



**Beyond Borders – Within Vietnam:  
A Mixed-Method Study of Student Agency and  
Intranational Migration in Private Higher Education**

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MSc in Education (Higher Education), 2024

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## List of Abbreviations

ANOVA	Analysis of Variance
ATPA-22	Assessment Tool for Perceived Agency-22
CUREC	Central University Research Ethics Committee
DV	Dependent Variable
FUV	Fulbright University Vietnam
HCMC	Ho Chi Minh City
HE	Higher Education
IV	Independent Variables
MS	Migration Status
SES	Socio-Economic Status

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## Abstract

This explanatory sequential mixed-methods study investigated the manners in which Vietnamese undergraduate students at Fulbright University Vietnam (FUV), the nation's first American-style liberal arts institution, perceive their agentic powers and reflect on their self-development processes. The research elucidated how the demographic factors of migration status (MS) and socioeconomic status (SES) interact with FUV's American-style institutional structures to influence students' perceived agency and overall undergraduate experiences. Specifically, the study compared the experiences of local students with those of intranational migrants, as well as contrasted the perceptions and experiences of higher SES students against those of lower SES students.

Quantitative data collected from 52 actively enrolled senior and junior students ( $N = 52$ ), using the Assessment Tool for Perceived Agency (ATPA-22), demonstrated that intranational migrants reported significantly higher perceived agency than local students. Moreover, the quantitative findings indicated no statistical significance regarding the main effect of SES or the interactive effect of SES and MS on perceived agency. The ensued qualitative interviews with eight previous ATPA-22 survey respondents ( $n = 8$ ) further explored these results, revealing the complex interplay of cultural adaptation, financial pressures, institutional enables and constraints, employability-related anxieties and motivations as well as spirituality in shaping student agency.

Ultimately, the research underscores the broader implications of these findings for shaping practices and developing programmes in HE institutions within the gradually privatising and internationalising Vietnamese HE landscape. In particular, the study advocates for a holistic approach to student support that recognises and addresses the unique barriers faced by diverse student populations, fostering a more inclusive and equitable HE environment. This approach is crucial for HE institutions like FUV to enhance their student support strategies, and for Vietnam to maximise the potential of its private HE sector during this period of rapid transformation, ensuring that every student can thrive in a globalised academic and professional landscape within their homeland. The results also carry broader implications for HE institutions with diverse student bodies across the world.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

Higher education (HE) institutions play a crucial role in societal development across the world, from preserving traditions to fostering innovation, and from promoting individual growth to contributing to community construction. As the globalisation-driven forces of neoliberalism prevail, the popular opinions on the aims of HE often centre on its economic roles, where universities are often expected to produce employable graduates who can adapt to ever-changing market demands (del Cerro Santamaría, 2019). That said, within the academic discourse, the purposes of HE remain a highly contentious topic, where views on HE institutions' purposes have ranged from developing critical thinkers to providing vocational trainings (Agalday, 2022; Barnett, 1988; Chan et al., 2014).

Among these discussions, HE's role in student development has recently gained more traction, where students' self-formation is observed to be "a condition of [HE], its central process and its most important outcome" (Marginson, 2023, p. 63). As a matter of fact, it has been increasingly recognised that HE institutions should focus on fostering holistic student development and empowering their agency. On this note, student agency has been concurrently defined by multiple authors as the capacity of students to act independently and make active choices about their academic trajectories (Biesta & Tedder, 2006; Klemenčič, 2015). This active participation in HE has been found to enable students to develop a sense of ownership, purpose, and critical thinking skills that extend beyond the classroom (Bullen, 1998; Veugeliers, 2009). By delving into the lived experiences of various groups of students within each national system and examining how HE institutions can best support and cultivate student agency, valuable insights into the evolving nature of HE and its impact on individual lives and societal transformations can arise (Stenalt & Lassesen, 2022).

Given the emphasis on student agency within HE and the current trends of globalisation, it is crucial to examine student agency in the context of a national system navigating the changes induced by both internal factors and neoliberalism. Vietnam's HE system, shaped by unique social, historical, and economic backgrounds, exemplifies this dynamic.

