

Coaching early-career social sciences researchers to publish their first indexed publications: the Research Coach in Social Sciences program as a model

Hiep-Hung Pham^{1,2}

¹Research Coach in Social Sciences, Hanoi; ²Center for Research and Practice on Education, Phu Xuan University, Hue City, Vietnam

Introduction

In this short essay, I describe how our Vietnam-based continuing education program, Research Coach in Social Sciences (RCISS), supports early-career researchers to (co)publish their first international indexed publications (i.e., publications in Clarivate Web of Science [WoS] or Scopus-indexed journals). In developed countries, junior researchers often seek help from university professors to publish their first publication. However, given the chronic shortage of senior social sciences scholars with international publishing experience in Vietnam, along with outdated and ill-designed PhD programs, early-career researchers in the social sciences in Vietnam often face challenges in international publishing.

In February 2017, the RCISS program was founded by the author of this paper, a foreign-trained returnee, based in Hanoi, Vietnam. By the time that this paper is being written (June 2020), the RCISS program has provided coaching services for 200 junior social researchers, of whom 28 have published at least one article or book chapter indexed by Clarivate WoS or Scopus. In the following sections, I describe the context of social sciences research in Vietnam, as well as the overarching concepts and operational model of the RCISS program. Subsequently, I present some examples, which reflect three successful models that the RCISS program has adopted in order to support the coachees to publish their first international publication. The paper ends with a conclusion, which provides implications and suggestions.

Context of Social Sciences Research in Vietnam

In the past, the Vietnamese research sector lagged far behind that of its neighboring countries. According to Clarivate Analytics [1] statistics, in 2004, Vietnamese scholars published only 510 publications indexed by the Science Citation Index Expanded (SCIE), Social Science Citation Index (SSCI), and Arts and Humanities Citation Index (AHCI). This is much lower than the

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Correspondence to Hiep-Hung Pham
hiep@researchcoach.edu.vn

ORCID
Hiep-Hung Pham
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3300-7770>

respective figures of Singapore (6,623), Thailand (2,574) or Malaysia (1,548). A closer look at different disciplines reveals that between the social sciences/arts and humanities and the hard sciences in Vietnam, social sciences/arts and humanities have played a comparatively modest role. Thus, as observed in the Clarivate Analytics [1] database in 2004, Vietnamese authors published 486 SCIE publications, while the respective figure as indexed by the SSCI and AHCI was only 36, equaling 7.4% of the SCIE publications. In 2005, the Vietnamese government issued the Higher Education Reform Agenda (HERA) with the ambition to renovate the whole university system [2]. Thus, among the measures implemented by the HERA, enhancing research capability through internationalization has been regarded as a key strategy. Such strategies might be illuminated through several programs and initiatives, as described below.

First, following the HERA's scheme, thousands of young future faculty members were sent to developed countries to pursue PhD degrees at renowned universities [3]. Second, the National Foundation for Science and Technology was launched in 2008 with the adoption of Clarivate and Scopus as references to evaluate and grant funding for research projects [4]. Third, a new regulation on doctoral education was issued in 2017 to set a new bar for both PhD candidates and their supervisors. Specifically, PhD candidates are required to have at least one international publication before their final defense, whereas faculty members must have at least one international publication as the first/corresponding author to be eligible to serve as a PhD supervisor [4].

The new regulations on doctoral education, coupled with the growing flow of foreign-trained PhD holder returnees since the mid-2000s and the increasing role of the National Foundation for Science and Technology, have resulted in a new aspiration among academics in Vietnam to reach international standards. Consequently, recent statistics have documented a tremendous leap forward of international research output in Vietnam [4]. In 2018, Vietnamese scholars published 6,001 publications indexed by the SCIE, SSCI, and AHCI [1], a figure that is 11.8-fold higher than that of 2004. According to Clarivate Analytics, within the South and Southeast Asian region, Vietnam is the country with the highest growth rate in terms of Clarivate Analytics WoS-indexed publications between 1991 and 2017 [5].

