

# **Factors influencing prospective international students' motivation for overseas study and selection of host countries and institutions: The case of Vietnamese students**

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International students have been found to contribute a great deal to their host institution and country in terms of socio-economic and cultural development; as a result, recruiting international students has become an important strategy for sustaining institutional and national development. Recent studies have discovered an increasingly intense competition between Asian and Western higher education providers to enroll more international students. Existing literature also suggests that international students' choice of host country and/or institution is influenced by numerous different factors, heavily dependent on their backgrounds.

Investigating prospective Vietnamese students' opinions, this case study seeks to identify (i) reasons why Vietnamese students choose to study abroad, (ii) their targeted host countries, and (iii) factors influencing their choice of the host country or institution. The study was conducted in two stages. In the first stage, 55 prospective international Vietnamese students were interviewed to identify the reasons they decided to study abroad, and to determine which factors they considered when choosing the host country and institution. In the second stage, a survey, which was developed based on the results of the first stage and the literature review, was used to collect data from 400 prospective students. Data were analyzed with descriptive statistics, independent samples, T-tests and one-way ANOVA tests. The results showed that students chose to study abroad more because of pull factors than push factors. The study also found a possible increase in the outflow of students to the USA and emerging Asian countries and a decrease to Australia and China. When choosing the study destinations, participants appeared to be more concerned about practicalities for their survival, learning, and benefits gained upon graduation than other factors when choosing study destinations. Finally, among four demographic factors, age groups was found to make a significant impact in their selection of the host country and institution.

With these results, it is recommended that HEIs take into consideration the demographic factors in order to provide relevant information to help international students make well-informed decisions. This would not only help students choose an institution suitable for their needs, but would also aid the institution in recruiting international students that will fit into their institutional context, which would in turn avoid unrealistic expectations from both sides.

*Key words: international students, Vietnamese students, host country, host institution, influencing factors*

## **Introduction**

International education has recently become one of the most significant industries for several countries. Research suggests that international education brings students many benefits in terms of personal and professional development (Bryła 2015; Connington 2014; Cook-Anderson 2012; Cui 2013; Harder et al. 2015; Lee, CS, Therriault & Linderholm 2012; Monk 2012; Thorne 2013). International students themselves may be found to increase profitability in their host countries and institutions in different ways. They contribute greatly to the existence and operation of the host institution by paying full tuition (Gomes 2014), especially in the current context when higher education (HE) funding is increasingly cut (Carter 2012; Feigenbaum & Iqani 2015; Gopal 2012; Newell & California Postsecondary Education 2009). They also help improve the local economy by using services such as tourism, accommodation, catering, editing and printing, and language education, among others (Bento 2014; Gardiner, King & Wilkins 2013; Gomes 2014). They can help enrich local citizen's experiences with people from different cultures and then also disseminate the culture of the host country upon their return (Mellors-Bourne et al. 2013). Highly skilled workers are also important for sustaining a knowledge-based economy. Host countries often use scholarship programs and permanent or work visa schemes to attract and retain talented international students, who would contribute to advancing the development of sciences in the country (Chellaraj, Maskus & Mattoo 2008; Cheung, AC et al. 2011; de Wit 2011; Gribble & Blackmore 2012; Sweetman & Warman 2014). As such, keeping a stable inflow of international students is also a strategy to sustain the economic development of the host country (de Wit 2011; Gribble & Blackmore 2012). Therefore, devising marketing strategies to successfully recruit international students is becoming one of the central goals of many host countries and universities.

In the current context, physically attending a study program in the host country is not the only form of international education; there are now more affordable alternative options. Thanks to information technology advances, online distance learning is becoming an attractive and economical option for international students. Many HE providers also establish offshore campuses to better meet the learning needs and financial circumstances of international students. Despite possible advantages, these modes of training may not be as exciting and gainful as physically living and learning in the host country. That could explain why the number of students going overseas to pursue international education has been increasing in recent decades (Kritz 2012; Maslen 2012; UNESCO 2015). In 1975 there were only 0.8 million international students, but this number grew to 4.1 million in 2010 (Kritz 2012) and is predicted to reach about 8 million by 2025 (Maslen 2012).

In that scenario of international education development, there has been a slight shift in the flow of international students from traditional host countries such as the UK, the US, Australia, France and Germany to newly emerging countries. For example, citing OECD and UNESCO statistics, Kritz (2012) reported the top ten host countries of international students in 2010, including the USA (16.6%), the UK (13%), Australia (6.6%), Germany (6.4%), France (6.3%), Canada (4.7%), Russia (3.9%), Japan (3.4%), Spain (2.4%), and New Zealand (1.7%). Statistics currently available on the UNESCO website suggest a change in the top 10 host countries: the USA (18%), the UK (11%), France (7%), Australia (6%), Germany (5%), Russia (4%), Japan (4%), Canada (3%), China (2%), and Italy (2%) (UNESCO 2015). The two sets of statistics show that although Western countries are still the major host countries of international students, they are now competing with Asian countries. This is supported by recent studies that found the emergence of Asian HE providers such as Japan, Singapore, China, Malaysia, Taiwan and Hong Kong (Chan 2013; Cheung, ACK et al. 2010; Hennock 2012). In her report, Kritz (2012) also pointed out that the number of international students in the USA has been gradually decreasing. The UNESCO site also noted that students had begun to choose to study at prestigious institutions closer to their home (UNESCO 2015). All of the evidence suggests that there are ever-changing underlying factors influencing international students' choice of host country and institution. It is, therefore, necessary for universities to regularly investigate those factors in order to devise effective marketing strategies to help increase the enrollment of international students.

In the case of Vietnam, the current context of the country seems to push students to pursue their education abroad. In the last two decades, the country has experienced rapid socio-economic growth (Leung 2010; Shultz 2012; World Bank 2015). As a result, the HE has been expanded and reformed

to be able to produce a higher number of graduates with adequate skills and competence levels to meet the demand in the labour market and achieve socio-economic targets set by the government (Bodewig, Badiani-Magnusson & Macdonald 2014; World Bank 2008). However, despite an increase in the number of graduates in the past decade, the HE system seems to fail to provide sufficient places in higher education institutions (HEI) to match the greater demand for HE (Harman, Hayden & Nghi 2010; Nguyen Hong Chi 2013) and produce qualified graduates (Bodewig, Badiani-Magnusson & Macdonald 2014; Montague 2013; World Bank 2008). There has been an increasing public concern about the poor quality of the HE system and educational scandals (Harman, Hayden & Nghi 2010; Nguyen Hong Chi 2013; Welch 2013). Employers are dissatisfied with the quality of graduates from Vietnamese universities and tend to favor those who graduate from foreign institutions (Manpower Group 2011). Additionally, the globalization process, the regionalization in Southeast Asia, the government's commitment to send students overseas, and the presence of many international educational groups or organizations has contributed to promoting the value of having international education experience (Nguyen Hong Chi 2013; Sirat, Azman & Bakar 2014). As a result, there has been an increase in the number of Vietnamese students sent abroad to obtain international education for better career prospects and to achieve personal development (Clark 2013; Nguyen Hong Chi 2013; Nguyen Thi My Linh 2012).

Current statistics show that Vietnam has become one of the top ten countries that sends students abroad (UNESCO 2015). The country had 106,000 students attending educational programs in 49 countries and territories: about 35,900 students were studying in Asia (about 29.5%) and the rest were in Western countries (Clark 2013). The three most popular study destinations for Vietnamese international students are Australia, the US, and China. The top three Asian destinations for Vietnamese students are China, Singapore, and Taiwan (Clark 2013). While the number of Vietnamese international students in Australia appears to decline, it is increasing in the US and Asian countries (Table 1). This suggests that similar to other countries, there have been changes in the selection of study destinations of prospective Vietnamese international students over time.