## 1.1. Contextualising Vietnam's Privatising and Internationalising HE Scene

Substantial socio-economic transformations have been taking place in the post-war Vietnam, particularly in the realm of HE. After enduring consecutive wars and attempted cultural genocides, Vietnam has been adapting to the global context while balancing significant national development goals. As a result, the *Đổi Mới* (Renovation) Reforms, launched by the government in 1986, were designed to rejuvenate the economy by reducing state intervention, encouraging market investment, and enhancing opportunities for trade liberalisation and foreign investment (Bui & Nguyen, 2016). These reforms also instigated major transformations within the Vietnam's HE landscape, leading to massification and marketisation, thereby increasing the prominence of private and international HE institutions (Le, 2016; Phan & Doan, 2020).

Vietnam's private HE sectors emerged cautiously in 1993 and did not officially welcome foreign investment until 2000 (Nguyen & Vu, 2015). However, by 2005, recognising the crucial role of private HE in addressing rising enrolment demands due to massification, the government set ambitious expansion targets (Hayden & Dao, 2009). Resolution 14 issued in the same year stipulated that private HE institutions should account for 45% of all enrolments by 2020 (Hayden & Le-Nguyen, 2020). This policy shift, resulting from the nation-wide transition from a centrally planned to a socialist-oriented market economy, led to a temporary surge in demand for private HE and catalysed substantial governmental investment in this sector (Chau et al., 2022; Hayden & Le-Nguyen, 2020).

Embracing privatisation, Vietnam's HE landscape has also witnessed a marked transition towards internationalisation, incorporating international branch campuses and twinning programmes into the landscape (Tran & Marginson, 2018). This strategic approach, endorsed by the government, has aimed to elevate HE standards and contribute to national advancement. That said, the path to privatisation and internationalisation has not been without challenges. The process has been characterised by disjointed and inconsistent activities (Hoang et al., 2018; Ryu & Nguyen, 2021). Difficulties in governmental cooperation, talent retention, and financial constraints further complicate internationalisation efforts (Tran, 2014). Moreover, regulatory restrictions and top-down perception

of international HE as quick-fixes to persisting public sector's problems rather than sustainable solutions hinder the full integration of international standards and practices (Nguyen & Tran, 2019).

Despite these hurdles, HE privatisation and internationalisation have opened new avenues. They are perceived as vital instruments for enhancing the overall HE system and fostering international cooperation and integration (Cheng, 2018). Local universities can collaborate with foreign partners, equipping students with international and cross-cultural perspectives, leading to curriculum enhancement, increased student cohort quality and diversity, raised prestige for local institutions, and additional income (Tran, 2014).

Nevertheless, the ambitious target of 45% private HE enrolment was never realised, with recent figures barely reaching 15%, as public universities still reign supreme (MOET, 2022). Despite this, private and international HE institutions are gradually gaining prominence due to their responsiveness to market needs and the provision of more profitable courses compared to public universities (Chau, 2020; Goyette, 2012).

Seeing these extensive socio-economic changes and the ongoing shifts within HE sectors, a focus towards researching private and international HE institutions in Vietnam has become increasingly important. These institutions, gradually gaining prominence, play a crucial role in addressing the growing demand for HE and fostering global collaborations between Vietnam and the world. Investigating these institutions and their students will thus provide valuable insights into their contributions to HE student development, the overall HE landscape, and potentially the nation's socio-economic development.

## **1.2. Intranational Migration for HE in Vietnam**

Globalisation and the 1986 Renovation Reforms have not only transformed Vietnam's HE landscape but have also significantly accelerated intranational migration within the country (Nguyen et al., 2023). This phenomenon is particularly significant as intranational migrants, often driven by the

pursuit of better educational and economic opportunities (Nguyen et al., 2021), are key contributors to societal progress and economic development.