Nevertheless, international publications in Vietnam mostly come from scholars in hard science disciplines. According to the most recent Clarivate Analytics [1] statistics in 2018, for every 100 publications published by Vietnamese authors in the SCIE database, only about 13 publications indexed in the SSCI and AHCI were published. Due to their lack of research skills, scholars in social sciences still face several challenges

when striving to publish internationally. Nevertheless, it is apparent that social scientists currently have a different point of view toward international publishing compared to their peers a decade ago. In the past, social scientists in Vietnam often disregarded the importance of international publishing; instead, they thought that publishing in Vietnamese was more important since Vietnamese publications would contribute directly to the development of the national socio-cultural and economic system. Today, the requirement for international publication not only applies to newly enrolled PhD students, who have to consider it as a *sine qua non* to graduate, but also to other groups of social scientists, including senior scholars (even those with no previous experience in international publishing).

RCISS: Concepts and Operational Model

In the early 2010s, when I started my PhD program in international business in Taiwan (Republic of China), I immediately realized that there was a major gap between social researchers in Vietnam and in developed countries in terms of research skills and capability. Junior social researchers in developed countries, especially those undertaking PhD programs in the US, Canada, South Korea, Taiwan, or Singapore, often have to take a wide range of courses in research methods skills, from beginning to advanced levels. During their coursework, many subjects are presented, including econometrics, introduction to conducting research, qualitative methods, survey questionnaire methods, time series, and panel data analysis, academic writing, and so forth [6]. On average, courses in research methods might account for 20% to 30% of the total credits in the PhD program. Furthermore, the instructors of research methods courses are usually active researchers. Thanks to these features, PhD students in developed countries are well trained and prepared before moving on to the next phase: conducting their PhD dissertation.

A glimpse of the situation in social sciences PhD programs in Vietnam provides a contrasting picture. Coursework credits only account for a small proportion of the PhD program, with less emphasis on research methods skills. Furthermore, courses on research methods are not always delivered by active researchers who have experience in international publishing.

In order to bridge this substantial gap, I started to think about a concept, which later became the RCISS program. Three years since the first class of only four coachees in February 2017, the program has provided coaching services to about 200 junior social researchers from over 90 institutions and nine countries. Specifically, 30% of the coachees are young lecturers working in the academic sector, about 25% are master's or PhD students who face challenges while undertaking their dissertations/theses, about 25% are fourth-year under-

graduate students or recent bachelor's graduates, and the rest (approximately 20%) are from governmental, non-governmental, or private organizations. Their main motivations to participate in the RCISS program are two-fold: having papers published in internationally indexed journals and/or writing research proposals for overseas master's/PhD scholarship applications.

The staffing of the RCISS program started with only one person in early 2017 (the author of this article); to date, the personnel of the RCISS program has expanded to nine staff members, including one head coach, one coach, and seven assistant coaches, along with several senior advisors. To meet the demands and needs of our coachees, the RCISS program is organized as follows.

Components: Head coaches and senior colleagues deliver the RCISS with two main components: training and coaching. The key features of these two components are discussed as follows. (1) The training component provides a fundamental background for junior researchers through a series of research methods courses similar to the PhD coursework in developed countries. To date, the RCISS program has offered four courses, namely (i) Introduction in Research Methods in Social Sciences, (ii) Academic Reading and Writing Skills, (iii) Structural Equation Modeling, and (iv) Delphi and Analytical Hierarchy Process. Several other syllabi are being prepared, such as (i) Econometrics, (ii) Secondary Data Analysis, and (iii) Bibliometric Analysis, to name a few. On average, an RCISS course lasts from 3 to 5 intensive weeks with 3 hours of training per week and other side activities. The schedule is tailored to feature the busy schedule of each coachee. (2) The coaching component elevates coachees who are seriously committed to academia. A coachee might be arranged to work with their coach (or supervisor) or other coachees to conduct research as in any research team across the world. This component is illuminated in more detail by three success cases, which are described in the next section.

Mode of training and coaching delivery: To satisfy the diverse demands of our coachees, who are often busy and located in different zip codes, both offline and online means of communication are being used. Online training or coaching is delivered synchronously via Zoom (<https://zoom.us/>), whereas Facebook groups are being used as a means for exchange between coaches and coachees and among coachees.

Resources: The RCISS program utilizes the advantages of the ongoing open science movement [7], as the academic materials used in the RCISS program mostly come from open access journals and sources, while other open tools such as Mendeley are being used.