**Table 1. International Vietnamese students in Australia, the USA and China (Clark 2013)**

<b>Top 3 destination countries for overseas Vietnamese students</b>						
<b>Year</b>	<b>Australia</b>	<b>% increase</b>	<b>USA</b>	<b>% increase</b>	<b>China</b>	<b>% increase</b>
2012	22,551	-4.4%	15,572	4.6%	N/A	N/A
2011	23,592	-8.5%	14,888	13.5%	13,549	4.1%
2010	25,788	8.6%	13,112	2.3%	13,018	6.3%
2009	23,755	49.1%	12,823	46.2%	12,247	17.8%
2008	15,931	53.4%	8,769	45.3%	10,396	7.2%
2007	10,387	N/A	6,036	31.3%	9,702	67.7%
2006	N/A	N/A	4,597	25.3%	5,785	N/A

Although the number of international Vietnamese students in host countries has been well documented, the reasons why they chose to study in a particular host country or institution have been under-investigated. Therefore, investigating a group of prospective international Vietnamese students, this case study seeks to (i) identify the most popular study destinations targeted by the participants and (ii) quantify the extent to which factors influence their choice of the host country or institution. This case study is critical in that it gives evidence-based predictions of the changing patterns in the flow of international students and discusses some factors behind this changing pattern. It also points out factors that significantly influence international students' selection of study destinations. The study may give suggestions for HE providers to deploy marketing and recruitment strategies for international students in general and Vietnamese students in particular.

## **Literature review**

### ***Motivations for studying abroad***

For decades, many researchers have investigated international students' motivations for studying abroad (and also the choice of the study destinations) in terms of 'push' and 'pull' factors (for examples, Chen, L-H 2007; Eder, Smith & Pitts 2010; Li & Bray 2007; Maringe & Carter 2007;

Mazzarol & Soutar 2002; McMahon 1992; Yang 2007). Push factors are defined as factors that operate within the home country and initiate a student's decision to undertake international study (Mazzarol & Soutar 2002). Push factors can be comprised of the unavailability of a study program in the home country, lack of access to home universities, and poor quality of education in the home country. Pull factors are comprised of factors in the host country or institution that attract international students (Mazzarol & Soutar 2002) such as interesting culture, living standards, socio-economic status of the host country, improving career prospects and immigration opportunities. Many other studies, not using the push-pull model, have identified several factors that encourage international students to pursue their education abroad. These include things such as the family's encouragement, perception of poor quality education in the home country, advantages of having international experiences, immigration prospects, safety and cultural proximity (for examples Anderson & Bhati 2012; Lee, CKC & Morrish 2012; Lu Wang et al. 2009; Nguyen Hong Chi 2013; Singh, Schapper & Jack 2014). Results of those studies suggest that international students are motivated to study abroad by different factors in terms of personal perception, push factors of the home country and pull factors of the host country.

### ***Factors influencing international students' choice of the host country***

The literature indicates that international students' choices of the host country are influenced by different factors associated with the socio-economic, cultural and political issues of the host country.

*Socio-economic factors.* It has been observed that international students tend to choose a host country that has some socio-economic ties with the home country. For example, McMahon (1992) examined the flow of international students from 18 developing countries to the USA and found that a host country could attract international students by the relative size of the students' home country economy compared with that of the host country, economic links between the home and the host country, existence of social links between the home and the host country via foreign assistance or cultural exchange, and support of international students with scholarships or other forms of financial assistance. In addition, with international students having to stay far from home, such factors as safety and a welcoming atmosphere are also meaningful and influential on their choice of host country (Anderson & Bhati 2012; Singh, Schapper & Jack 2014). Similarly, living cost and living standard is becoming an increasing concern of many international students (Anderson & Bhati 2012; Clavel 2015; Pimpa 2003; Singh, Schapper & Jack 2014). Socialization is also of importance, and international students tend to opt toward a host country where they have relatives, friends or contacts (Mazzarol and Soutar 2002). Geographical proximity is also a concern for international students (Anderson & Bhati 2012; Eder, Smith & Pitts 2010; Singh, Schapper & Jack 2014). This could be primarily associated with a lower cost of travelling between the home and the host country.

*Cultural factors.* Cultural proximity appears to be one of the factors that influences international students' decisions on where to study because they may feel more comfortable when studying in a country where they clearly understand social practices (Singh, Schapper & Jack 2014). However, recent studies indicate that many international students also choose to study in a country whose culture is 'interesting' and completely different from their own culture in order to gain valuable life experience (Clavel 2015; Eder, Smith & Pitts 2010). For example, Eder, Smith and Pitts (2010) found that the interesting culture was one of the most important factors that made international students choose the US as the study destination. Similarly, Lu Wang et al. (2009) found that Chinese students chose New Zealand to study because of its low corruption and high level of honesty and fairness – distinctive social and cultural features when compared with the fact that China is highly ranked among countries with excessive levels of corruption, even in universities (Qian Forrest 2007; Quah 2014). Language is also part of a culture, and it is natural that international students would choose to study in a country where they can communicate in the language of the host country well, as it is a prerequisite for their study and social life in the host country. Language proficiency is also associated with the entry requirement of many HEIs (Bourke 2000; McCarthy, Sen & Fox Garrity 2012).

*Political factors.* Political proximity between the home and the host country has been long recorded as an influential factor of the flow of international students. In the past, a large number of students was recorded to travel for study purposes between socialist countries (Nguyen Hong Chi 2013; Pis'mennaia 2010; Pugach 2012). This political factor still influences the choice of international

students today, especially for government officials or civil workers who usually study abroad via bilateral scholarship programs or scholarship programs funded by the home country. These usually define or prioritize targeted host countries, such as in the Vietnamese Government's scheme for training 20,000 doctors domestically and abroad. In addition, policies in the host country that relate to part-time jobs, post-graduation employment, or immigration opportunities for international students also draws the attention of international students when selecting a host country (Ho et al. 2007; Yang 2007). For example, Yang (2007) found that one of the pull factors for mainland Chinese students to choose Australia as the study destination was Australian policies for immigration opportunities upon graduation. The researcher concluded that the skilled immigration policy had a great impact on students' choices of destination and their enrolling program. This study is supported by recent statistics of the fall and rise of number of international students in Australia before and after the commencement of the immigration policy in the country (Collins 2011; Hurst 2014; Smith 2015). Visa procedure is another factor that many students are concerned with when they choose to study abroad (Chen, L-H 2007; Eder, Smith & Pitts 2010; Ho et al. 2007). For example, Chen, L-H (2007) found that many factors such as academic standards, economic status, the environment, and visa/immigration procedures appeared to significantly influence East Asian students to choose Canada as their host country. Eder, Smith and Pitts (2010) also drew similar conclusions that visa issues are the most constraining factors for students who considered studying in the US.

### ***Factors influencing international students' choice of the host institution***

Many studies have been conducted to identify factors influencing international students' choice of the host institution. In general, those factors are related to institutional reputation, environment, cost issues, outcomes and benefits, the connection of the host institution with the home country/institution, admission criteria and recommendations of stakeholders.

*Institutional reputation.* Several studies have confirmed the influence of institutional reputation on the choice of international students of the host institution (Hemsley-Brown 2012; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka 2015; Lee, C-F 2014; Mazzarol & Soutar 2002; McCarthy, Sen & Fox Garrity 2012; Price et al. 2003). Elements associated with institutional reputation can be comprised of general institutional image, quality of the teaching staff, interaction with faculty and staff, availability of a desired program, support services, language of instruction, facilities and infrastructure, flexible scheduling options and availability of financial aid. Those factors are significant for international students because they determine a majority of international students' lives in the host institution and country.

