrough aspects" (p. 3) including those who work in state administration, policy planning, international laws; those who are university and college lecturers; those who are in technological fields; those who work in healthcare; those who are in banking and finance; and those who work in IT. Decision Number 579 does not explicitly define the concrete level of expertise that can be measured via educational credentials, and in this sense it is possible to assume that anyone can become a highly skilled worker as long as they have relevant skills and knowledge to work effectively in the fields that the State needs. In this vein, the definition given by Vietnam's Central Government somehow shares common characteristics with the OECD's definition in which highly skilled workforce is defined as a professional population who either hold formal degrees at the third level of education or must be able to perform their expertise in science and technology.

Vietnam is currently in a huge shortage of highly-qualified lecturers at tertiary level, and it suffers a lack of highly skilled workers in science and technology for the country. In fact, according to Vietnam's Ministry of Education and Training (MOET)'s 2009 report, the number of Vietnamese student enrolments in 2009 who are taking degree programs at both public and non-public universities in Vietnam is 1,752,561 within which there are 2,505 doctoral students and 30,638 Master's students (MOET, 2009). With the national population of 86 million people (Vietnam's General Office for Population and Family Planning, 2009), the participation rate of the people in higher education is very small. Further, the total number of faculty staff at universities is humble (MOET, 2009).

According to World Bank's Report on Vietnam's education (WB, 2011), Vietnam's higher education still faces mismatches in fulfilling the needs for industrialization, modernization and international

economic integration. Universities in Vietnam in general do not establish close linkages with industries due to many reasons. For example, their training quality and efficiency remain poor, and teaching and learning methods have been out-of-date. Moreover, resources and facilities for research are humble, and institutional autonomy and accountability have not been made full use of. In order to enhance the national intellectual capacity, the competitiveness of human resources and the country's economy, the Government required MOET to develop *Higher Education Reform Agenda* (Resolution Number 14/2005/NQ-CP, 2005), one of whose goals is to ensure that 35% of university staff will have been qualified to doctoral level by 2020.

Besides taking postgraduate courses at universities and research institutes which offer postgraduate training programs (Sheridan, 2010, p. 4), those who work for the state and semi-public organizations now can take a wide range of opportunities to study overseas thanks to many scholarship sources. Phase 2 of the Higher Education Project, the Teaching and Research Innovation Grants (TRIG) which is funded by the Central Government sends lecturers at major universities to partner-universities in developed countries to pursue Master's and doctoral degrees (MOET, 2011). Similarly, the 300-Program in Ho Chi Minh City has put the target of sending 300 state employees in this city overseas to take Master's and doctoral courses. In order to fill in the "brain engine gap" in the region, the Mekong 1,000 Project has sent 1,000 students in 13 cities and provinces of the Mekong Delta to study at Master's and doctoral levels in developed and Newly Industrialized Countries. The candidates in the Mekong 1,000 Project are selected based on the fields that the region is in high demand including mechanical engineering, IT, food processing, construction, material engineering, chemical engineering, biotechnology, urban planning and development, energy, banking and finance, and law (Mekong 1,000 Project, 2011).

In addition, foreign-based scholarship sponsors in Vietnam such as ADS, Fulbright, Chevening, ADB, WB, etc. all aim to recruit Vietnamese applicants to take Master's or doctoral courses overseas. The biggest scholarship program for Master's and doctoral students to study in Australia is the ADS (included Australian Leadership Awards), which supports around 150-285 candidates each year. The selection of the scholarship program is based on academic merit, work experience, and prioritized fields of study which are identified as Vietnam's key development themes that align with Australia's strategic aid in Vietnam. These fields of study broadly include healthcare, economic growth, education, environment, governance, human rights, infrastructure, rural development, and water and sanitation (ADS, 2011). Another scholarship program is Fulbright which sponsors around 22 Master's students who must work for state organizations to study social sciences and humanities in the US. The Vietnam Education Foundation (VEF), which is jointly managed by the U.S. Congress and Vietnam's Government, aims to strengthen the US-Vietnam bilateral relationship by sending Vietnamese students in science and technology to study for Master's and doctoral degrees in the US. Other scholarship programs such as Chevening (sending 20 Master's students studying in the UK) and Endeavor Postgraduate Awards (around 25 students studying at VET, Master's and doctoral levels) all target to recruit students in the prioritized fields of study that Vietnam think are strategic for its development. In other words, it is evident that Vietnam needs more highly-skilled workforce who will probably be employed as a vehicle to disseminate their knowledge and expertise to local people.

