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# International Students in Their Own Country: Motivation of Vietnamese Graduate Students to Attend a Collaborative Transnational University

## **Abstract**

Higher education institutions in Vietnam have embraced opportunities to collaborate internationally to address specific educational needs that have emerged as a result of an accelerated economic and political society. The shift to a global market-driven economy has resulted in the need to produce better prepared graduates, advance in technology, and a shift in teaching and learning practices. In this study, we examine the motivations of 22 Vietnamese graduate students to attend Vietnamese-German University (VGU). The site is of particular importance because VGU is a true collaboration between two different governments, resulting in a collaborative transnational university. The findings from this study indicate three connected pull factors for graduate students: instruction conducted in English, benefits of a German degree, and the low cost for an international degree. Implications from findings illuminate why Vietnamese graduate students make educational choices and provide insights on their academic experiences as they relate to societal priorities.

## **Keywords**

Vietnam, Germany, transnational education, higher education, student choice

## **Cover Page Footnote**

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# **INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN THEIR OWN COUNTRY: MOTIVATION OF VIETNAMESE GRADUATE STUDENTS TO ATTEND A COLLABORATIVE TRANSNATIONAL UNIVERSITY**

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## **Introduction**

Over the past two decades, internationalization has emerged as a major topic in higher education and as a result, global perspectives have influenced many aspects of the academic institution (Altbach & Knight, 2007). Higher education is a part of the global economy, with emphasis on student mobility and cross-border research collaborations. In addition, postsecondary education is currently a source of financial growth, knowledge exchange, and economic development for many institutions around the globe, especially in developing countries (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009; Anh, 2009; Knight, 2006).

Internationalization of higher education has moved beyond sending and receiving international students; rather, institutions of higher education around the world have developed partnerships to create and establish transnational campuses. Transnational higher education is defined by higher education that includes the mobility of institutional programs and courses beyond national borders; as such, students receive international degrees and certifications without having to leave their home country (Fang, 2012; Fang & Wang, 2014). Simply stated, Wilkins (2015) summarized transnational education as “study programs where learners are located in a country other than the one in which the awarding institutions is based” (p. 3).

Transnational education often benefits both the host and foreign countries. For example, foreign or sending countries of international partnerships, most of which are Western countries such as the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom, benefit

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from increased global presence, financial gain, and the satisfaction from providing educational access to students around the world. Host or receiving countries gain access to what are considered world-class and established universities with well-regarded educational reputations. Moreover, several host countries, particularly those in Latin America and Southeast Asia, lack the ability to meet growing economic demands for higher education (Altbach & Knight, 2007); thus, foreign sending countries are able to fill that gap in host nations. With the shared interests in educational collaboration, several hubs for transnational campuses have emerged, with Vietnam as a growing location for transnational higher education partnerships in Southeast Asia (Altbach & Knight, 2007).

With a growing number of transnational higher education institutions, it is important to better understand how and why students choose to attend a transnational university in their own country, which has implications for student recruitment and retention efforts. The purpose of this paper is to examine the motivations of Vietnamese graduate students to attend Vietnamese-German University (VGU). The site is of particular importance because VGU was established in 2008 as a collaboration between the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) and the Hessen State Ministry of Higher Education, Research and the Arts (HMWK) in Germany. VGU is one of four collaborative transnational universities in Vietnam, with the others partnering with France, Russia, the United States, and Japan. Thus, VGU is unique in the fact that it is one of four institutions that are transnational collaborations between two different governments rather than the typical off-shore branch campus of one higher education institution.

We seek to answer the research question, “what motivated Vietnamese graduate students to attend a transnational university in their own country?” First, we provide an overview of transnational campuses in order to understand the structure of these institutions. We also highlight contextual factors in Vietnam as well as at VGU. Finally, we illuminate findings from this study and discuss implications for future research and practice. The findings from this study provide information on graduate students’ institutional selection processes and provide insight to individual academic experiences as they relate to societal priorities. Understanding student attitudes will assist institutions in better supporting student needs as well as provide useful information to institutions as they market to students.