*International and supportive environment.* Recent studies indicated that international students were greatly concerned about the location of the host institution and the presence of other international students in an institution in their selection process (Hemsley-Brown 2012; Jobbins 2015; Price et al. 2003; Rooijen 2015). The researchers explained that it was because international students, apart from their formal study, wanted to enjoy their life, build networks and train themselves with skills necessary for their future career in an international labour market. They also seek out an institution that can provide a wide variety of services to support their academic and non-academic problems, which will help them to live and study more effectively in a new social and educational environment.

*Cost issues.* Many studies indicated that when choosing host country and institution, international students are becoming more concerned about the cost they invest (Anderson & Bhati 2012; Clavel 2015; Maringe 2006; Paton 2014; Pimpa 2003). For example, Maringe (2006) found that price-related issues were considered more important than other factors influencing international students' choice of the university. More recently, Anderson and Bhati (2012) found that Indian students began to choose Singaporean institutions instead of Australian ones because of the lower tuition fees. Similarly, it was discovered that due to a rise in tuition fees, the number of international students in the UK decreased for the first time in three decades (Paton 2014).

*Outcomes and benefits.* When choosing which institution to enroll in, international students were found to be concerned about the benefits they might receive during and after completion of their study (Chen, C-H & Zimitat 2006; Counsell 2011; Eder, Smith & Pitts 2010; Ivy 2010). They seemed to consider studying abroad as an opportunity to acquire or polish skills that they lacked during their time at the institution (Chen, C-H & Zimitat 2006; Eder, Smith & Pitts 2010) or to improve their

career prospects upon completing a program at a foreign institution (Binsardi & Ekwulugo 2003; Counsell 2011; Eder, Smith & Pitts 2010; Hemsley-Brown 2012; Ivy 2010).

*Familiarity with the host institution.* The familiarity with the host institution and the connection between a potential host institution and a social organization in the home country (the government, universities or overseas study consultancy services) could contribute to the increase in the number of students enrolled in that host institution. It could be for this reason that most HEIs now employ marketing strategies to attract international students. They use the Internet or collaborate with agencies in home countries to introduce their institution and courses to prospective students (Cheung, AC et al. 2011). Similarly, cited in C.F. Lee (2014), Muntasira found that the home university's promotion of overseas exchange study was found to be a significant motivational factor for international students to study abroad.

*Stakeholders' recommendations.* Recommendations of stakeholders such as family members, friends, teachers, employers, and international student recruiting agents have been found to influence international students' choice of host country and home institution (Bodycott 2009; Cheung, AC et al. 2011; Ivy 2010; Lee, C-F 2014; Lee, CKC & Morrish 2012; Mazzarol & Soutar 2002; McCarthy, Sen & Fox Garrity 2012; Pimpa 2003). Among these groups of stakeholders, family members - particularly parents - have been found to influence international students' choice of study destination the most, especially Asian students (Bodycott 2009; Ivy 2010; Lee, CKC & Morrish 2012; Pimpa 2003). In addition, recommendations from friends, especially those that have already enrolled in a foreign institution, are of importance when international students select their study destination (Mazzarol & Soutar 2002). Finally, the opinions of potential employers regarding foreign credentials are also significant for international students' choice of both host institution and country (Harder et al. 2015; Trooboff, Vande Berg & Rayman 2007).

*Admission criteria and enrollment procedure.* Admission criterion is one of the key issues when students begin considering studying abroad. Academic entry standards and English proficiency (mostly IELTS, TOEFL or TOEIC scores) have been found to be two key factors that international students pay attention to when they choose a host institution (Bourke 2000; McCarthy, Sen & Fox Garrity 2012). It appears that those entry standards vary across disciplines, HEIs and host countries and also change through time (Birrell 2006; Genovese, Schmidt & Brown 2015; Hyatt 2013), which may often worry international students. Concerning enrollment procedures, many HE providers now start to recruit international students with the help of agencies in the students' home countries, which has the potential to benefit all three parties (Hagedorn & Leaf Yi 2011; Hulme et al. 2014).

In conclusion, there are a variety of factors that influence international students' selection of a study destination. Those factors appear to cluster around (i) socio-economic, cultural and political issues of the host countries, (ii) features of the host institutions, (iii) student motivation for studying abroad, and (iv) stakeholders' recommendations for overseas study.

### **The present study**

The present study aimed to explore factors motivating Vietnamese students to study abroad, their targeted host countries and factors influencing their selection of the study destination. This article specifically answers the following research questions:

- What are the host countries that Vietnamese students target for their overseas study?
- What factors motivate them to study abroad? To what extent do those factors motivate them?
- What factors influence their selection of the host country? To what extent do those factors influence their selection?
- What factors influence their selection of the host institution? To what extent do those factors influence their selection?

### **Participants**

Participants in this study included those who had planned to study abroad or wished to begin their overseas study in 2015, 2016 and 2017. Because it was difficult to identify the targeted participants, the snowball sampling technique (Browne 2005) was used to recruit them in both stages of the study. This technique allowed the researcher to approach a potential participant based on the referral of

another participant. In doing so, it allowed the researcher to recruit the targeted participants more quickly.

In total, 55 participants were interviewed in the first stage and 400 participants completed the survey in the second stage of the study. The majority of the participants were attending English courses in commercial English language centres in Vietnam. 24% of the participants were male, and 76% were female. The number of the participants who were studying an undergraduate course (generally ages 18 to 22) and who had completed their university study (generally above 22 years old) was nearly equal: 53.5% and 46.5% respectively (hereafter they will be referred to as Group A and Group B).

### ***Data collection and analysis***

The study was conducted in two phases. In the first phase, 55 participants were interviewed to identify factors influencing their choice of the host country and institution. The interviews were conducted from February to March 2014 in Ho Chi Minh City and Can Tho. The analysis of the interviews, using a content analysis approach (Crowe, Inder & Porter 2015; Elo & Kyngäs 2008), suggested 12 factors motivating them to study abroad, 13 factors influencing their choice of the host country and 17 factors influencing their choice of the host institution (see Tables 3 and 4).

In the second phase, the factors identified in the first phase were used to develop a paper-based survey to collect quantitative data from 400 participants. They were asked to provide some background information in Section 1, indicate the first and second choice of the host country in Section 2 and rate the extent to which each of the 12, 13 and 17 factors influenced their motivation for studying abroad, their selection of the host country and institution in Sections 3, 4 and 5 respectively, using a 5-point Likert scale in which 1 denoted 'very weak' and 5 'very strong'. Quantitative data were collected in Ho Chi Minh, Can Tho and Long Xuyen cities from October to December 2014. The three cities were selected because they are among the biggest cities and educational hubs in the South of Vietnam, which would ideally produce more opportunities to recruit potential participants.

Quantitative data was analyzed using SPSS version 20. The data in Section 2 was analyzed using descriptive statistics. The targeted host countries were recorded, counted in frequency and then ranked from the most to the least selected.