At the same time, Vietnam claims that it is suffering from a brain drain when the number of the non-return students is high. In fact, issues about brain drain seem ubiquitous in official Vietnamese media coverage (e.g. Huynh Van Thuan's article on *Tuoi Tre Newspaper,* August 13, 2004; Pham Song's article on *Sai Gon Giai Phong Newspaper*, December 10, 2007; The Uyen's article on *Lao Dong Newspaper*, August 14, 2011) while there is almost no statistical information on the number of non-return students. The only one academic document that very briefly presents the brain drain facts in Vietnam can be referred to an article on the economics of brain drain in the global context written by Docquier and Rapoport (2011) in which Vietnam is mentioned as one of the countries with the highest rates of brain drain, amounting to 26.9% of the trained stocks (p. 9). However, skilled migrants have returned, but their returns are not widely recognized; and even when they have not returned, their contribution to the nation's development may remain unheard. Therefore, in case where non-returnees contribute remittances, transnational expertise exchanges, and transnational ties back to the home country, is their flow considered as a brain drain?

8. Concluding comments

In the global context where Australia as a developed Western skill-hungry nation and its international education as an expanding export industry has aimed to reach out to recruit overseas students and offer PR opportunities, and where Vietnam urgently needs to send its young people to such a developed country as Australia to achieve advanced knowledge to quickly meet the soaring demands for the market and encourages them to return when confronting a perceived brain drain, and the cultural perspectives in Vietnamese traditions, the forces from families; Vietnamese skilled migrants in Australia do have their own stories about their residency journey, about the formation of a new identity which may make them multi-stranded in terms of citizenships, about their obligations to both home and receiving countries, and about their professional aspirations. They bring with them unique features of capitals namely cultural, social, and symbolic capitals that facilitate their multi-stranded stance in the world. According to Dahinden (2010), mobility is considered as migrants' physical movements in transnational spaces, and locality means how they are rooted or anchored socially, economically or politically in the destination country and/or the sending country by establishing and maintaining social relations in specific places.

Because migration studies tend to emphasize an investigation of immigration at either pole of the macro-micro continuum (Gold, 1997), we often end up with an incomplete understanding of migration, especially migrants' stories are always complex and are shaped by different social structures. Studies concerning the macro level fail to consider migrants' individual and collective complexities involved as they move from one setting to another while micro level studies address more of the human drama of immigration, but often ignore the effects of broader social structures, political and economic relations that shape migrants' contexts. In contrast, transnationalism views migration as a multi-level process (demographic, political, economic, cultural, and familial) that consists of various links between two or more settings rather than "a discrete event constituted by a permanent move from one nation to another" (ibid, p. 410). Like migration studies at the micro level, transnationalism examines the importance of networks, contexts, and individual values, and like the macro approaches, it also investigates the large economic, political and legal structures within which immigrants develop their communities and lives. Furthermore, transnationalism emphasizes immigration as a continuous process where migrants' ideas and values are changed as they change

their localities and develop their own meanings in multiple settings. Their sustained relationships across borders can allow migrants to surmount hindrances traditionally associated with long distances and international borders.

Many of these issues reflected in this essays have been researched and debated while others are still left for further research. Given the young population living mostly in rural areas and a developing economy which has suffered great losses after the War, it is possible to assume that going overseas to study is popular among those who reside in urban areas with a high level of education and easy, available access to information. It would also be interesting to look at locales where internationalization of education reaches to see their marketing goals in three dimensions: width, breadth, and distribution (i.e. marketing strategies and rationales, types of targeted customers, the effectiveness of their participation in the local market such as an offshore campus, the geographical coverage, the impacts of their strategies on the number of actual enrolments, and the social classes of the enrolled students.) From a macro-economic level, what really attracts foreign institutions to reach Vietnam's market besides the fact that it is an emerging economy?

Compliance of research and publication ethics

I, as the Corresponding Author, declare and undertake that in the study titled as "Reflections on the Australian international education and Vietnamese skilled migration nexus", scientific, ethical and citation rules were followed; Turkish Online Journal of Qualitative Inquiry Journal Editorial Board has no responsibility for all ethical violations to be encountered, that all responsibility belongs to the author/s and that this study has not been sent to any other academic publication platform for evaluation.

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