

The Stories of the Leavers and Stayers as “Pure” Researchers in Vietnamese Universities: Another Version of “The Dream of the Red Chamber”?

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Abstract

This research, through a case study, examined the work of “pure” researchers, who only performed research as their tasks without teaching at Vietnam’s higher education institutions, as well as the influence of institutional elements of their organization on their attachment to the workplace. Through the use of the theoretical framework that Scott proposes, the three pillars of institutions, this study revealed that the participants in this study worked at an organization with almost no specific rules for researchers, nor effective policies on developing those staff members. Expectations for researchers were also not clear and individually determined. Researchers had to undertake many different tasks that they thought were unimportant to the organization’s mission, obligatory, monotonous, or beyond their ability. All three pillars in the institutional life of the organization had an impact on the participants’ attachment to the institute, and enhancing the aspect of research required changes to some institutional elements.

Keywords

Attachment, institutes, institutional elements, researchers, Vietnam higher education institutions

Introduction

Higher education research is regarded as one of the main missions of higher education institutions (Ramoso & Cruz, 2019), and to sustain their competitive role in the era of globalization, it is a fact that universities have striven to identify themselves as effective organizations through “the research pursuits of academics” (Nguyen & Klopper, 2019, p.

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174). In the case of Vietnam, many important documents also affirm the importance of research in universities, as well as strategies for developing this aspect. In 2005, the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) launched the 2006–2020 Higher Education Reform Agenda, proposing various changes, some of which are the establishment of a tier of research-oriented universities and the expansion of PhD holders in universities (Pham, 2010). In 2012, Vietnam passed the first higher education law, which has affected university research in the country. The law emphasizes the university's attaching research to training and enhancing cooperation between universities and research organizations (National Assembly of Vietnam, 2012). The coming Socioeconomic Development Strategy 2021–2030 also concentrates on research and innovation for the development of the country (World Bank, 2020).

Vietnam has two groups of academic organizations. The first includes general research and development and engineering institutes; the other comprises higher education institutions. The separation is not completely definite as organizations in the former group also do certain formal training while those in the latter group conduct research as well (Ca & Hung, 2011). The majority of research institutes belong to the government, whereas universities and enterprises own only 4.85% (150 out of 3,088 institutes) (Bach, 2017). It is not lecturers in universities but the “research-only” staff in the research institutes that conduct most research activities (Harman & Nguyen, 2010). This is partly because lecturers receive salaries based on the number of teaching hours. A lecturer must perform the certain number of teaching hours assigned; then he or she can receive a pay rise every three years, regardless of how many publications he or she produces (Pho & Tran, 2016).

According to the regulations of the Ministry of Science and Technology [MOST] and the Ministry of Home Affairs [MOHA], as presented in the Joint Circular No: 24/2014/TTLT-BKHCHN-BNV, researcher is a professional title in academic organizations like universities with a stated mandate to carry out scientific research for their institution (Ministry of Science and Technology [MOST] and Ministry of Home Affairs [MOHA], 2014). In addition to the requirements of linguistic and ICT competences as well as professional qualities, researchers must have at least a university degree relevant to the field of study. Researchers are required to perform research-related tasks other than administrative work such as writing research proposals and conducting research with individuals and units within and outside their organizations. Vietnamese universities have different regulations on the duties of researchers to both ensure

compliance with the provisions of the Joint Circular No: 24/2014/TTLT-BKHHCN-BNV and meet their specific characteristics. For example, there are universities that only require researchers to conduct research without teaching, such as Vietnam National University – Hanoi (Vietnam National University, Hanoi, 2017). There are also higher education institutions, such as the University of Technology – a member of Vietnam National University – Ho Chi Minh City, which require lecturers to participate in teaching, in addition to research as their main tasks (Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology, 2014). In this research, “pure” researchers are “research-only” staff, who only work on research without any teaching obligation.

Although many documents and policies of the Vietnamese government, as well as the development strategies of universities in this country, state the important role of research, no empirical research focuses on examining the work of university researchers and the factors influencing their work, especially that of “pure” researchers. Instead, most studies explore university research policies and their implementation (Nguyen, 2014, 2016; Pham, 2013). Other studies largely investigate publication-related matters, such as barriers, motivations, affiliation organizations and research fields (Nguyen et al., 2017; Pham & Hayden, 2019; Trung et al., 2020). Harman and Nguyen (2010) provide more information on research institutes inside and outside of universities, as well as different types of researchers, but the information is mainly quantitative and in need of updates. Pham (2013) also spares small space in her research to shed light on matters about “pure” researchers and research institutes, but the information focuses on aspects of policy and governance and spreads from the national to the institutional level.