Data in Section 3 was first tested for reliability by calculating Cronbach's alpha. The results showed that the 12 items had an acceptable level of internal consistency ( $\alpha = 0.77$ ). The researcher tested the uni-dimensionality of the 12 items by computing item-total correlations. Item-total correlation is often used to test uni-dimensionality of items in a scale. Normally, an item with a coefficient value  $r > 0.30$  is retained for interpretation (Coolidge 2013). All 12 items had coefficient values ranging from 0.36 to 0.48, except the item 'being asked to study abroad by my family' ( $r = 0.24$ ). Still, the researcher decided to retain this item after consulting with Vietnamese colleagues on the relevance and importance of this item in the context of Vietnam. Then the researcher measured the sampling adequacy of the items by running the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin test. Theoretically, if the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test yielded a value greater than 0.70, correlations among items were sufficiently high enough to perform factor analysis (de Vaus & Ebooks Corporation 2014). For the 12 items in this section, the KMO value was 0.75; therefore, it was suitable to extract the items into principal components. Eigen values greater than 1.0 suggested that three principal components should be extracted, which together explained 71.40% of the variance. However, two out of the four components only had two items, which as a general rule should not be extracted (Costello & Osborne 2005; Ledesma, Valero-Mora & Macbeth 2015), and the elbow in the scree plot suggested two principal components should be extracted. Therefore, the researcher chose to extract two principal components, which combined explained 53.04% of the variance. The two components extracted using the Varimax rotation method were:

- Push reasons ( $\alpha = 0.77$ )
- Pull reasons ( $\alpha = 0.84$ )

A similar procedure was repeated for the 13 items in Section 4. Cronbach's alpha was 0.80, item-total correlations ranged from 0.35 to 0.54, and the KMO test value was 0.80. Three principal components

were extracted based on the Eigen value greater than 1.0, which together explained 60.02% of the variance. The three components are:

- Socio-economic circumstances of the host country ( $\alpha = 0.79$ )
- Practicality for survival and policies for international students ( $\alpha = 0.75$ )
- Closeness to the home country (i.e. Vietnam) ( $\alpha = 0.80$ )

The 17 items in Section 5 were also analyzed with the procedure above. Cronbach's alpha was 0.87, item-total correlations ranged from 0.35 to 0.66, and the KMO test value was 0.85. Four principal components were extracted based on the Eigen value greater than 1.0, which together explained 62.54% of the variance. The four components are:

- Institution reputation ( $\alpha = 0.83$ )
- Institution environment ( $\alpha = 0.81$ )
- Institutional linkage with the home country ( $\alpha = 0.70$ )
- Opinions of influential stakeholders ( $\alpha = 0.72$ )

After extracting items into principal components, mean scores and deviations were computed to find the influence of each factor on participants' selection of the host country and institution. Finally, independent samples T-tests and one-way ANOVA tests were run to test whether there were differences in the influence of the factors on the selection of the host country and institution between groups of participants.

## Results

### *Vietnamese students' study destinations*

Out of the 400 participants, 24% planned to attend an undergraduate program, 38.3% postgraduate, 23.5% vocation and 14.3% short exchange. In terms of disciplines, 13.8% planned to attend a program in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), 18.3% in social science, 36.8% in business, 12.8% in agriculture, 10.8% in education and the remaining 7.3% in health.

The participants named 27 countries that they targeted for their overseas study. Those countries varied in terms of geographical location, political regime, socio-economic and cultural context. However, none of the participants chose to study in Latin America or Africa.

The participants were asked to give two preferences for their study destinations. Overall, descriptive statistics showed that 29.25% of the participants wanted to pursue their study in North American countries, 24.25% in European countries, 16.25% in Oceanian countries and the remaining 30.25% in Asian countries. In other words, almost a third of the participants chose to study in Asian countries and the rest in Western societies.

Although there were differences in the ranking of countries of preferences, the participants indicated that the five most-targeted countries for first, second, and overall choices were the USA, Australia, Japan, Singapore, and the UK. Some participants also intended to study in countries that are not historically popular for international students, such as Laos and Cambodia. Table 2 summarizes country destinations preferred by the participants.

**Table 2. Vietnamese students' choice of country destinations for their studies**

Rank	First choice	%	Second choice	%	Overall	%
1	USA	25.0	USA	18.8	USA	21.9
2	Australia	16.3	Australia	16.8	Australia	16.6
3	Singapore	12.5	Japan	13.5	Japan	12.0
4	UK	10.8	Singapore	10.5	Singapore	11.5
5	Japan	10.5	UK	9.3	UK	10.1
6	France	8.5	Korea	5.5	France	6.8
7	Canada	4.3	France	5.0	Canada	4.1
8	Korea	2.3	Russia	4.0	Korea	3.9

9	China	2.0	Canada	3.8	Russia	2.5
10	The Netherlands	1.5	Germany	3.5	Germany	2.4
11	Germany	1.3	China	2.0	China	2.0
12	Russia	1.0	Finland	1.5	The Netherlands	1.3
13	India	0.8	The Netherlands	1.0	Finland	1.0
14	Italy	0.5	Italy	0.8	India	0.8
15	Thailand	0.5	Thailand	0.8	Italy	0.7
	Others	2.5	Others	3.5	Others	2.7

### *Reasons that Vietnamese students decided to study abroad*

Table 3 showed reasons and the extent they influenced the participants' motivation for studying overseas based on their self-rating. It appeared that the participants were 'pulled' ( $M = 3.98$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ) more than 'pushed' ( $M = 2.94$ ,  $SD = 1.23$ ) to study abroad. Out of the 12 reasons, improving chance of employment internationally ( $M = 4.19$ ,  $SD = 1.00$ ), improving foreign language competence ( $M = 4.16$ ,  $SD = 0.98$ ) and obtaining international experience ( $M = 4.02$ ,  $SD = 0.98$ ) were the three most important reasons, all of which belonged to the pull reasons. The three most important push reasons were seeking immigration opportunities ( $M = 3.37$ ,  $SD = 1.20$ ), followed by poor education quality in Vietnam ( $M = 3.28$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ) and avoiding bad practices in Vietnamese education (bribery, rote learning, and excessive politically-driven education as stated by the participants in the interviews) ( $M = 3.17$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ ). It is also noted that standard deviations were high, suggesting that the participants were motivated by those reasons differently. Therefore, such differences were explored with independent samples T-tests and one-way ANOVA tests.

**Table 3. Factors influencing Vietnamese students' motivation for overseas study**

FACTORS	All (N=400)		Asian (N=121)		Western (N=279)	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
<b>Push factors</b>	<b>2.94</b>	<b>1.23</b>	<b>2.85</b>	<b>1.21</b>	<b>2.98</b>	<b>1.23</b>
Unavailability of a desired program	2.52	1.24	2.42	1.23	2.56	1.24
Competitive entry to Vietnamese universities	2.56	1.15	2.37	1.05	2.64	1.19
Poor educational quality in Vietnam	3.28	1.10	3.17	1.14	3.32	1.09
Avoidance of bad practices in Vietnamese education	3.17	1.27	3.17	1.24	3.17	1.29
Seeking immigration opportunities	3.37	1.20	3.34	1.22	3.38	1.19
Being asked to study abroad by my family	2.76	1.39	2.64	1.41	2.81	1.38
<b>Pull factors</b>	<b>3.98</b>	<b>1.01</b>	<b>4.06</b>	<b>0.92</b>	<b>3.95</b>	<b>1.05</b>
Pursuing foreign educational values	3.82	1.06	3.84	1.05	3.81	1.07
Obtaining international experience	4.02	0.98	4.14	0.83	3.97	1.04
Experiencing foreign cultures	3.86	1.03	3.94	0.94	3.82	1.06
Establishing relationships with international friends	3.84	1.03	3.92	0.91	3.81	1.07
Improving foreign language competence	4.16	0.98	4.25	0.85	4.11	1.03
Improving chance of employment internationally	4.19	1.00	4.28	0.93	4.15	1.02

Independent sample T-tests were conducted to test whether there were differences in the influence of the two principal factors on the motivations for studying abroad between groups of students choosing Western and Asian host countries. The results indicated that there was no statistically significant difference in the influence of pull and push factors on the selection of the host country of both groups.

Independent sample T-tests were conducted to test whether there were differences in the influence of the two principal factors on the motivations for studying abroad between groups of male and female participants.