### **Proliferation of Transnational Campuses**

Literature on transnational higher education in Vietnam is limited, with only a few empirical studies on transnational campuses (e.g., Fang, 2012; Fang & Wang, 2014). Most international exchange studies tend to focus on branch campuses (e.g., Becker, 2009, 2010; Tierney & Lanford, 2015; Wilkins, Balakrishnan, & Huisman, 2011; Wilkins & Huisman, 2012), which can range widely from physical description to offered services. The commonly used definition of branch campus is:

An international branch campus is an off-shore entity of a higher education institution operated by the institution or through a joint venture in which the institution is a partner (some countries require foreign providers to partner with a local organization) in the name of the foreign institution. (Becker, 2009, p. 3)

Under this common description, there are currently over 282 branch campuses that have been established around the world (Cross-Border Education Research Team, 2015). These campuses are considered to be “traditional” branch campuses, which includes services

that would often be found in the home institution (Becker, 2010). The typical characteristics include a library, student housing, research facilities, and a variety of course offerings. These traditional branch campuses offer courses and degrees that are associated with one foreign host institution, and the campus is supported by the host country's local government.

Branch campuses are defined by a receiving host country and a sending foreign country. An international branch campus differs in that the educational institution is owned by a foreign institution (i.e., New York University) and operates under the name of the foreign institution at an offshore location (i.e., NYU in Shanghai), with the culmination as a degree conferred from the foreign institution (Wilkins & Huisman, 2012). Although transnational campuses are sometimes considered to be interchangeable with branch campuses, recent research indicates that transnational campuses are a new entity emerging into the global market (Fang, 2012; Fang & Wang, 2014). Transnational higher education campuses are different in that there is not defined differentiation between the host and home country.

Rather, transnational universities tend to be collaborations between foreign and host countries, most visibly in mutual financial investment. Transnational campuses are very similar to traditional branch campuses, but are considered a new model of international campuses that seeks to partner and sustain with the host country beyond just establishing the institutions. Transnational campuses are often collaborations between foreign higher education institutions and/or systems and national governments, with significant economic investment from both entities, which differs from international branch campuses (Fang, 2012). Thus, transnational higher education, as referred to in this current study as collaboration transnational institutions, indicates significant partnership from both the foreign and host country. With such a proliferation of transnational and branch campuses, students have choice in deciding whether to attend an in-country institution or a transnational educational institution. In order to best meet the needs of students, it is important to understand why students choose transnational campuses.

### **Student Choice in International Education**

Current literature primarily focuses on student choice in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Wilkins, Balakrishnan, and Huisman (2011) conducted a quantitative study on student choice to study at international branch campuses in the UAE. Participants stated that they were able to follow the same curriculum and receive the same degree awarded by the home or sending campus, which meant there was little financial justification to attend the home campus. In addition, students stated that they were able to study subjects not offered at UAE institutions and at the same time, they were able to gain more prestige by having a foreign degree. Students claimed that they would be able to get better employment within the competitive international labor market as a result of having earned a foreign degree (Wilkins et al., 2011).

Similarly, in a study on Chinese students' choice at a transnational higher education institution, Fang and Wang (2014) found that students desired the prestige from receiving an international degree. The students believed transnational education served as a "tool to regain access to high-quality domestic higher education institutions and to gain access to overseas higher education" (Fang & Wang, 2014, p. 17). Motivations for students included several pull factors, including interest in foreign teaching methods, advanced foreign knowledge, and improvement of cross-cultural communication practices. Push factors included a lack of access to satisfactory domestic institutions, low international influence,

and low levels of language training in Chinese universities. These motivations for attending a transnational university were similar to those reported by Ahmad (2015) in a study on Malaysian branch campuses.

Ahmad (2015) examined student satisfaction in attending international branch campuses in Malaysia. The survey measured student satisfaction in seven areas that the author identified as motivating factors that attracted students to branch campuses, such as program quality, teaching quality, university image, and student learning environment. Overall, findings in this study indicated that students had favorable evaluations of branch campuses in Malaysia, particularly in satisfaction with foreign (British and Australian) models of education as well as English language instruction. The main motivations to study at Malaysian international branch campuses reported by the participants included the ability to attend an internationally known institution that was valued by Malaysians and to receive a recognized international degree.

As indicated by the studies reviewed, student choice for attending transnational and branch campuses include the desire for international degrees as a way to participate in the international labor market. Although these quantitative studies are informative, these studies are also limited in that they examine specific countries and, with the exception of Fang and Wang (2014), focus predominantly on traditional branch campuses. This indicates a dearth of literature related to student choice in transnational collaborative universities, and even more limited in understanding student motivations in Vietnam. Thus, this qualitative study seeks to fill that gap by examining factors that motivated graduate students to attend a transnational university in Vietnam.