For these reasons, the study paid special attention to “pure” researchers at public higher education institutions in Vietnam. In spite of the contributions of these members to university research activities, there have been a few studies, especially empirical ones, which thoroughly examine their working life. Therefore, the underlying objective of this study was to identify what ways and to what extent institutional factors had an impact on “pure” researchers’ attachment to their organization. The research question was built as a guide to the set objective and the main question was “How do the institutional factors make impacts on “pure” researchers’ attachment to their organization?”. To answer this main research question, the study also shed light on what institutional factors are and which factors influenced researchers’ attachment to their workplace.

Research workforces in the Vietnamese context

Since not many research papers focus exclusively on “pure” researchers at universities or research institutes in Vietnam, information about the context of research in Vietnamese universities in this paper related to various objects, including both lecturers and administrative staff who were also involved in the research, and “pure” researchers. In Vietnam, universities and research institutes under the direct governance of ministries work as separate entities, following the Soviet model (Thien, 2020). Harman and Nguyen (2010) estimate that until 2010, research involved about 30,000 staff, including librarians, technicians and support staff. As Nguyen (2020) reveals, among all kinds of organizations involving research, until 2017, the portion of full-time researchers in universities accounted for 25.77%, much smaller than that in the state research institutes, at 49.73%.

In the academic year 2017–2018, among 74,991 academics in all colleges and universities, 20,198 (26.90%) held a doctorate (MOET, 2019). After one year, the rate was 28.79% – certainly an increase in the number of PhD holders in higher education institutions in Vietnam, but very slight. Also, in spite of the growth in the quantity of doctorates, the average proportion of academics with PhD qualifications is still low, from 10% to 25%, except for the two national universities with 40% (Nguyen et al., 2019). Compared to the average percentage of the world and Asian nations, where one-third of researchers have a PhD education, this figure in Vietnam is very humble (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2017). The number of professors and associate professors is also limited. Among 73,321 full-time faculty members in 2018–2019, only 0.70% held the rank of professor, and 5.65% ranked as associate professors (MOET, 2019). The Science and Technology Law of 2013 stipulates the eligibility of researchers who take part in teaching for appointment as associate professors or professors (Le, 2016), but the data on this category has not been released.

Another fact related to PhD holders in Vietnamese higher education institutions is that a number of them rarely have their works published to an international standard (Thien, 2021). In a study on the academic identity of Vietnamese public university faculty members, Le (2016) provided clear information on this issue in the four key universities in Vietnam. The research showed that in general, the interview participants in the fields of natural and applied sciences had formed continuous support for international disciplinary communities. They showed their profound participation with international knowledge networks. To enhance their engagement, they put effort into having works published to an international standard. Participants in the domain of humanities still

desired engagement with global disciplinary communities, but the number of international publications was much fewer, and publishing was still locally focused and sporadic. Academics in the field of applied social sciences, especially teacher education, have the least engagement with the global professional network, even though teacher trainers recognize the need to connect through publishing research in international journals. Nguyen et al. (2020) also reveals similar information regarding the situation of scientific publication in social sciences and humanities in Vietnam. Accordingly, the number of social sciences and humanities academics actively conducting research is limited; the commitment comes from a small pool of individuals.

According to Pham and Hayden (2019), another feature of academic staff in Vietnam is that generally, they do not have much depth of research experience; and as Salmi and Pham (2019) indicate, academics at public higher education institutions connect earnestly with research only to a small extent. Traditionally, as a whole, Vietnamese universities are teaching institutions (Pham & Hayden, 2019). Over the past few decades, the government has undeniably adopted policies to improve the research capacity of universities and academics, especially providing scholarships for lecturers' pursuing doctoral programs in developed countries. However, according to Pham and Hayden (2019), these young returnees are not yet experienced researchers. Additionally, an extensive portion of them are appointed to academic management positions, or academics themselves find that continuing to develop their research capacities in Vietnam is impossible because of limitations in infrastructure as well as financial sources.