- The results indicated that there were statistically significant differences in the influence of push reasons on the motivation for studying abroad between groups of male ( $M = 3.25$ ,  $SD = 0.82$ ) and female participants ( $M = 2.85$ ,  $SD = 0.82$ ),  $t(397) = 4.19$ ,  $p = 0.00$ . This suggests that male participants were motivated to study abroad by push reasons more than female participants.
- The results indicated that there were statistically significant differences in the influence of pull reasons on the motivation for studying abroad between groups of male ( $M = 3.82$ ,  $SD = 0.86$ ) and female participants ( $M = 4.03$ ,  $SD = 0.72$ ),  $t(137.63) = -2.12$ ,  $p = 0.04$ . This suggests that male participants were less motivated to study abroad by pull reasons than female participants.

Independent sample T-tests were conducted to test whether there were differences in the influence of the two principal factors on the motivations for studying abroad between two age groups: group A (from 18 to 22 years old) and group B (above 22 years old).

- The results indicated that there were statistically significant differences in the influence of push reasons on the motivation for studying abroad between group A ( $M = 2.54$ ,  $SD = 0.64$ ) and group B ( $M = 3.40$ ,  $SD = 0.81$ ),  $t(348.06) = -11.58$ ,  $p = 0.00$ . This suggests that younger participants were less influenced by push reasons than older participants.
- The results indicated that there were statistically significant differences in the influence of pull reasons on the motivation for studying abroad between group A ( $M = 4.14$ ,  $SD = 0.71$ ) and group B ( $M = 3.79$ ,  $SD = 0.77$ ),  $t(397) = 4.70$ ,  $p = 0.00$ . This suggests that younger participants were more influenced by pull reasons than older participants.

Furthermore, one-way ANOVA tests were conducted to compare the influence of the two principal factors on the motivation of studying abroad between six groups of students who intended to study different disciplines abroad: STEM, social sciences, business, agriculture, education and health.

- The results indicated statistically significant differences in the influence of the push reasons on the motivation for studying abroad at the  $p < .05$  level for the six groups of students [ $F(5, 394) = 8.21$ ,  $p = 0.00$ ]. Post hoc comparisons using the Turkey HSD test indicated that push reasons affected students who would pursue Business ( $M = 2.69$ ,  $SD = 0.78$ ) less significantly than students who would pursue STEM ( $M = 3.30$ ,  $SD = 0.90$ ), Education ( $M = 3.24$ ,  $SD = 0.76$ ) and Health ( $M = 3.35$ ,  $SD = 0.75$ ).
- The results also indicated statistically significant differences in the influence of the pull reasons on the motivation for studying abroad at the  $p < .05$  level for the six groups of students [ $F(5, 394) = 5.19$ ,  $p = 0.00$ ]. Post hoc comparisons using the Turkey HSD test indicated that pull reasons affected students who would pursue Business ( $M = 4.20$ ,  $SD = 0.65$ ) more significantly than students who would pursue Education ( $M = 3.71$ ,  $SD = 0.80$ ) and Health ( $M = 3.63$ ,  $SD = 0.74$ ).

Finally, one-way ANOVA tests were conducted to compare the influence of the two principal factors on the motivation of studying abroad between four groups of students who intended to study different levels of education: undergraduate, graduate, vocation and short exchange. The results only indicated statistically significant differences in the influence of push reasons on the motivation for studying abroad at the  $p < .05$  level for the four groups of students [ $F(5, 396) = 7.19$ ,  $p = 0.00$ ]. Post hoc comparisons using the Turkey HSD test indicated that push reasons affected students who would pursue vocational study ( $M = 3.23$ ,  $SD = 0.83$ ) more significantly than students who would pursue undergraduate study ( $M = 2.71$ ,  $SD = 0.73$ ) and graduate study ( $M = 2.86$ ,  $SD = 0.84$ ).

### ***Factors influencing Vietnamese students' choice of the host country for their study***

Table 4 showed factors and the extent to which they influenced participants' selection of the host country for their study based on their self-report. It appeared that participants were strongly influenced by factors related to the host country's socio-economic status ( $M = 3.85$ ,  $SD = 0.97$ ) and policies and practicalities that may affect their survival as students ( $M = 3.82$ ,  $SD = 0.96$ ). Their selection was very minimally influenced by the closeness of the host country to Vietnam ( $M = 2.85$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ ).

**Table 4. Factors influencing Vietnamese students' selection of the host country**

FACTOR	ALL (N=400)		Asian (N=121)		Western (N=279)	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
<b>Closeness to the home country</b>	<b>2.85</b>	<b>1.09</b>	<b>3.03</b>	<b>1.14</b>	<b>2.77</b>	<b>1.06</b>
Geographical proximity between the host country and Vietnam	2.46	1.17	2.71	1.24	2.34	1.12
Political proximity between the host country and Vietnam	2.76	1.11	2.96	1.23	2.67	1.05
Cultural proximity between the host country and Vietnam	2.81	1.05	2.93	1.09	2.75	1.03
Interesting culture in the host country	3.37	1.02	3.53	0.99	3.30	1.03
<b>Socio-economic status of the host country</b>	<b>3.85</b>	<b>0.97</b>	<b>3.90</b>	<b>0.93</b>	<b>3.83</b>	<b>0.99</b>
Safety level in the host country	3.78	1.05	3.92	1.00	3.72	1.06
Living standards in the host country	3.79	0.94	3.85	0.94	3.77	0.94
Living cost in the host country	3.94	0.97	3.98	0.90	3.92	1.01
A welcoming environment for international students in the host country	3.90	0.91	3.85	0.86	3.92	0.94
<b>Survival practicalities and policies in the host country</b>	<b>3.81</b>	<b>0.96</b>	<b>3.78</b>	<b>0.95</b>	<b>3.83</b>	<b>0.96</b>
Network of friends or relatives in the host country	3.58	1.05	3.52	0.93	3.61	1.09
Visa procedures to enter the host country	3.84	0.95	3.76	1.00	3.87	0.93
Part-time job policies for international students in the host country	3.93	0.89	3.88	0.90	3.95	0.88
Post-graduation employment or immigration policies in the host country	3.83	0.95	3.76	1.01	3.85	0.92
Familiarity of the language of the host country	3.90	0.94	4.00	0.89	3.86	0.96

Independent sample T-tests were conducted to test whether there were differences in the influence of the three principal factors on the selection of host country between groups of students who chose to go West and East. The results indicated that there were statistically significant differences in the influence of 'closeness to Vietnam' on the choice of the host country between groups going West ( $M = 2.77$ ,  $SD = 0.96$ ) and going East ( $M = 3.03$ ,  $SD = 0.81$ ),  $t(197.26) = 2.68$ ,  $p = 0.01$ . This suggests that students choosing to go to Asian countries were more influenced by the proximity between the home and the host countries in terms of geographical, political and cultural distance and interesting cultures than those who chose to go to Western countries.

Independent sample T-tests were conducted to test whether there were differences in the influence of the three principal factors on the selection of the host country between groups of male and female participants. The results indicated statistically significant differences in two out of the three principal factors as follows:

- The results indicated that there were statistically significant differences in the influence of 'socio-economic status' on the choice of the host country between groups of male ( $M = 3.65$ ,  $SD = 0.78$ ) and female participants ( $M = 3.91$ ,  $SD = 0.75$ ),  $t(397) = 3.00$ ,  $p = 0.00$ . This suggests that female participants paid more attention to factors related to the socio-economic status of the host country than male participants.

- The results indicated that there were statistically significant differences in the influence of ‘closeness to the home country’ on the choice of the host country between groups of male ( $M = 2.63$ ,  $SD = 0.82$ ) and female participants ( $M = 2.91$ ,  $SD = 0.87$ ),  $t(397) = -2.72$ ,  $p = 0.01$ . This suggests that female participants were more concerned about the closeness between the home and host country more than male participants.