### **Contextual Factors: Vietnam and Vietnamese-German University**

Beyond the roles of transnational partnerships and student choice, contextual factors are critical in understanding why and how transnational campuses are emerging in Vietnam. Higher education institutions in Vietnam have embraced opportunities to collaborate internationally to address specific educational needs that have emerged as a result of an accelerated economic and political society. In addition, higher education institutions have a responsibility to assist learners “to navigate the knowledge, skills and attributes to perform effectively across a broad range of sectors of society,” (Tran & Marginson, 2015, p. 15) all in a “fast-developing economy and society” (p. 15). Harman and Bich (2010) described higher education in Vietnam as “a key driver in the country’s move from a centrally controlled economy to a market-led economy with a socialist orientation” (p. 66). This shift has resulted in the need to produce better prepared graduates, advance in technology, and move toward a learning paradigm (Harman & Bich, 2010).

The Vietnamese Higher Education Reform Agenda (HERA) was established in 2005 by the Vietnam government with the goal of developing an internationally competitive and respected system of higher education by the year 2020 (Harman, Hayden, & Nghi, 2010). Harman et al. (2010) identified several key objectives of HERA, including but not limited to: increasing of enrollment with 20% of students attending research-oriented institutions, reforming governance and management programs, restructuring and internationalization of curriculum, and developing internationally-integrated higher education programs, including “more international commitments and agreements, improvements in the teaching and learning of foreign languages (especially English), and the development of conditions favourable to increased foreign investment in the higher education system” (p. 3). Additional objectives included an expansion of the private sector, anticipating that 40% of all student enrollment would be at non-public higher education institutions. HERA was

added to a series of reforms implemented back to 1993; however, it has not resulted in swift results and faces a number of challenges (Harman et al., 2010). Among these challenges are a lack of resources to support a strong educational infrastructure, issues with governance, and ineffective teaching practices (Nghi, 2010).

Another challenge Vietnam's higher education system has faced is graduate preparation. The lack of skill development in Vietnamese graduates was found to be a critical barrier to the workforce in a study conducted by Tran (2013), with implications for student success in future professional work. Similarly, the World Bank (2013) reported that education has played an increasingly critical role in job placement in Vietnam, noting that the increase of professional and technical positions in urban areas increased "the demand for workers with a secondary general and vocational or higher education degree" (p. 46). This growth has resulted in a decrease in the number of agriculturally-based jobs and an increase in manufacturing, thus increasing the need for "analytical and interpersonal skills" in place of "manual skills" (World Bank, 2013, p. 43).

In a study of employer-identified needs in Vietnam and the ways universities have addressed the development of job-related skills, Trung and Swierczek (2009) found that overall, university training has not met the needs of employers in Vietnam. The authors identified employers' perspectives on necessary skills in graduates and found that recent graduates were lacking in the necessary skills and competencies. Trung and Swierczek (2009) indicated that adding learning approaches such as case study and group discussion could result in positive effects on developing necessary workplace skills, such as interpersonal communication and effective teamwork. These findings have implications for educators to improve teaching and learning practices to better meet the needs of employers in Vietnam. As a result, higher education institutions in Vietnam must reconsider their approaches towards traditional teaching methods, soft skill development, and support for university students' transition to the workplace (Tran, 2013).

Compounding the issue of workforce development, students enrolled in postsecondary institutions in Vietnam are affected by the inability of the current system to meet the rising demands of higher education (Ashwill, 2015). Higher education age-related participation rate in Vietnam more than doubled from 10% in 2000 to 24% in 2011, yet it still lags behind other nearby countries (World Bank, 2013). While this growth shows promise for higher education in Vietnam, the increase in enrollment cannot currently be met by the country's educational infrastructure (Clark, 2014). Hayden and Thiep (2006) reinforced this argument by asserting that many individuals do not seek higher education enrollment because of the lack of institutions to attend in the country. Some students do, however, enroll in higher education internationally, with Australia, the U.S. and China being the top three enrollment destinations (Clark, 2014). However, enrolling in colleges and universities abroad can be expensive and is not an option for all students, which was highlighted by the World Bank's (2013) call for the development of additional higher education funding mechanisms in Vietnam. These developments also underscore the rationale behind Ashwill's (2015) assertion that Vietnam offers opportunity for the establishment of higher education institutions by other countries.

**Vietnamese-German University.** Vietnamese-German University (VGU) is a public university located in Binh Duong New City, approximately 70 kilometers north of Ho Chi Minh City. VGU was founded in March 2008, after discussion between the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) and the Hessen State Ministry of Higher Education, Research and the Arts (HMWK) in 2006. In recent years, the collaboration has broadened to additional states in Germany. The university started with



30 students in one program; however, by 2015, VGU had approximately 1,000 students enrolled in four bachelor's and six master's programs. VGU offers predominantly technology and engineering majors for both undergraduate and graduate students. Full-time graduate programs offered at the time of this study are: Mechatronics and Sensor Systems Technology, Sustainable Urban Development, Business Information Systems, Computational Engineering, Traffic and Transport, and Global Production Engineering and Management. Industry scholarships are often offered to graduate students, as a result of partnerships with international corporations such as Adidas and Pepperl+Fuchs (Vietnamese-German University, 2015).