Research investment in the Vietnamese higher education

Vietnamese universities receive support for staff development mainly from the government. Through various projects, such as Project 322, Project 911 and Project 89, MOET supports academics pursuing doctoral programs abroad (Nguyen, 2020). Concerning universities, according to a study at the four leading institutions in Vietnam by Nguyen (2016), even though these institutions are interested in improving their academics' formal education, expert advancement courses, which they could provide to help their academic staff develop research skills and ability, are lacking. Other higher education institutions have no official information on this situation, but its existence, if any, would affect the development of academic staff and research.

In Vietnam, full-time academics are paid a fundamental salary, based on the scale that the Ministry of Home Affairs (MOHA) sets (Nguyen, 2016). Compared to other

sectors, the officially reported pay rates in the domain of education and training in Vietnam, for individuals with advanced education degrees, are lower (Harman & Nguyen, 2010). Concerning financial support for PhD students, although tuition fees for PhD programs are generally higher than for bachelor's and master's programs, Vietnam has almost no financial support systems in graduate programs, which can offer PhD students with graduate assistantships, grants, or recognition of their work status like in many countries. Ho Chi Minh City International University – a member of Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City and Ton Duc Thang University are rare instances of institutions which provide scholarships for graduate students, in the form of the reduction of tuition fee (Thien, 2021).

Vietnam's public higher education institutions receive limited government financial investment. For instance, in 2015, the government only allocated 0.33% of GDP to them, 1.1% of total government spending and 6.1% of total government spending on education and training (World Bank, 2020). It is not surprising that this figure puts Vietnam at the bottom in terms of public-funding allocation to tertiary education, compared with regional countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand (World Bank, 2020). Although the government has increased its spending in the science and technology sector (MOST, 2015), finance for university research is still constrained. The percentage for this field constitutes only 2% of the total state budget, and “of the 2% budget allocation for research and development, only three-fifths is actually spent on research. The majority of the research funding is spent on paying salaries for more than 60,000 employees of all state-owned research institutes throughout the country” (Nguyen, 2014, p. 197). Rather than universities, the research institutes belonging to two national research academies, as well as other government institutes, receive most of the funding (Nguyen & Vu, 2015). The priority for funding research institutes separated from universities is one of the legacies of the Soviet period (Pham & Hayden, 2019).

By law, universities in Vietnam can get funding for university research from various sources. For public universities, approximately 2% of the funds from the government are reserved for research activities. Except for teacher training, as well as some other specialized institutions with free tuition, universities can spend tuition fees, approximately 50% of their income, on research. Moreover, the main research activities and commercialization of technical services also bring income to major universities, although the contribution rate is still modest. These universities also get additional income from implementing informal programs (Le & Hayden, 2017). Nonetheless, as the

most important provider of education as a whole, the state still plays the main role in financing research in universities, (London, 2010; Salmi & Pham, 2019, Thien, 2021).

The mechanism for allocating funding for university research and innovation in Vietnam is complex and bureaucratic, involving various ministries, including MOST, the Ministry of Planning and Investment, the Ministry of Finance, MOET and MOHA, not to mention the involvement of provincial and municipal governments (Thien, 2021). The lack of a central agency responsible for allocating funding for university research and the distribution of funding to various organizations reflects the fact that “accountability processes for the expenditure of the national science and technology budget on national priorities are weak” (Pham, 2013, p. 143).

Another point worth referencing is that although there is not any data on patterns of expenditure by MOST officially published, it is believed that natural and applied sciences have received more investment than other domains. This can also be seen in part through the fact that the National Fund for Science and Technology Development (NAFOSTED), a research funding agency run under the management of MOST, requires that the funding proposers must have a prior track record of published research in international peer-reviewed journals. This is clearly a disadvantage for research in the fields of social sciences and humanities, and is probably why there were only about 110 proposals in social sciences and humanities submitted with 50 funded, while the number of proposals in the natural sciences and engineering domain was about 600 with 350 funded in 2017 (NAFOSTED, 2020; Pham & Hayden, 2019).