Side activities: Apart from the two main activities of training and coaching several extra activities have been implemented

to support our coachees. (1) Academic writing group: Each week, the RCISS program asks two coachees to summarize an academic issue and post their writing to the group for cross-checking. All other coachees are encouraged to revise the writing work of the two coachees. (2) Invited speaker seminars: Twice per quarter, the RCISS program invites senior scholars to deliver seminars such as (i) introduction of a research method, or (ii) introducing a paper of an invited scholar. The ultimate purpose of the seminar series is two-fold: (i) to avoid the problem of the inbreeding effect in academia, and (ii) to create opportunities for coachees to join the research group of invited senior scholars. (3) Annual conference: Annually, the coachees may present their research proposals or draft manuscripts in front of a committee consisting of invited senior scholars. Based on the feedback of the committee members, coachees improve their proposal/manuscript for further submissions.

Three Success Cases

In this section, I describe some high-profile success cases of coachees, who have published their first international publication under the supervision or with the collaboration of RCISS. These cases also illuminate three models that RCISS often support their coachees to meet the standard: publishing their first international publication.

Case 1: RCISS coachees co-publish with RCISS members

This case involves a coachee who joined a research project of RCISS members. The project started in November 2018 when I read a working paper entitled, "What makes a quality curriculum? In-progress reflection no. 2 on 'Current and critical issues in curriculum and learning'" by Stabback [8]. The RCISS team wanted to follow Stabback's suggestion to adapt his framework to tackle local issues, but I faced difficulties in finding schools that would allow us to pilot the framework. Eventually, the problem was resolved with the participation of a coachee from the K-12 schooling sector. Our manuscript, titled: "Introducing a tool to gauge curriculum quality under UNESCO's Sustainable Development Goal 4: an analysis of four primary schools in Vietnam" was finished in November 2019 and accepted by the *International Review of Education* in March 2020 (the online version is expected to be issued in August 2020). Following this first project, the coachee remained with the RCISS team to conduct further studies, one of which was recently published by *Data in Brief* (see [9]).

Case 2: RCISS coachees publish together with support from the RCISS program

This situation started when a coachee asked me to revise a

manuscript draft in the accounting field that she wrote with her colleagues. Since the manuscript was well-written and well-designed, I encouraged the coachee to translate the manuscript into English and submit it to an international journal. The coachee seemed to be reluctant due to her inadequate proficiency in English writing. Thus, I introduced her to another coachee with a higher level of proficiency in English writing, and urged them to collaborate. Thanks to their collaborative work, the English version of the manuscript was completed, and subsequently was published internationally [10].

Case 3: RCISS coachees co-publish with other senior scholars

In recent years, there has been a small but increasing number of middle- to high-level Vietnamese scholars in the social sciences. These senior scientists, who reside in Vietnam or overseas, have a high demand for recruiting junior researchers in Vietnam to join their research groups as research assistants. However, as mentioned at the outset of this study, due to the outdated and ill-designed PhD programs, these senior scholars often face difficulties in finding qualified personnel. Given this circumstance, the RCISS program serves as a bridge to match the demand (from the senior scholars) with the supply (from the early-career researchers). After several training courses through the RCISS program, some early-career researchers have enhanced their capacities to meet the requirements of the senior scholars. A high-profile case involved a coachee who joined Dr. Vuong Quan Hoang's (<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0790-1576>) research group. The coachee co-published her first international publication with Dr. Vuong's research team in April 2020 [11]. Other notable cases involved a coachee who joined Dr. Nguyen The Ninh's (<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6050-2633>) team [12] and another who joined Dr. Tran Xuan Bach's (<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7827-8449>) team [13].

Conclusion

The internationalization of research has been one of the most visible components of higher education reform in Vietnam over the previous decade. The two key strategies underlying internationalization have been sending early-career researchers to study for their PhD degrees abroad and encouraging domestic researchers to publish internationally. However, a problem is that some junior researchers are not qualified enough to study abroad or cannot study abroad despite being qualified to do so due to personal reasons. Staying at home, these junior researchers face several challenges when striving to publish their first international publication. Given these circumstances, the RCISS program was established to support this group of researchers. Personally, I do not think that the

RCISS program is inherently an innovative concept, since it adopts several features of PhD programs in developed countries. However, I believe in the efficiency of my model in identifying and supporting local demands. In order to promote the social research sector in Vietnam, I suggest that all PhD programs must be reformed radically. I am willing to share our experiences with Vietnamese universities, which have plans to renovate their research activities as part of PhD programs. Various aspects of my program could be adopted by universities in other developing countries.

Conflict of Interest

No potential conflict of interest relevant to this article was reported.

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