In addition, independent sample T-tests were conducted to test whether there were differences in the influence of the three principal factors on the selection of the host country between two age groups: group A (from 18 to 22 years old) and group B (more than 22 years old).

- The results indicated that there were statistically significant differences in the influence of ‘socio-economic status’ on the selection of the host country between group A ( $M = 4.01$ ,  $SD = 0.70$ ) and group B ( $M = 3.66$ ,  $SD = 0.79$ ),  $t(372.12) = 4.71$ ,  $p = 0.00$ . This suggests that younger participants were more concerned with socio-economic issues of the host country when they decided where to study than older participants.
- The results indicated that there were statistically significant differences in the influence of ‘policies and practicalities for survival’ on the selection of the host country between group A ( $M = 3.66$ ,  $SD = 0.64$ ) and group B ( $M = 3.99$ ,  $SD = 0.68$ ),  $t(397) = -5.12$ ,  $p = 0.00$ . This suggests that the younger participants were more concerned about policies related to international students and practical issues such as language and sources of help in the host country than older participants.
- The results indicated that there were statistically significant differences in the influence of ‘closeness to the home country’ on the selection of the host country between group A ( $M = 3.04$ ,  $SD = 0.80$ ) and group B ( $M = 2.62$ ,  $SD = 0.86$ ),  $t(397) = 5.09$ ,  $p = 0.00$ . This suggests that younger participants were more concerned about the similarities between the host country and Vietnam than older participants.

Furthermore, one-way ANOVA tests were conducted to compare the influence of the three principal factors on the selection of the host country between six groups of students who intended to study different disciplines abroad: STEM, social sciences, business, agriculture, education and health. The results only indicated statistically significant differences in the influence of the ‘socio-economic status of the host country’ on the selection of the host country at the  $p < .05$  level for the six groups of students [ $F(5, 394) = 2.59$ ,  $p = 0.03$ ]. Post hoc comparisons using the Turkey HSD test indicated that this principal factor affected students who would pursue Business ( $M = 3.97$ ,  $SD = 0.72$ ) more significantly than students who would pursue Education ( $M = 3.58$ ,  $SD = 0.82$ ).

Finally, one-way ANOVA tests were conducted to compare the influence of the three principal factors on the selection of the host country between four groups of students who intended to study at different levels of education: undergraduate, postgraduate, vocation and short exchange. The results only indicated statistically significant differences in the influence of the ‘socio-economic status of the host country’ on the selection of the host country at the  $p < .05$  level for the six groups of students [ $F(3, 396) = 3.54$ ,  $p = 0.02$ ]. Post hoc comparisons using the Turkey HSD test indicated that ‘socio-economic status of the host country’ affected students who would pursue undergraduate study ( $M = 3.98$ ,  $SD = 0.69$ ) or postgraduate study ( $M = 3.91$ ,  $SD = 0.76$ ) more significantly than students who would go overseas for a short exchange ( $M = 3.60$ ,  $SD = 0.76$ ).

### ***Factors influencing Vietnamese students’ choice of host institution for their study***

Table 5 showed factors and the extent to which they influenced participants’ selection of the host country for their study based on their self-report. Participants appeared to be very strongly influenced by factors related to the friendliness of the host institution environment to international students ( $M = 3.88$ ,  $SD = 0.98$ ). Their selections were also strongly influenced by the linkage of an institution with Vietnam ( $M = 3.73$ ,  $SD = 1.00$ ), the opinions of influential stakeholders such as overseas study promoters, their peers or family members ( $M = 3.59$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ) and the reputation of the institution ( $M = 3.49$ ,  $SD = 1.16$ ).

**Table 5. Factors influencing Vietnamese students' selection of host institution**

FACTOR	ALL (N=400)		Asian (N=121)		Western (N=279)	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
<b>Institution reputation</b>	<b>3.48</b>	<b>1.14</b>	<b>3.37</b>	<b>1.17</b>	<b>3.49</b>	<b>1.14</b>
Availability of the desired program	3.30	1.29	3.24	1.34	3.32	1.27
University reputation/ranking	3.34	1.10	3.25	1.09	3.37	1.10
Qualified teaching staff	3.50	1.12	3.51	1.11	3.49	1.13
Graduates' employment rates	3.80	1.05	3.49	1.13	3.78	1.07
<b>Friendly environment for international students</b>	<b>3.88</b>	<b>0.98</b>	<b>3.89</b>	<b>0.92</b>	<b>3.88</b>	<b>1.00</b>
Facilities and infrastructure	3.83	0.92	3.82	0.83	3.84	0.96
Tuition fees for international students	4.00	1.00	4.08	0.96	3.96	1.01
Scholarship opportunities for international students	3.96	0.98	3.96	0.92	3.96	1.00
Presence of many other international students	3.64	1.05	3.60	1.04	3.65	1.06
Support services for international students	4.00	0.94	4.01	0.92	3.99	0.95
Convenient location	3.85	0.97	3.84	0.88	3.85	1.02
<b>Institutional linkage with the home country (i.e. Vietnam)</b>	<b>3.73</b>	<b>1.00</b>	<b>3.76</b>	<b>0.99</b>	<b>3.72</b>	<b>1.01</b>
Admission criteria for international students	3.91	0.89	3.81	0.87	3.95	0.89
Relationship with the current/former university	3.70	1.04	3.79	1.05	3.66	1.04
Presence of a representative office of the institution in Vietnam	3.59	1.07	3.68	1.04	3.55	1.09
<b>Opinions of influential stakeholders</b>	<b>3.59</b>	<b>1.02</b>	<b>3.58</b>	<b>1.01</b>	<b>3.59</b>	<b>1.01</b>
Recommendations of teachers, friends, family members	3.41	1.03	3.40	0.93	3.41	1.07
Advertisement strategies	3.38	1.04	3.33	0.97	3.41	1.06
Local employers' preference of the degree granted by the institution	3.68	0.99	3.78	1.03	3.63	0.97
International students' experience with the institution	3.90	1.01	3.82	1.13	3.93	0.95

Independent sample T-tests were conducted to test whether there were differences in the influence of the four principal factors on the selection of the host institution between groups of students who chose to go West and East. The results indicated that there were no statistically significant differences in the influence of the four principal factors on their choice between the two groups.

Independent sample T-tests were conducted to test whether there were differences in the influence of the four principal factors on the selection of the host institution between groups of male and female participants. The results only indicated statistically significant differences in the influence of 'institution reputation' on the selection of the host institution between males ( $M = 3.31$ ,  $SD = 0.10$ ) and females ( $M = 3.54$ ,  $SD = 0.92$ ),  $t(145.87) = -2.00$ ,  $p = 0.05$ . This means that female students were more concerned about the prestige of an institution than male students when they selected the host institution.

Independent sample T-tests were conducted to test whether there were differences in the influence of the four principal factors on the selection of the host institution between the two age groups. The results indicated statistically significant differences in three out of the four principal factors between the two groups as follows:

- The results indicated that there were statistically significant differences in the influence of 'institution reputation' on the selection of the host institution between group A ( $M = 3.74$ ,  $SD$

= 0.81) and group B ( $M = 3.19$ ,  $SD = 1.00$ ),  $t(354.90) = 5.89$ ,  $p = 0.00$ . This suggests that younger participants tended to choose an institution based on its reputation more than older participants.