Theoretical background

Among various theories, theories of institutions are useful for examining individuals’ and organizations’ actions in an institutional environment (Dacin et al., 2002), including those in the context of higher education (Cai & Johannes, 2015). Scott (2014) suggests that institutions is made up of regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive pillars, all of which form or support institutions. Regarding the three pillars of institutions, the regulatory process involves rules and regulations of an organization, as well as mechanisms for others’ conformity and nonconformity. The normative pillar refers to values and norms guiding how to perceive, evaluate and perform appropriately. Theorists focusing on examining the normative systems also highlight “the stabilizing influence of social beliefs and norms that are both internalized and imposed by others” (Scott, 2014, p. 66). The

cultural-cognitive pillar is “the shared conceptions that constitute the nature of social reality and the frames through which meaning is made” (Scott, 2014, p. 67).

Using institutional theories, this study examined the work of researchers at a research institution under the governance of a university, through these three pillars. Specifically, the study explored the regulations, rules and policies available to researchers (the regulative pillar), the expectations of them at work (the normative pillar) and researchers’ perceptions of their work (the cultural-cognitive pillar). Based on researchers’ work-related information, this study considers which factors in these pillars affected researchers’ attachment to the organization.

Institutional theories focused on organizational factors, not referring to the relationship between the organization and the technical/resource environment or the role of geographical distance (Cai & Johannes, 2015). Therefore, information on researchers’ work in the organization and factors influencing their engagement in the organization that this research provided are only part of a broader real-world picture.

Research methodology

The study used interviews to discover participants’ opinions about institutional factors related to researchers and which ones influenced researchers’ attachment to their workplace. This approach was appropriate for revealing complex matters, such as cultural factors, which Schein (1990) regards as always dynamic and abstract, since it helps to acquire a deep understanding of multiple aspects which questionnaires in surveys are likely to fail to cover and disclose. The interviews occurred between August and October 2020, in Vietnamese, each lasting an average of 45 minutes and recorded. Then, the content was typed and sent to the participants. The same process applied to the English version. This procedure increased the reliability and validity of collected data (Creswell & Miller, 2000), by helping to reduce the possibility of the researcher misrepresenting or misinterpreting the interview information. Some researchers, such as Lincoln and Guba (1985) many decades ago, even considered member-checking, to ensure the collection of reliable and valid data, the most important part of qualitative research.

Two groups of interviewees were selected for the interview, including present researchers and “past” researchers, who had left the selected organization. The subject institute, called Institute A, has a long history of formation and development since 1975. Institute A’s mission is to “pioneer in the field of research and education technology transfer in all levels of education”. In terms of structure, as Institute A is a department of

the university, the university rector appoints its head. The university is the provider of funding for the Institute, in addition to the Institute's own funding from the activities that the university allows, such as organizing short-term courses and cooperatively doing research with partners. Researchers here are "pure" researchers, doing research as their main tasks, with no obligation to participate in teaching at the university.

The inclusion of past and present researchers as two target groups from Institute A helped to comprehensively reflect the impact of the institutional issues and can be a reference source for various stakeholders making policies to create an effective research environment to which employees feel attached. Institute A is a long-standing organization that belongs to one of Vietnam's leading universities. Thus, research activities here will clearly reflect state policies on research activities primarily aimed at key universities, their implementation at the institutional level and each university's development research paths. In addition, according to Institute A's yearly report, researchers gradually left it for other workplaces. Discovering reasons for this phenomenon may provide an appropriate and practical instance of helping units with similar institutional characteristics to retain and develop researchers.

Two out of four researchers currently working at Institute A participated in the interviews. Two researchers were not selected, one because of his relation to this research, and another with different seniority, qualifications and job positions than other researchers. Three out of five researchers who actively quit Institute A during 2017–2020 agreed to participate in this research.

The research also studied documents relevant to the topic, such as state and university policies on research, as well as papers concerning Institute A, such as its yearbooks and annual activity reports. The "voluntary leavers" from 2010 to the present had in common one thing that the study discovered from Institute A reports. The shared reality is that no one continued doing research as their main job, including the three participants. Table 1 summarizes and encodes information about the participants.