Globally, it is recognised that millions of young individuals make the decision to migrate, either internationally or domestically, for HE every year (Zhao & Hu, 2019). This decision is widely recognised to align with personal growth and the anticipation of improved graduate employability or better economic outcomes. In Vietnam, a UNESCO (2018) report substantiated the rising trend of intranational migration, highlighting that nearly 14% of the population were intranational migrants, with 85% aged between 15 and 39. Notably, 23.4% cited education, often HE, as their primary motivation for relocating, making it the third most common reason after employment and family reunification. This underscores the significance of HE as a catalyst for migration to urban areas.

Researching Vietnam's intranational migration trend, Celi and Sica (2023) further emphasise the role of HE institutions as “both attractors and developers of human capital formation,” acting as a “factor that encourages mobility” (p. 11). Their research identifies Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) and Hanoi as prime destinations for migrants, attributing this to the cities' substantial foreign direct investment since Vietnam joined the World Trade Organisation in 2006. This aligns with Nguyen & Kokko's (2023) observations regarding HCMC's appeal to intranational migrants.

All things considered, intranational migration has been increasingly common in Vietnam, and HE is a huge motivator. This phenomenon, though lesser researched, is captured in the phrase ‘lên thành phố học Đại học,’ usually employed in colloquial communications and popular culture.

**Lên thành phố:** In the Vietnamese context, ‘lên thành phố’ (literally translated as ‘move up to the city’) signifies more than a physical relocation; it also embodies upward socio-economic mobility. For many non-urban Vietnamese youth, ‘lên thành phố,’ either to work or to study, is a significant rite of passage towards achieving personal ambitions and fulfilling familial goals, often aimed at escaping poverty. Consequently, this journey frequently entails financial burdens, cultural adjustments, and pressures to succeed. The phrase also evokes nostalgia and

homesickness, as depicted in literature and films. For instance, in the famous movie *Mắt Biếc*, the line “Lên thành phố, không có Ngạn chắc Hà Lan buồn lắm, không biết có dễ làm quen bạn mới không nữa?” (“Moving up to the city, without Ngan, Ha Lan will probably be very sad; I wonder if it will be easy for me to make new friends?”) reflects these sentiments.

**Lên thành phố học Đại học:** Then, ‘lên thành phố học Đại học’ (‘moving up to cities for university’), is a well-recognised trend in Vietnam. ‘Thành phố’ or cities in this case usually refer to HCMC and Hanoi, the two largest urban centres, which are also home to many of the country’s leading universities (Tran, 2006). Conventionally, HCMC draws students from the southern regions, whereas Hanoi attracts those from the north. Although universities in the other three major Vietnamese cities (i.e., Da Nang, Can Tho, and Hai Phong) also attract local students from nearby provinces, the appeal of prestigious HE institutions in HCMC and Hanoi remains strong (Tran, 2006; Tran & Do, 2022). This ‘lên thành phố học Đại học’ migration trend, hence, demonstrates a notable demographic shift with implications for both urban development and the overall HE landscape in Vietnam.

Despite the evident significance of intranational migration for HE in Vietnam as demonstrated in popular culture and day-to-day discussions, research addressing this phenomenon is scarce. While the growth of private HE means its impact on intranational migration will be more and more marked, there remains a lack of studies focused on understanding the experiences and motivations of Vietnamese intranational migrants. This gap in the literature highlights a crucial area for research to explore the complex interplay between HE, intranational migration, and student agency in the Vietnamese context.

### **1.3. Vietnam, the United States, and Fulbright University Vietnam**

All things considered, the examination of Vietnam’s HE and migration trends within the context of globalisation and post-war economic reforms reveals a research gap concerning the relationship between three interconnected dynamics: the rise of private and international HE sectors, intranational

migration, and intertwined with both scenes, socio-economic factors. Undoubtedly, these three dynamics could interact and influence one another. By examining the agency nested in the motivations, challenges, and aspirations of intranational migrants and local students with different socio-economic status (SES) who opt for a private and international HE institution, this study seeks to address the identified gap. It is, hence, essential to select a research site where these elements are distinctly manifest. Fulbright University Vietnam (FUV), an international HE institution in HCMC, exemplifies this description.