VGU's strategy is to "import excellent German study programs, taken from the strongest engineering areas of Germany and customize them to the needs of Vietnamese higher education" (Vietnamese-German University, 2015). In addition, VGU also touts the following benefits of attending: receiving both German and VGU degrees, improved English language skills, moderate tuition fees, and opportunities to study in Germany. Faculty are important members of the university community, and currently, VGU has two types of faculty: permanent and "flying faculty" from German partner universities. Permanent faculty are Vietnamese nationals, and the flying faculty get their name from flying into Vietnam and teaching a course in two weeks. Thus, students attend intensive two-week long classes on one course topic that is typically taught by German faculty. According to current VGU staff, the strategic plan for VGU includes eventually employing primarily German-trained Vietnamese faculty.

Although VGU is a Vietnamese state university, students receive degrees that are conferred by the German partner universities associated with their degree program. VGU currently issues certificates that confirm students' graduation, with future plans of VGU conferring joint degrees in collaboration with German universities. The future joint degrees are anticipated to "follow high international standards and meet the need for highly qualified young academics" (Vietnamese-German University, 2015). Thus, in the future, VGU will become a joint degree program, which is described by Knight (2007) as "a joint award from collaborating partners" (p. 28). Because VGU currently only awards graduation certificates rather than a degree, VGU is not currently considered a joint degree program.

### **Theoretical Framework: Push and Pull Factors**

The theoretical framework used in this study is guided by Mazzarol and Soutar's (2002) description of push and pull factors. Push factors are described as factors that "operate within the source country and initiate a student's decision to undertake international study" (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002, p. 82). Pull factors are the factors within a host country that attract international students. Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) noted that push and pull factors become influential at different stages of the student college choice process. Push factors come into play during the first stage, wherein students make the choice between domestic and international settings. The second stage involves determining which specific institution the student will attend. During this time, pull factors define the ways students compare and make a selection among institutional options.

Early studies of push and pull factors such as McMahon's (1992) examination of the movement of college level students hailing from 18 different countries to the United States influenced the work of other researchers exploring international student college choice. This framework has been used to understand international student flow through a variety of different host and source countries. For the purposes of this study, we are interested in determining what attracted participants to this particular institution (VGU) for their

graduate program. According to Mazzarol and Soutar's (2002) reasoning, our focus would therefore take place in the second stage of the choice process, which is where pull factors come into play. Thus, we will specifically focus on the pull factors as a means to understand participants' decision to attend VGU, a collaborative transnational university in their own country.

## **Method**

We utilized qualitative research methods at a single site institution. The findings for this paper emerged from a larger study in which we questioned: what are graduate students' academic experiences at Vietnamese-German University? The first author recruited participants by sending emails to gatekeepers at VGU. The gatekeepers, who served as administrative staff at the university, distributed the email to all eligible participants who then contacted the first author to schedule in person interviews. Recruitment emails were sent in spring of 2015 to eligible participants, which included all current students enrolled in a master's program at VGU.

The first author traveled to Vietnamese-German University in the spring of 2015. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in person with 24 graduate students at VGU; however, two participants' findings were excluded because of their international student status. Using semi-structured interviews provided the opportunity to ask follow-up or clarifying questions related to participants' specific and unique experiences in their respective graduate program (Glesne, 2010). Participants were able to share thoughts on their specific graduate programs, including feedback on faculty and their motivation to attend VGU.

Nine of the participants identified as women and 17 were first year master's students. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes and was conducted in English. Interviewing participants was the most appropriate mode of inquiry because it helped us learn about their experiences and allowed for their lived experiences to emerge (Charmaz, 2001). As a result of our participants' broad range of interests and experiences, we have been able to collect rich data, which has increased the trustworthiness of the data collected (Glesne, 2010). Selection of participants was a result of purposeful sampling, which is used when "the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned" (Merriam, 2009, p. 77).