Table 1. The main information on the interview participants

The participants	Codes	Qualifications when employed by the Institution	Qualifications at present	Highest degree obtained from	Current position	Duration of working at the Institute	Year of birth
Interviewee 1	Stayer 1	Bachelor of Psychology	Master of Psychology	Vietnam	Researcher	2008–present	1984
Interviewee 2	Stayer 2	Master of Literature	Master of Literature	Vietnam	Researcher	2012–present	1984
Interviewee 3	Leaver 1	Master of Literature	Master of Literature	Vietnam	Administrative	2008–2017	1982
Interviewee 4	Leaver 2	Bachelor of Administrative business	Master of Education	Australia	Lecturer	2006–2019	1984
Interviewee 5	Leaver 3	Bachelor of Physics	Master of Physics	Vietnam	Administrative	2011–2020	1987

Findings

The way to the “red chamber” – Introduced by someone and informed of nothing

All interviewees said that they obtained recruitment information from “someone”, through their relationships. The introducer might have been a current member of Institute A at that time or an outside member affiliated with the Institute. No one personally got information from Institute A’s website or other publicly available recruitment resources. They decided to apply for a job at Institute A with the hope of having a secure job and chances for enhancing their qualifications and degrees. All interviewees thought that the Institute, a public organization within a key university, “seemed” able to help them achieve these goals.

At the time of application, all participants had only a master’s degree as the highest qualification. In addition, they did not know exactly what they would do and what the job requirements were, saying that the “contract was very general” (Stayer 2), “the employment contract of a public agency does not have information on the job description” (Leaver 3), “the tasks are assigned by the direct manager(s)” (Stayer 1).

When I accepted the job, I could not fully imagine the work I had to do because the Institute’s labour contract was of an administrative nature, only including the

salary scale and very administrative information. So at that time, I only knew that at first, I would do research apprenticeship for the researchers in the Institute. (Leaver 2)

This is similar to Pham (2013) revealing that only a few public research institutions develop job descriptions for all positions, including research management. Regarding qualifications of academics, the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2017) indicates the limitations on academic qualifications of the employed person in Vietnam, as noted above. Conducting research in four key universities in Vietnam, Nguyen (2016) also provides similar information that the recruiting criteria of these institutions do not include research accomplishments. This recruiting practice in Vietnam generally opposes the common practices of prestigious research institutions in the world, which use various “research-based” strategies in selecting researchers, such as concentrating on applicants’ documented research ability and requiring a reputation in research (Edgar & Geare, 2013). Pham and Nguyen’s (2020) research also discloses the role of “relationships” in other Vietnamese universities, mentioning its dominant influence in the recruiting process. Due to these relationships, recruiters do not have high requirements for applicant qualifications.

Under one roof – Regulatory systems and their influences

Surprisingly, the participants said that Institute A had almost no specific and clear regulations related to the work of the staff. The main regulations were also in political terms for government employees – in general, avoiding actions and words contrary to the policies of the Communist Party (Leaver 3). The only information directly relevant to the organization’s researchers, not regulatory but a commitment to work without any consequences of noncompliance, was the “commitment to work at least 5 years” (Leaver 2) and to “the number of ‘at-office’ days per week for each researcher – but it is possible to arrange among staff members” (Stayer 1). There were few policies on enhancing the researchers’ competence, except those that “allocated a small amount of tuition fees for getting a higher degree in Vietnam” (Leaver 2).

The Institute has few specific policies for researchers, including professional improvement policies for researchers. (Stayer 2)

Regulations and rules are too general. Nothing special and needed to be noted. (Leaver 1)

Pham (2013) used to mention the lack of regulations and policies concerning researchers as a common practice at most public higher education and research institutions. In theory, strategic planning at the national policy and institutional levels identified research priorities. However, these documents tend to be written to be read, not implemented. Policies to enhance research staff feature no induction programs for newly appointed members of academic staff. Early-career and newly independent researchers have no postdoctoral programs or career-path support. If they exist at all, they are only personal efforts, “without staff development planning at a system level” (Pham, 2013, p. 155). Examining the management of human resources for research in four key Vietnam higher education institutions, Nguyen (2016) also reveals that these organizations have seldom provided expert advancement courses for research staff. In addition, projects such as Project 322 and Project 911, which award scholarships to lecturers participating in doctoral training programs abroad, are only for lecturers.

The reality is that the agency has almost no specific regulations and policies for researchers to develop expertise is believed to have caused the participants to leave the organization. In contrast, the flexibility of working time for researchers is one of their reasons for staying with Institute A.