- The results indicated that there were statistically significant differences in the influence of ‘institutional linkage with the home country’ on the selection of the host institution between group A ( $M = 3.55$ ,  $SD = 0.77$ ) and group B ( $M = 3.94$ ,  $SD = 0.77$ ),  $t(397) = -5.04$ ,  $p = 0.00$ . This shows that older participants were more influenced by the linkage of a foreign institution with Vietnam when selecting the host institution than younger participants.
- The results indicated that there were statistically significant differences in the influence of ‘opinions of influential stakeholders’ on the selection of the host institution between group A ( $M = 3.35$ ,  $SD = 0.71$ ) and group B ( $M = 3.86$ ,  $SD = 0.70$ ),  $t(397) = -7.23$ ,  $p = 0.00$ . This indicates that older participants took advice from influential individuals into consideration when selecting the host institution more than younger participants.

One-way ANOVA tests were conducted to compare the influence of the four principal factors on the selection of the host institution between six groups of students who intended to study different disciplines abroad: STEM, social sciences, business, agriculture, education and health. The results only indicated statistically significant differences in the influence of ‘institution reputation’ on the selection of the host institution at the  $p < .05$  level for the six groups of students [ $F(5, 394) = 2.90$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ]. Post hoc comparisons using the Turkey HSD test indicated that ‘institution reputation’ affected students who would pursue a study in Business ( $M = 3.68$ ,  $SD = 0.79$ ) more significantly than students who would pursue a study in Education ( $M = 3.09$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ).

Finally, one-way ANOVA tests were conducted to compare the influence of the four principal factors on the selection of the host institution between four groups of students who intended to study at different levels of education: undergraduate, postgraduate, vocation and short exchange. The results indicated statistically significant differences in the influence of three out of the four factors on the four groups of students as follows:

- There was a statistically significant difference in the influence of ‘institution reputation’ on the selection of the host institution at the  $p < .05$  level for the six groups of students [ $F(3, 396) = 3.84$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ]. Post hoc comparisons using the Turkey HSD test indicated that ‘institution reputation’ affected students who would pursue undergraduate study ( $M = 3.69$ ,  $SD = 0.90$ ) more significantly than students who would go abroad for a short exchange ( $M = 3.18$ ,  $SD = 0.90$ ).
- There was a statistically significant difference in the influence of institutional linkage with the home country on the selection of the host institution at the  $p < .05$  level for the six groups of students [ $F(3, 396) = 3.83$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ]. Post hoc comparisons using the Turkey HSD test indicated that ‘institution reputation’ affected students who would pursue vocational study ( $M = 3.92$ ,  $SD = 0.78$ ) more significantly than students who would pursue undergraduate study ( $M = 3.54$ ,  $SD = 0.87$ ).
- There was a statistically significant difference in the influence of ‘opinions of influential stakeholders’ on the selection of the host institution at the  $p < .05$  level for the six groups of students [ $F(3, 396) = 3.71$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ]. Post hoc comparisons using the Turkey HSD test indicated that ‘opinions of influential stakeholders’ affected students who would pursue vocational study ( $M = 3.80$ ,  $SD = 0.72$ ) more significantly than students who would pursue postgraduate study ( $M = 3.49$ ,  $SD = 0.76$ ).

## **Discussion**

### ***A shift in the targeted study destination?***

According to Clark (2013), Australia and the USA were the leading host countries of international Vietnamese students in 2012, but the USA seemed close to surpassing Australia for first place due to a consistently increasing number of Vietnamese students enrolling in its universities. This study

confirmed that trend, because the percentage of students choosing the US as their preferred study destination was much higher than that of Australia (21.8% and 16.3% respectively). While there may be different explanations, the most important reason seems to be that American education is considered the best in Vietnam (Clark 2013; Turauskis 2014). Because people tend to act accordingly with their beliefs or perceptions (Firmin, Chi-En & Wood 2007; Mokhtari 2014; Skamp, Boyes & Stanisstreet 2013), it is not surprising that an increasing number of Vietnamese students choose to study in the US due to a general perception that they will receive a high quality of education while studying there.

The findings also suggest that Western HE providers are competing with emerging Asian providers, such as Japan, Singapore and Korea. This study showed that overall, 30.25% of the participants wanted to study in Asian countries, compared with 29.5% in the previous study (Clark 2013). This is a small change, but it may demonstrate a significant change in students' preference for the host country, considering two facts: The first is that there have been fewer Asian HE providers compared to a large variety of Western options in Europe, North America and Oceania. The second fact is that the number of students choosing to study in China significantly dropped from the third place host country in 2012, as indicated in Clark (2013), to 11<sup>th</sup> place in this study. There could be many reasons for such a fall; however, considering the fact that this study was conducted very soon after a national protest against Chinese government's activities in the South China Sea (Ives & Fuller 2014), political conflict could be a significant factor for the drastic drop in rank. This supports previous studies that found political issues could affect the flow of international students from a sending to a receiving country (for example, see Howson 2014; Papatsiba 2005). Without this political turbulence, the number of students choosing China would be higher, which in turn could have increased the percentage of students choosing Asian host countries.

For the entire group of participants, such factors as geographical, cultural and political proximity and interesting culture were not rated as highly as the others, suggesting that those factors did not significantly influence their choice of host country (Table 4). However, this study found that students who chose to study in Asian countries were influenced more significantly by those factors than their peers who chose to study in Western countries. It was also interesting to note that Malaysia, Taiwan and Singapore - the three countries with approximately similar geographical distance, cultural similarity and political ties with Vietnam - were chosen as host countries differently by the participants. Malaysia, which closely follows Singapore as an international Southeast Asian hub for education, was not chosen by any of the participants as a host country. Taiwan was preferred as the second choice study destination by 0.5% of the participants in this study, but it was in the top three Asian host countries for Vietnamese students reported in Clark (2013). Singapore was in the top five most targeted host countries in this study. Although there has been a lack of studies to document the efforts of Taiwan and Malaysia in marketing their education programs, my work experience and consultation with a local international student recruitment service showed that Taiwan and Malaysia seemed to lag behind Singapore in terms of promoting their educational courses using local international student recruitment agencies. In contrast, regardless of geographical, political and cultural distance, many students chose to pursue their studies in Western countries. Apart from social beliefs about the quality of education in those Western countries, it seems that marketing efforts for their HE courses and institutions have successfully attracted Vietnamese students. Western countries have had their representative agencies (the IDP for Australia, the British Council for the UK), build an offshore university campus (the RMIT of Australia) or signed bilateral scholarship programs to train talented Vietnamese students and officials (the Australian Awards Scholarships, the American Fulbright Scholarship). These initiatives seem to make prospective international Vietnamese students consider Western countries as study destinations before considering affordability issues. The cases of the US, UK, Australia, Singapore, Taiwan and Malaysia suggest that geographical, cultural and political proximity could be an advantage for attracting international students but effective marketing campaigns would enhance their competitiveness more greatly. Therefore, regardless of geographical and cultural proximity, marketing of the educational reputation and specific educational programs provided by the host institutions in students' home country is critical for attracting international students to a host country.

In general, this study found that there could be a shift in the outflow of prospective Vietnamese students from Australia to the US and from the traditional Western host countries to the newly emerging Asian ones. Although this study only investigated Vietnamese students' opinions, the finding was consistent with recent studies that found changes in the flow of international students (Anderson & Bhati 2012; Clark 2013; Clavel 2015; Pan 2013). Despite various influencing factors behind these changes, this study suggests three possible factors: (i) perception of the value of education in the host country, (ii) political issues between the home and the host countries and (iii) host country/institution's marketing efforts in students' home countries.

***Significant factors influencing international students' choices of the host country and institution***

Participants in this study appeared to be more motivated to study abroad due to factors from the host countries rather than the home country. Generally, the findings showed that the participants paid more attention to practical factors for their entrance into and survival and retention in the host country and institution than other factors when they decided to study abroad.