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

In-depth, face-to-face interviews were conducted in English with each participant, at which point each participant selected his or her own pseudonym. All interviews were conducted within two weeks in May 2015. Gathered data from each individual interview was organized and transcribed on an ongoing basis, including details on dates, pseudonyms, and any other notes that the first author took during and after the interviews. Examples of interview questions include: "Tell me what you were looking for in a graduate program prior to starting in your graduate program." and "What do you think are the benefits of attending VGU instead of another university in Vietnam?" Although the researcher had some pre-determined interview questions, she allowed for conversation to emerge naturally and asked follow-up questions when appropriate.

Coding and analysis were conducted by a team of four additional researchers after the first author returned to the United States. When coding, we made categories that were based on the research questions and conceptual framework from which we interpreted emerging themes (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). We utilized deductive coding, which includes a

“start list” (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014, p. 81) based on this study’s interview protocol and conceptual framework. We first searched for broad categories and then developed themes that emerged from the participants’ experiences. Themes were coded by identifying appropriate phrases that related to our themes.

After concluding first cycle coding, we moved on to second cycle coding, which is “a way of grouping those summaries into a smaller number of categories, themes, or constructs” (Miles et al., 2013, p. 86). We organized the first cycle codes by clustering them under common themes or patterns that emerged from the interviews. This was an iterative process of reflecting and clustering codes into code categories. We continuously refined the pattern codes until we felt the final codes were representative of the participants’ experiences.

### **Trustworthiness and Validity**

Merriam (2002) indicated that triangulation is an effective strategy for confirming findings, which we accomplished by using multiple data sources and multiple researchers. Given the nature and the length of the interviews, we have been able to collect rich data and use thick description, which has increased the trustworthiness of the data collected (Glesne, 2010). Our findings are based on the raw data that was collected and the exact quotations from our study participants. We employed reliability procedures (Creswell, 2007), including conducting multiple reviews of transcripts in order to reduce mistakes in our interpretation participants’ narratives of their experiences. Finally, we conferred with international higher education scholars regarding our study topic, the nature of our study, and the process by which we collected our data. We have also shared our preliminary findings with our peers proficient in qualitative research who critiqued our findings and provided alternative viewpoints. These discussions helped us to confirm that our “tentative interpretations” (Merriam, 2002, p. 31) were appropriate and congruent with the themes that we identified from our findings.

Reliability often lies within the researcher who is the primary instrument for data collection. As the researchers, we were aware that our own biases, values, and perspectives influence our research lens; thus, our reflexivity affected how we made meaning of participants’ worldviews. As such, the investigators’ positionality was used as a form of reliability (Merriam, 2009). One author, who traveled to VGU to conduct the interviews, identifies as an U.S.-born first-generation Chinese-American whose primary language is English. This author uses a critical perspective in her research approach as a way to incorporate the importance of critiquing and challenging the dominant paradigm and status quo that dominates social and educational structures in current society. This author had traveled to Vietnam for a previous study tour while in her doctoral program, and recognizes the privileges and benefits of her U.S. citizenship when conducting this research project. The second author identifies as a U.S. born, Mexican-American whose primary language is English. Having one parent that immigrated to the U.S., she is sensitive to cultural differences and recognizes aspects of her privileged background that may shape her bias and perspective.

### **Limitations**

Interviews were conducted in English, which was not the primary language for any of the participants. The interviewer carefully phrased questions in order to minimize the use of U.S.-centric colloquial terms. Questions were repeated and rephrased to assist in participants’ understanding. We also recognized that participants’ responses to our

questions about the benefits of English language could have been affected by the fact that the interviewer is a native English speaker as well as interviews being conducted in English. Another limitation was interviewing participants at one point in time during their graduate program. Although this does provide the opportunity for them to immediately reflect on their experiences, this does not evaluate any future changes that could potentially occur in their graduate programs. Finally, the participants represent only one institution in Vietnam; as such, findings may not be specifically generalizable to all transnational campuses. However, the findings and subsequent discussion may be relevant to many transnational universities in Vietnam and Southeast Asia.

## Findings

Our analysis indicated that participants' motivation to attend VGU was shaped by several key pull factors. Pull factors to VGU included instruction conducted in English, benefits of a German degree, and the low cost for an international degree. Although these influences were all singularly identified by a number of participants, a combination of these factors was also influential in shaping the motivation to attend VGU for others.

**Benefits of English Instruction.** The fact that VGU offered all instruction in English was perhaps the strongest pull factor in the participants' decision to choose this institution. In fact, Simon asserted that the opportunity to learn English outweighed the importance of gaining content knowledge. When asked whether he believed he would have learned more content-wise at a Vietnamese university he stated, "I think I can get more if I learn the course in [a] Vietnamese university." However, the benefit of learning in English superseded this possibility.