The reason I left this job partly stems from the underlying fact that I had difficulty developing on my research path. The regulations and professional development policy for the researchers were unclear and I felt confused about the development directions. (Leaver 2)

Currently, the regulation is a bit “loose”, so I have time to do my own projects or work. In addition to securing a permanent job, I have more time to be able to do other jobs to increase my income. . . . For me, I have not gone yet because I am determining my career direction for the future and am currently meeting current job requirements. In the case there are strict regulations, then I may think again. (Stayer 1)

I have a slightly different personal situation from everyone else, so I need time for my private life, so I can pay attention to my daughter as a single mom, so I stay . . . I have no intention of leaving, but I have no enthusiasm to stick to the organization. (Stayer 2)

Besides the lack of effective professional development policies, for researchers from the state in general and Institute A in particular, financial matters also affect the commitment of researchers – “low salary, not enough to live” (Leaver 1). Nguyen (2016)

and Harman and Nguyen (2010) demonstrate the issue of staff members' modest salary in higher education institutions. Thien (2021) also says that the basic salary of researchers is very modest. This is because public university staff are also government employees whose salary is paid according to the pay scale that MOHA imposes (Ha-Anh, 2019; Nguyen, 2006). The World Bank (2020) also points out that the majority of graduate programs in Vietnam do not have financial support for learners. This general fact, together with the lack of specific policies from the agency itself, has caused the respondents to leave or lack attachment to the Institute. As some shared, "those who stay here need the brand name of the Institute to go out to work" (Stayer 2). "I am a woman, so I want to have a secure job. The salary in my current organization is reasonable to me", (Leaver 3) and "the wage in my current workplace is liveable enough" (Leaver 1).

You are allocated a small amount of tuition fees for getting a higher degree in Vietnam, but it helps almost nothing. The income of researchers is very limited, and now they have to spend money on the rest of the tuition fees improving their qualifications. (Leaver 2)

I left the organization partly because the financial source for researchers was not enough. Researchers had to do many other things to have more money such as selling research products. Compared to institutes of applied sciences and technology, this is very thorny for an educational institute. (Leaver 3)

Normative systems and their influences

The participants shared that expectations of them may depend on leaders in different periods. Even participants with the same job position in the same period may not have the same understanding of these expectations. Besides, most participants were not really certain that what they thought were exactly what their leaders expected of them, especially Stayer 1, who said, "I have not known what I am expected", and Stayer 2, who said, "I really wonder. I think each leader has his/her own strategies, but I am not clear".

It probably depends on who the direct manager is. I did not know how I was expected, but for example, when assigned a task with a deadline, I always tried to complete it before that deadline with the best effort in my ability. (Leaver 2)

The expectations that the "past" researchers thought they needed to meet contributed to their quitting Institute A because these expectations were thought to be beyond the capacity of the participants and exhausted them in the long run (Leaver 1, Leaver 3). Besides, expectations were not accompanied by policies to help employees

fulfill these beliefs (Leaver 2). The ambiguity of these expectations did not cause the present researchers to leave their current organization, but neither does it create their attachment to it. In fact, they lack confidence in performing assigned tasks due to their unawareness of expectations for them.

The expectations from leaders also contributed to my leaving the organization. Basically, my manager at the same time only set expectations for people in the organization but did not have a development direction and professional enhancement policies for researchers in the long term. (Leaver 2)

Cultural-cognitive systems and their influences

All participants believed that research-related tasks were of the utmost importance in their organization, as its mission affirmed. However, the majority did not and do not take them as the first priority in their daily work. The regular work that a researcher must prioritize involves implementing various training programs and administrative tasks, such as calculating and reporting research-project-related expenses and organizing workshops.

Currently, my job involves running training courses, preparing contracts and relevant documents for organizing short training courses with partners as a way to widen income sources. Besides, I have to do my research, if any. (Stayer 1)

I organized seminars related to high school education. I also input and coded data for other researchers to have more money. (Leaver 1)

This information is similar to what other researchers disclose. As indicated by Pham (2013), basically, researchers at higher education institutions do what they are required to do, and the implementation of research activities is also considered a way to have income, rather than a way of developing their scholarship by the work of the researchers. In this research, as shared by the interview participants, the situation in which researchers must do multiple tasks to make a living is also related to their salary level, lower than that in many other areas, as mentioned above.