Officially co-signed into existence by Vietnamese and American officials in 2016, FUV is Vietnam's first and by far only independent, non-profit, American-style liberal arts university (FUV Website, n.d.). Its predecessor, the Fulbright Economics Teaching Programme, was founded in 1994, just a year before the normalisation of diplomatic relations between Vietnam and the United States. This programme was a collaborative effort between the Harvard Kennedy School and the University of Economics HCMC led by American war veterans with the aim of improving strained political relations after the Vietnam War (Harvard Kenney School, 2015). Building on this foundation, FUV has emerged as an inter-governmental HE initiative between the two countries, aimed at further strengthening bilateral diplomacy.

Notably, FUV is neither an international branch of a foreign university nor does it possess a host institution within Vietnam. Rather, it represents a joint endeavour between the Vietnamese and American governments. As a non-profit university, its principal funding is derived from the Trust for University Innovation in Vietnam, an independent American non-profit organisation, in conjunction with the United States Agency for International Development and various philanthropic entities (Harvard Kenney School, 2015).

Presently, FUV is at the intersection of Vietnam's reform initiatives amidst globalisation and has emerged as a significant driver of intranational migration. Unlike the conventional pattern of Southern universities attracting primarily Southern students (Tran & Do, 2022), more than 70% of FUV's undergraduate student population consists of intranational migrants who relocated to HCMC

from different regions across the country, from the Northernmost mountainous areas to the Southernmost Mekong Delta coastal town (Fulbright Admissions Booklet, 2023)

The student body is diverse not only in terms of migration status (MS) but also in SES. With a tuition fee of 467,600,000 VND, or nearly 20,000 USD per year, FUV is the second most expensive HE institution in the country (Thanh Nien Newspaper, 2021). To mitigate this cost, FUV offers substantial need-based financial aid each year. Specifically, more than two-thirds of currently enrolled students receive need-based financial aid, with packages ranging from 10% to 100% (Fulbright Admissions Booklet, 2023). The remaining students, less than one-third, pay the full fee. These statistics indicate that students at FUV come from families with a wide range of SES.

Overall, the unique private and international nature of FUV, characterised by the American liberal arts orientation, may present unique challenges and opportunities for its diverse student body. These structural constraints and enablers, coupled with students' MS and SES, may significantly influence student agency. Therefore, FUV represents an ideal research site within the current context of the Vietnam's HE landscape to understand how the three identified dynamics of MS, SES, and private and international HE structures may interact and affect students' self-developments.

#### **1.4. Research Aim**

To summarise, this research aims to investigate student agency within FUV – Vietnam's first and only American-style university - with considerations for students' MS and SES. Specifically, the researcher will investigate how FUV's undergraduate students assess and reflect on their own agentic powers and the contributing factors, comparing the perceptions and experiences between local students and intranational migrants from different socio-economic backgrounds (higher and lower ends). The study also aims to examine whether the students' MS and SES, as well as FUV's unique American-style liberal arts structures, exert individual or interactive influences on the observed similarities or differences among the perceived agency of the different student groups in question.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

Research on HE student agency in Vietnam, particularly within the private or international HE sector, is notably limited, with relevant research usually focusing more on student development or decisions. Moreover, studies on intranational migration for HE in Vietnam are scarce compared to research on Vietnamese students' outward mobility for HE. Seeing this, this literature review will draw upon a broader spectrum of existing research on international mobility and from HE systems across the world to make connections and bridge gaps towards a more comprehensive understanding of the research topics in question, especially for intranational migration, and the implications at hand for Vietnam.

### 2.1. Rising Significance and Conceptualisation of Student Agency

Primarily, the importance of researching student agency and the researcher's conceptualisation of this concept based on past literature will be outlined, as it has been observed that many studies in the discourse often mentioned agency without providing a clear conceptual definition as a guiding start (Inouye et al., 2023).