For Jenny, the benefits of improving her English language skills outweighed the challenge of learning course content in a secondary language. She reflected:

Another university they teach by Vietnamese and my mother language is Vietnamese, it is easy for me to learn. And if I learn in English environment I would have a chance to improve my English speaking and skill and it's also advantage for my future because their international relation between our country now, so learning English course is very good for me.

Jenny felt that the ability to speak English was more beneficial than content expertise. Similarly, Bi was familiar with other individuals who lacked content knowledge for their respective field, but were successful because of their strong English skills. He reflected, "I know many people [that] don't have good knowledge about what thing they do, but they have language skill and become a leader. Because they can communicate with the whole overseas." Overall, as illustrated by Bi, participants expressed significant value in English instruction, which they believe will help them in in both the global and Vietnamese work force.

The students spoke of the benefits of English instruction generally and as a critical tool in the market, both within Vietnam and in international settings abroad. Kane shed light on the perception of studying English as an asset because of globalization in the workplace. Matthew echoed this assertion stating:

Today we live in a world where many countries connect together in English unity. Without English we cannot do anything with foreigners. So

we must study our program in English so that we can understand better and we all need to care about English.

Similarly, Joshua emphasized the importance of English as a skill in the industry, stating:

Nowadays English is a very important skill in the industry now. When we go to work in any international company or even national company, they also need English as the primary language in communication. So it is very important I can improve English here.

As evidenced by Matthew and Joshua, English language ability was touted as an imperative component of participating in the global workforce. Several students, including Seven, believed that English language skills would benefit their future employment, whether on a national or international level. Seven also noted the value of English for her future by explaining:

If you are on a company, business, or something like this, [and] there [are] two students who applied for a job, what do you choose if they, if a student graduated from here and a student graduated from a Vietnamese university? And your company needs this person good in English and good in their major. Maybe the knowledge about their major is the same, but what do you choose? Yeah, English, the guy who knows English.

Alan voiced a similar opinion, asserting that English language skills are often a requirement for employment. He stated, “you have to have English if you want to have a job,” particularly in developing countries such as Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. Interestingly, he also acknowledged that although an English degree is necessary, that “maybe you would not use it much in that environment, but you still have to have it.” Thus, English language instruction motivated most participants to attend VGU because of perceived future employment benefits.

**Value of German Education.** Although international degrees were recognized as being valuable in and of themselves, several students were also pulled toward selecting VGU because of the high standards of German education. For example, Matthew felt compelled to choose VGU “because German education is among the best.” Similarly, Danny also expressed his appreciation for German quality of education. He spoke extensively about why he chose VGU, and much of it was due to German excellence in education, which includes the quality of teaching. He stated:

I did research about this school, I found this school is very good because it has relationship to Germany government. And you see they connect, they use the high quality. So I think when we graduate from this school we have master’s degree with higher quality. And also I think the second reason is the teacher, the lecturer come from Germany so I respect to the way to teach and knowledge from the lecturer.

Similarly, Mr. C recognized the value of a German degree and chose VGU over other Vietnamese options because, “I just want to have German degree and I have a chance to go to Germany and...and I, I guess apart from that, German degree, it good, and

German education is good.” Cat also voiced her interest in German education by describing her motivation to attend VGU, which included the ability to study with German faculty and to gain an international degree. In addition she noted, “I think in Vietnam if they see you have a degree from German, they would evaluate your ability higher [than] another one.” Cat echoed the sentiment from several other participants that German education was of a higher quality than Vietnamese education.

An important factor in high quality included the teaching and learning practices of German faculty. The type of learning that German educators were known for as opposed to Vietnamese practices also pulled Seven toward VGU. He described:

If you study from university from Germany, it’s very high skills and I think good in, I don’t know how to describe, but they can work in group or they can work in individual. Because during the training they study a lot. And you know Vietnamese people, they are not good in working in group. That mean they cannot enjoy group in work.

As indicated by Seven, many students were attracted to the idea of German expertise in technology and engineering. German education served as a large pull factor for students to attend VGU.

**Low Cost, High Value.** When comparing the options, students tended to find that VGU offered highly regarded German learning opportunities and prestige at a competitive cost. For example, Bong compared the cost of VGU to other international universities and found that VGU had a “cheap price, it’s not like...my father, I mean my parents they could let me...go to UK to study the master of engineering, but it costs \$1 billion [approximately \$44,010 U.S. dollars] for one year. For just one year. It’s a lot. And for two years here it’s about \$10,000.” Similarly, John wanted “to have a chance to go to [a] developed country,” and found that VGU was more affordable compared to other options studying abroad.