As for the impact of their perception of their work, all participants agreed that it had influenced their organizational commitment. Specifically, the leavers “had” to maintain these work habits because they were their duties, not their strengths or preferences. Repetition made them feel too bored and pressured to continue. The influence also occurred in their feeling that what they were doing did not hold much value, while they had few opportunities to do what they desired and felt important to the Institute’s mission.

Chasing after the coordination work, I forgot my main role, which must be doing research. After self-reflecting, I felt that I had worked for a few years at the Institute, but my real value in contributing to the field of research was almost nonexistent. (Leaver 2)

I think the most important thing is to do scientific research, but my ability did not allow me to reach the level of continuous implementation. At a point when I felt saturated, I could not think of new things, I felt bored and did not want to continue, but the external factors forced me to continue. That was also the reason why I wanted to stop. (Leaver 3)

That some researchers have decided to still stay with the organization does not mean that they find the jobs they are currently undertaking have close connections with the main functions and mission of the Institute. In contrast, these individuals still consider themselves to be doing “miscellaneous” jobs, which do not serve the Institute’s mission, rather than research-related work. Although having such perception of their work, they are still with the organization as they think the jobs are not too overwhelming or they are waiting for a new direction from the leaders of the university and Institute A. Stayer 2 also talked about the possibility of leaving when not as many changes occur as expected; “all are waiting for new decisions of the university . . . Then, each individual will decide to stick or have a different route”.

Towards concluding – Disconnected from... and expecting for...

The findings revealed one astonishing feature, namely, that the participants in this research worked or are working at an organization which has almost no specific regulations for researcher jobs, except for general terms in employment contracts, such as salary ratio, job position and the responsibility to meet very general requirements at the organization, most related to political matters and without terms for disconformity. Concrete regulations and effective policies regarding researchers are lacking. Moreover, normative aspects expressed in terms of expectations for researchers, are also not clearly perceived and individually dependent. Besides the research tasks, the findings show that a researcher must take on many different other responsibilities that appear unimportant to the organization’s mission, obligatory, monotonous or outside of their ability. The lack of important regulatory elements in the institutional life of Institute A, though surprising for a public agency, may commonly occur in university-affiliated research institutes, as Pham (2013) indicates. In most Vietnamese universities, teaching is the main work and

duty of all academics, while research is secondary. Due to this imbalance, procedures exist for managing lecturers but not for researchers. This results in the situation in which “there is neither a specific procedure for appointing and managing research staff members, nor are there any relevant statements of performance expectations, responsibilities and accountabilities for researchers” (Pham, 2013, p. 156). Scott (2014) mentions the power of the institutional pillars, indicating that in some cases, it is probable that one or two institutional pillars “will operate virtually alone in supporting the social order” (p. 71). In this case, the regulative pillar is very weak, and its existence is almost invisible when it comes to regulations and policies on work tasks and competency development for researchers. Scott (2014) also affirms that when the three pillars of institutions coordinate with each other, they produce enormous strength. This reality does not appear in this case study, not only because of the weakness of the regulative pillar, which, in some regards, is almost non-existent but also due to the fact that the normative pillar is not strong, as many have been unsure of what has been expected of them.

All three pillars in the institutional life of the organization have made impacts on the participants’ attachment. The reality that the agency has almost no specific regulations and policies for researchers to develop expertise is believed to have caused the participants to leave the organization. Financial aspects also had an impact on the commitment of researchers. Some researchers left the Institute because they thought the expectations were beyond their capacity and exhausted them in the long run. Besides, expectations, as believed by the participants, were not accompanied by policies to help researchers fulfill their beliefs. Some leavers “had” to maintain these work habits because they were their duties, not their strengths or preferences. Also, repetition made some feel too bored and pressured to continue. Some also quit their job because of the belief what they were doing added little value to the Institute’s mission. There are some reasons which make some researchers stay with the Institute A such as the flexibility of working time for researchers and the thought that the jobs are not too overwhelming. However, the current staff are working with lack confidence in performing assigned tasks due to their feeling unsure of expectations for them. Some are also waiting for changes to decide whether they will leave or not. A common feature of those who chose to become “leavers”, both the interviewees and other leavers from the organization since 2010, is that they not only left the Institute but also disconnected themselves from the research profession. Those who stay, or just have not left yet, do not show attachment to the organization.