#### 2.1.1. Rising Significance of Researching Student Agency in HE

In the global discourse of HE studies, student agency has gradually garnered significant attention. This increased focus is justified as agency has been found to shape students' decision-making processes, thus gradually extending the impact from an individual level to also include local communities and broader society (Biesta & Tedder, 2006; Klemenčič, 2015).

Globally, the academic discourse on student agency in HE is expanding. Stenalt and Lassen's (2022) systematic review of 42 articles from 1980 to 2021 highlight student agency as a recurring theme in HE studies on assessment, feedback, globalisation, knowledge production, and practical learning experiences. Similarly, Castro and Pineda-Báez's (2023) bibliometric analysis of 224 articles on student agency in HE published between 2000 and 2022 show a significant increase in research since 2017, particularly in the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom. Focusing more on international HE, Inouye et al.'s (2023) examination of 51 articles published between 2000 and 2020

draws the conclusions that interest in researching agency of international students (i.e., students who cross national borders for HE) has steadily increased since 2011 and peaked in 2020. All three bibliometric reviews, despite different categorisations and approaches, converge towards the shared notion that student agency has indeed become a more frequently researched topic in HE studies. They also observe that enhanced student agency is dynamically linked to other aspects such as demographics and institutional structures to result in more personalised HE experiences and outcomes for individual students. All three reviews, hence, call for further research in diverse contexts to fully grasp the implications of student agency in HE.

### **2.1.2. Conceptualisation of Student Agency in this Dissertation**

With the explosive interest on this topic in recent global research, student agency has consequently been inconsistently defined according to the different positionings it assumed in HE studies literature (Castro & Pineda-Báez, 2023; Inouye et al., 2023; Stenalt & Lassesen, 2022). Aligning with the common notions of previous research that has treated student agency as a research object or the explicit focus, this dissertation is interested in “the varying extent and manifestation of [student agency] in adapting to new environments,” and seeks to investigate “students’ intentional action on/interaction with structure in HE” (Inouye et al., 2023, p. 901).

Coupled with the research aim of viewing student agency in its interplay with the students’ MS, SES and the institution’s private and international structures, this study conceptualises student agency as the dynamic capacity of students to actively navigate and shape their educational journey, which is influenced by both their individual demographics and the structural HE contexts that they immerse in. Central to this conceptualisation is the recognition of the interplay between agency and structure, the functions of self-reflection and behavioural regulation, the mediating role of sociocultural factors and the potential environmental transformation besides personal development (Inouye et al., 2023).

## 2.2. Interplay between MS and Student Agency in HE

### 2.2.1. Global Perspectives

Within the global discourse on HE, student mobility—both international and intranational—has become a critical area of study (Findlay et al., 2012). With substantial attention devoted to international student mobility and the pursuit of cross-cultural experiences, recent research underscores the importance and impact of student agency in these mobility experiences (Inouye et al., 2023). Specifically, it has been found that the decision to move across borders for HE usually agentically stems from the students themselves as students perceived the migration to be helpful for their current and future self-developments (Tran & Vu, 2018). Moreover, the agentic power of these mobile students has also been observed to not only enhance their individual formations through context-induced adjustments but also helped to counter certain culture-related stereotypes and deficit perspectives (Oldac, 2023), which has contributed to a more equitable international HE scene.

Compared to the extensive research on international student mobility, intranational migration for HE remains lesser examined. Nevertheless, this phenomenon has been found to be a crucial aspect of many national systems, driven by regional disparities in educational opportunities and economic conditions (Chen et al., 2018). Therefore, understanding intranational migration is essential for comprehending the national HE landscape. Overall, studies on this topic usually focus on challenges faced by intranational migrants, suggesting that relocation often leads to significant changes in identity and self-perception for these students. These challenges can result in feelings of identity loss and a diminished sense of agency (Stevens, 2005; O'Shea et al., 2019; Haines, 2013; Morton, 2019). Furthermore, intranational migrants may experience discomfort, alienation, isolation, and discrimination due to disconnection from familiar surroundings, difficulties in forming new social connections, cultural differences, and socio-economic disadvantages (Haines, 2013; Prazeres, 2013).