The opportunity to earn external scholarships from companies that partnered with the university was voiced as key factors by several of the participants as they described their decision process to attend VGU. Kane described:

I also looked to another university, but this program have some advantage. First of all, they cooperate with Adidas and I have a scholarship to give me a chance to work with an Adidas supplier in the future for three years. It’s very good for me... helps a lot.

Joshua had a similar experience comparing other international options. During his search he considered universities in Sweden, but ultimately decided to attend VGU. He stated:

The fees, the cost—I have to spend very high. So after received the offer letter there and an offer letter here, I decide to go here because it’s more or less the technology and the program here very similar with them. I also study with many professors around the world, so it’s the same, but I can save a lot of money and also get the scholarship from Adidas so I don’t need to pay anything even the costs for living and spending everyday.

As indicated by several participants, the low cost of tuition was a large contributing factor to their decision to attend VGU. This finding highlights participants' desire for German standards of education. Several participants expressed their satisfaction with being able to attend an international institution with high standards of excellence, but at a low cost.

**Combination of Influences.** Although many of the students described pull factors individually, several of the participants emphasized how a combination of these influences shaped their motivation. For example, Melissa noted that the combination of low cost and quality education at VGU were important in her motivation to choose her academic program. She explained, "Because this is a public school and the fee is so cheaper than the other ones. You, I think that I am ensure the quality of this school because this school—too government incorporated...so I think the quality is good." Thus, educational quality at a low cost was instrumental to Melissa's decision to choose VGU for graduate studies.

VGU was a reasonable choice for Matthew because he could learn English and receive a prestigious German education. Matthew described, "There are not really any program[s] in Vietnam that teach in English... Only one or two other universities, but to compare with VGU they are no match... Because VGU has the standard, Germany standard." Similarly, Nguyen recognized that being taught by international faculty members would help improve his English-speaking abilities. As reported by several participants, the dual value of having an international degree and learning English was important to allow students to expand their employment options.

Bong also felt that VGU would provide him the knowledge and ability to move beyond employment limitations. Bong felt pushed towards an international degree because he did not like the work atmosphere or the salary offered by Vietnamese companies. In this regard, Bong felt that his education at VGU would provide "a chance to go abroad to work outside of Vietnam." As evidenced by Bong, opportunities to work beyond the confines of Vietnam were motivating factors to attend VGU.

## Discussion and Implications

Findings from this study illustrate the role of several pull factors in motivating student choice to attend a collaborative transnational university. Participants identified three main pull factors for choosing to attend VGU for their graduate education: English language instruction, German educational excellence, and low cost for an international degree. The motivation for attending VGU as illustrated by participants in this study are consistent with prior literature on student choice for transnational and branch campuses (Ahmad, 2015; Fang & Wang, 2014; Wilkins et al., 2011). For example, participants in Wilkins et al.'s (2011) study identified that they were attracted to the ability to gain prestige from a foreign degree. Mr. C and Cat both spoke extensively about their belief that a degree from the German partner institutions at VGU would bring more prestige because of the reputation for German educational excellence in engineering and technology. In addition, several students noted that they were appreciative of the low tuition costs at VGU, which was similar to the findings from Fang and Wang (2014), who found that transnational education in China allowed for access to high quality education within domestic borders.

An implication from this finding includes the importance of transnational institutions emphasizing their areas of expertise at a low cost. For example, VGU markets their specialization as engineering and technology, which are considered areas of expertise by German educators. In doing so, the marketing of German teaching expertise and

educational quality in specific areas of study would be attractive to potential students. An additional marketing factor could be that the international educational quality at a low cost, which, as indicated by several participants, would allow for additional opportunities for work and collaboration beyond Vietnamese borders.

Seven and Simon both discussed their belief that German education and English instruction would benefit their future careers. Their expectations are similar to findings from Ahmad's (2015) Malaysian study. Ahmad reported that participants found satisfaction in foreign models of education as well as English language instruction, all of which are reflected in this study's Vietnamese participants. Although Ahmad did find English language instruction as a motivating factor, the participants from VGU appeared to place a higher value on English as the language of instruction in their graduate program. Matthew, Alan, and Bi all spoke extensively about the influence of English language instruction on their motivation to attend VGU; in fact, almost all of the participants stressed the importance of English to their future careers. The significance of English fits within the objectives set by the Vietnamese Higher Education Reform Agenda (HERA), which includes the importance of "improvements in the teaching and learning of foreign languages (especially English), and the development of conditions favourable to increased foreign investment in the higher education system" (Harman et al., 2010, p. 3). Thus, implications from this study indicate that English language instruction is of critical importance both to the Vietnamese government as well as individual Vietnamese students.