Through the participants' sharing, the effects of institutional pillars are not individual but, to some extent, interconnected. The lack of requirements for researchers' work, such as tasks, responsibilities and rights, leads to their feelings of uncertainty about what is expected and their doing various tasks irrelevant or unessential to the Institute's mission as required by their leaders. Additionally, the fact that the researchers quit their job or have no attachment to the present organization stems from not only the contents of these institutional pillars but also contradictions among them or related to them. The main mission of the Institute is research, but the participants have realized that researchers do much non-research work, irrelevant to the Institute's mission. The Institute has various expectations of its researchers but operates no policies to support employees in realizing them. The relevant contradiction also arises with the researchers' reflection on their own interest and strength, as well as their tasks. All participants perceive the importance of conducting research, yet they have prioritized the implementation of things that some leaders in the Institute need, something mandatory, out of their desire and/or ability, and/or irrelevant to the Institute's mission.

Obviously, the improvement in research is an integral part of strategies to modernize and industrialize Vietnam, and higher education institutions must put more effort into developing the domain of research with appropriate attention to staff. Creating an effective research environment for Institute A requires changes, and the interviewees, the "stayers", also expect these adjustments to determine their future paths. Other higher education institutions also require this change, if the common situations there are no different from this case.

As for Institute A, the alteration, first and foremost, must be specific work regulations for researchers and appropriate policies to develop research staff from the national to the institutional level, since these elements are lacking at all levels. MOST and MOHA have issued the Joint Circular No: 24/2014/TTLT-BKHHCN-BNV, "Regulations on codes and standards for professional titles of public officers specialized in science and technology". This dispatch sets out the standards for individuals who want to become senior researchers (first-ranked), second-ranked researchers, third-ranked researchers or research assistants. However, the main use of this document is to consider the promotion of the current researchers' titles, not to guide the professional improvement of a researcher. (MOST & MOHA, 2014). Hence, changes, first, must be made from the national level. Current policies prove to be biased against "pure" researchers in comparison with university lecturers since Vietnamese government scholarship programs

funding studying abroad are only for teaching staff and even researchers must take part in teaching to be eligible for appointment as associate professors or professors (Le, 2016). As for Institute A itself, there should be concretization of the regulations on researchers' tasks, such as describing on what the researcher should research and for how long. Moreover, to prepare for new research workforces, the regulations, expectations and necessary tasks of researchers must be clearly communicated to help select suitable candidates during the recruitment process. Also, expertise instead of "relationship" must be taken into consideration, as some interviewees show interest and strength inconsistent with the profession. Recruitment sites and employment contracts should disclose such job-related and candidate-related information. Having a channel to gather researchers' opinions of their work life for effective and timely supportive solutions should be in place as well. Salaries for researchers, an age-old issue in discussions about higher education in Vietnam, also must be considered.

The participants' stories recall a novel by a Chinese writer, Cao Xueqin, *The Dream of the Red Chamber* or *Hong lou meng*, not only famous in China but also widely known in many other Asian countries, including Vietnam. The story revolves around a family gathering of many different individuals, all going through glory and then decline, due to the impact of the society and the family itself, witnessing the departure of many people from this once proper chamber. In this research, Institute A seems like that; from an organization with a long history and abundant manpower, there are now only a few researchers. Those who left were directly disconnected from the research profession, those who stay also expect changes that will decide whether to continue with the agency. In following the policy of the state in promoting research in universities, attracting, retaining and developing research-capable individuals in universities is an indispensable part. Otherwise, expectations for universities in Vietnam with strong research will be like "the dream of the red chamber"—just a nice dream!

"You're under the delusion of a dream

Rub your eyes and look carefully! It's your reflection in the mirror"

(July, 1893)

Limitations

A single case study was used in this research to make it possible for the examination of complicated subject matters as institutional matters as well as staff's retention and turnover. Nonetheless, the use and interpretation of the results from this research must

take limitations of the case study approach into account, one of which was that the research findings could not be used for generalization despite the fact that the case study could present “a snapshot of a slice of life” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p.139). However, such generalizability was not the aim of this study, but it hoped to gain a clear understanding of the research phenomenon in which aspects related to the study could be transferred to other suitable settings (Steven, 2015). Besides, in reality, it is nearly impossible to generalize research results from a case of a university due to the fact that higher education institutions are not comparable entities but “small worlds” which are internally distinct (Clark, 1987).

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