Among the four principal factors that influenced international students' choices of the host country, the participants rated the 'socio-economic status of the host country' and 'survival practicalities and policy in the host country' almost equally ( $M = 3.85$ ,  $SD = 0.97$  and  $M = 3.81$ ,  $SD = 0.96$ , respectively). The top five factors that concerned the prospective students the most when selecting a host country were: the cost of living in the host country, employment policies for international students, their fluency with the language used in the host country, a welcoming environment for international students, and visa procedures (see Table 4).

Similarly, among the factors influencing their choice of host institution, the participants rated the 'friendly environment for international students' ( $M = 3.88$ ,  $SD = 0.98$ ) to be the most influential out of the four components. This principal factor was consistently rated highly by groups of participants of different demographic features, suggesting a congruence of the significant influence of this factor on their choice of the host institution. The top five factors that students took into account when choosing the host institution included tuition fees, support services, scholarship opportunities, admission criteria, and international students' experience with the host institution. Other factors such as convenient location of the host institution and facilities and infrastructure also received a great deal of attention (see Table 5).

Those findings appear to support recent critiques that international students are more practical in pursuing their education; therefore, they have been downgrading the values of HE in Western societies (Benzie 2010; Bita 2015; Harrison 2014; Watty 2007). However, as they would most likely be living alone for the first time abroad, it is understandable why students took those factors into account. What is more important is the role of the HEIs in recruiting international students with acceptable academic standards at university entry and supporting them in achieving their educational goals at the standards set by the institutions. This finding also suggests that international students could fall into the trap of bogus and unaccredited institutions, which usually use low tuition fees, short study lengths, easy admission criteria and non-academic attractions to lure international students (Head 2011; Nganga 2015; Robson 2004). Therefore, international HE providers, recruitment agencies and international students need to responsibly collaborate to identify an HEI suitable for students' needs and avoid bogus and unaccredited institutions.

Additionally, it is interesting to find out that the participants did not rate institutional reputation as influential as the other three principal factors. Out of the four sub-factors under the 'institutional reputation' component, the participants did not highly consider the rank of the institution, the quality of the staff or even the availability of the program they wanted to attend in the host institution (see Table 5). In other words, they might take any program at any institution, as long as it meets their financial situation and personal preferences. The sub-factor they cared about considerably was the graduates' employment rate upon graduation. Such a finding suggests two things:

On the one hand, international students are more concerned about their future employment than with the true values of HE provided by the institution. This may cause problems for the students themselves, if the program they chose impulsively does not match their educational background or

academic competence, which may increase the possibility of student dropouts or subpar learning later on. Host institutions, despite the need for recruiting international students to sustain their institutions, should consider their prospective students' education backgrounds or prior learning experiences to enroll suitable students. They should also provide services that support international students with their learning, which may also help ease recent debates about international students downgrading the quality of HE in Western societies as mentioned earlier in this section.

On the other hand, the true intention of international university ranking leagues is not achieved with the findings in this study. One of the goals of the ranking leagues is to provide stakeholders, including students, with information about an institution's operation and quality of the education of that institution so that they can make informed decisions (Hazelkorn 2007). However, this study suggests that the prospective international students seemed not to care as much about such a ranking. It could be that the information about the reputation/rank of HEIs has not been widely communicated to those students, or that such information does not make as much sense as other information about the host country and institution.

The problem is that international students pay a great deal to pursue an international education, so investing into a program at a less qualified institution could be a deadly mistake that would not enhance their employability, but would only incur a great financial debt (Pash 2014). Therefore, it is recommended that HEIs communicate the information about their institutions and the programs they offer with great clarity so that students can select a program suitable to their personal circumstances and needs. It is not only a practice of transparency in business operation but also a moral issue in this rapidly changing HE sector.

#### ***The influence of demographic factors on international students' choices of study destination***

The findings suggest that the selection of study destinations by international students has been influenced by different demographic factors. In this study, independent sample T-tests indicated that age groups influenced their choice the most significantly. Younger participants' (18-22 years old) choice of the host institution was more influenced by 'closeness of the host country to Vietnam' and 'socio-economic status of the host country' and less influenced by 'survival practicalities and policies in the host country' than older participants (more than 22 years old). In choosing the host institution, the former were more attracted by the reputation of the host institution, but they considered such factors as the linkage of the host institution with a home organization or recommendations of influential stakeholders less than the latter. Those differences could be ascribed to differences in exposure to real life of the two groups of participants. In Vietnam, the older participants live and work more independently than the younger participants, who are normally studying in undergraduate programs and are still primarily supported by their parents at the time of research. That could explain why older participants were more concerned about practical issues in the host country and gathered information on the host institution from reliable people or agencies. However, it was also interesting to find that, despite depending on their parents, younger participants did not consider their parents' opinions in choosing the study destination as much as the older ones. This is contrary to many studies that found that Asian parents greatly influenced their children's choice of where to pursue their overseas studies, mostly at the undergraduate level (Bodycott 2009; Ivy 2010; Lee, CKC & Morrish 2012; Pimpa 2003).

In addition, independent sample T-tests and one-way ANOVA tests indicated that genders, disciplines or levels of education that an international student intended to pursue abroad also made differences in students' selection of the host institution. Those findings were consistent with previous studies that found the influence of demographic factors on international students' choice of the host country and institution (for example, see Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka 2015, pp. 259-60).

Finally, analysis of the influence of pull factors on the motivation for studying abroad of participants of different demographic features also gave some implications for HE marketing. The results of the independent sample T-tests and one-way ANOVA tests of the influence of pull factors on the motivation for studying abroad revealed that young, female, Business and vocational students could be influenced by pull factors the most. In contrast, older, male, Health or Education and postgraduate

students would be the most difficult customers. Those findings suggest that the latter should be approached with more of a carefully devised marketing strategy than the former.

### ***Limitations and suggestions for future research***

This study has some limitations. It separated factors influencing international students' motivation for studying abroad and their choice of the host institution and country, but those factors may actually be interrelated. It did not include student-related factors such as their personal perception, academic competence or personal traits, among many others. Therefore, future studies need to add those factors together and extract them using the Oblimin rotation method to give a clearer view of how those factors influence international students' choice of the study destination. Also, this is a case study using a convenient sampling technique, in which the percentage of male and female participants was not equally balanced. Thus, its findings should be interpreted for use with caution. Future study should address this issue as well as include participants from different countries for more accurate insights into the topic.

### **Conclusion**

This study brought to light four important findings. First, there is a possibility of change in the outflow of prospective international Vietnamese students: More students will go to the US than to Australia and China and there will be a shift from the traditional Western host countries to Asian ones such as Singapore, Japan or Korea. Second, it found that international students seemed to be motivated to study abroad by certain pull factors such as improving chance of employment internationally, improving foreign language competence and obtaining international experience more than push factors. Third, prospective international Vietnamese students were found to consider practicalities for their survival in the host country, learning in the host institution and benefits they may gain upon graduation, rather than pursuing a high-quality education. Fourth, a number of demographic factors - age groups, genders, targeted educational programs and levels of education to pursue - were found to make a difference in international students' choice of host institution and country.

With these findings, it is recommended that HEIs take into account those demographic factors in order to provide relevant information to assist international students in making well-informed decisions. This would not only help students choose an institution suited to their needs, but would also encourage the institution to recruit international students that will better fit with their institutional context, which would in turn avoid unrealistic expectations from both sides. It is also recommended that while improving marketing strategies to recruit more international students, HEIs need to pay attention to recruiting international students with satisfactory academic standards at the entry level and supporting them to achieve their learning objectives at their best. This would benefit students in selecting a program suitable with their needs and institutions in maintaining their academic standards and reputation.

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