Because English language instruction is so valuable to students, transnational institutions must consider how they are effectively providing opportunities for English language practice. VGU currently ensures that full instruction is conducted in English and that all admitted students must have a minimum language proficiency; however, institutions should consider if there are sufficient opportunities for informal language practice. Although transnational institutions of higher education may emphasize speaking English language in the classroom, the out-of-classroom experience should also be opportunities for English language practice. As multiple participants stated, they believe that English proficiency will assist them in international employment settings. Students would benefit from going beyond the classroom to strengthen their language ability. They could practice speaking English in informal settings by having conversations that are not exclusively based on course content because students will likely have conversations with future international business collaborators that would be more informal in nature.

The role of international business collaborators is particularly salient for the participants in the Global Production Engineering and Management (GPEM) program who received scholarships from Adidas, a German-based athletic apparel company that operates using English for communication. Many GPEM students received scholarships from Adidas to help offset some of their tuition costs, and as a result, graduates were expected to work for Adidas for a few years after graduation. Thus, this illustrates the importance of English language proficiency for the graduates and requires preparation from VGU for future business careers with international corporations.

Beyond providing opportunities for English language improvement, transnational institutions should establish and maintain collaborations with industry, both local and international. In doing so, industry corporations may be more likely to invest in the education of their future employees by providing financial scholarships as well as skill-building internships. Students would be able to benefit from these established relationships, all of which are connected to the international labor market.



Understanding pull factors is critical when considering how transnational universities recruit and retain students. Pull factors often indicate what makes a university stand out as a top choice for students. Further, transnational universities typically only have control over pull factors, as push factors are often out of their scope of influence. Knowing why students choose to attend a transnational university is imperative for institutions and government entities who have a responsibility for providing quality and effective educational programs, particularly in locations such as Vietnam that are trying to become more of a market-led economy (Harman & Bich, 2010). As a result of the emerging global economic and political markets, Vietnam has compelling reasons to both pull their domestic students into their own institutions and to ensure that these students receive high quality education. Transnational educational partnerships may be key to providing opportunities for Vietnamese graduate students to become prepared and competitive for participation in the global economic market.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

We acknowledge that this study is limited to understanding students' pull factors for attending one transnational university in Vietnam. Thus, an additional area of future research would include conducting a study of other transnational universities in Vietnam to get a sense of the similarities and differences in student motivation. Similarly, expanding the study to other countries in Southeast Asia would likely provide broader implications for transnational education and for participating students. Finally, we also would recommend understanding how transnational institutions develop and market to students, including any cultural considerations and international priorities. In doing so, we may better discover a third component or emerging framework that extends beyond the traditional push and pull factors in transnational education.

### **Conclusion**

The growth of transnational higher education, particularly in what is considered developing countries, requires a better understanding what pull factors motivate students to attend transnational universities in their home countries. Multiple stakeholders invest in the establishment and success of transnational universities, including multiple governments, university administrators, and potentially industry partners, yet the success of transnational institutions depends heavily on student attendance and satisfaction.

This qualitative study contributes to this conversation by providing insight to pull factors that influence student choice to attend a particular institution in Vietnam. Although this study examines one site, other transnational universities should also consider the findings and implications from this research when considering how to market educational outcomes to prospective students. For the participants in this study, pull factors such as the value of German education, the use of English as the primary language of instruction, and the low cost of attendance had a strong influence on their decision to enroll at VGU. A notable aspect of our findings is that the particular pull factors that emerged provided interesting insights into understanding what the students enrolled at VGU valued in higher education. For instance, the emphasis on the value of German education above Vietnamese education was a primary pull toward VGU. Additionally, participant reflections were evidence of the common belief of the added value that primarily English instruction offered students. Therefore, institutions would be wise to identify whether students they are recruiting possess particular values and beliefs that would attract them to or deter them away from the institution. In other words, pull factors, including those outlined in this

study, are important institutional considerations when attempting to recruit students because they are often something that falls within the control of the host institution.

Given the strong competitive nature of postsecondary education and the increasing number of campuses spreading around the globe, institutions must remain cognizant of ways that institutions appeal to students through pull factors. Understanding what exactly motivates students to attend transnational universities is imperative in understanding how to better support these students as institutions seek to meet student expectations and industry needs. As students are drawn to institutions for particular push and pull forces, faculty and administrators should also ensure that proper supports are in place to not only pull students to the institution, but also to support their success in completing their educational goals.

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