Despite these challenges, intranational migration can also enhance agency for participating students as exposure to diverse environments and challenges can broaden these students' perspectives

and improve their ability to navigate various cultural and social situations (Haines, 2013). In addition, the move can stimulate self-discovery and redefine the concept of 'home,' aiding in better self-understanding (Prazeres, 2013).

All things considered, both international migration and intranational migration present adaptation-required situations that can result in both substantial challenges and major growth opportunities for participating students. Drawing parallels from the more-researched outward mobility discourse can thus provide valuable insights into intranational migration patterns. This is especially important when the distinction between international and intranational migration has gradually blurred, with students often undertaking multiple fragmented journeys in their HE trajectories due to geopolitical changes and shifting borders (King & Skeldon, 2010).

Finally, it is worth noting that comparative research on the agency of local students and intranational migrant students is limited to non-existent, with the few available studies often exclusively focusing on intranational migrants. This once again highlights a marked gap in the current academic landscapes. As a matter of fact, comparative analyses between local and intranational migrant students can elucidate common challenges and unique experiences faced by the respective groups, further enriching the understanding of how different MS impact student agency and educational outcomes.

### **2.2.2. The Vietnamese Context**

Recent studies have begun to illuminate the experiences of intranational migrants within Vietnamese HE, especially on the challenges that these students face. Notably, students from rural or non-urban backgrounds who relocate to urban centres for higher education frequently grapple with acclimating to unfamiliar cultural and social contexts, navigating socio-economic disparities, and accessing essential support networks (Lo, 2022; Pham et al., 2018). Specifically, it has been found that rural-to-urban migrants reported experiencing difficult relationships with teachers and peers due to regional prejudices (Lo, 2022). In addition, Pham et al. (2018) reveal that such barriers to assimilation, coupled

with financial hardships and gender-specific stigmatisation, often leads to these students suffering from physical and mental health strains. It is worth noting that these are the only two most notable papers on intranational migrants for HE in Vietnam.

## **2.3. Interplay between SES and Student Agency in HE**

### **2.3.1. Global Perspectives**

Contrary to the lack of research on intranational migration, the impact of SES on student agency has drawn great attention of researchers the world over. Notably, literature converges to suggest that SES significantly impacts student agency. Primarily, research indicates that students from higher SES backgrounds typically exhibit greater agency due to better access to information, resources, diverse social networks, and higher self-efficacy (Griffiths, 2006; Jurecska et al., 2012). These students benefit from superior high school education, higher family income, and greater parental educational attainment, leading to better academic achievements and university admissions (Munir et al., 2023; Sakiz et al., 2021).

In contrast, lower SES students face barriers such as financial constraints, limited social capital, and lower family expectations (Kloosterman et al., 2011; Reay et al., 2005). These challenges could be heavily worsened with their high school education quality, family income, and parental education level, all of which were crucial for academic success and university admission. In terms of HE immersion, they may struggle with institutional integration, interpersonal relationships, and individual identity (Thiele et al., 2017; Wei et al., 2019). Furthermore, financial difficulties could lead to lower enrolment and graduation rates (Declercq et al., 2021). Despite these obstacles, many lower SES students demonstrate resilience and achieve high academic results, with aspirations comparable to or exceeding those of their wealthier peers (Li et al., 2015; McKay & Devlin, 2016; Yan & Gai, 2022). These substantial studies in the global discourse have provided a solid foundation for understanding the dynamics of SES and HE student agency.

### **2.3.2. The Vietnamese Context**

Transitioning to the Vietnamese context, the dynamic between SES and student agency in HE is particularly worth investigating due to the nation's rapid economic development following the Renovations Reforms and the potential ensued social inequalities. Notable, HE studies' researchers in Vietnam have recently paid more attention to this topic but nowhere near extent of the global discourse. Recently, Duong et al. (2023) find that in choosing which institutions to attend, students originating from lower SES backgrounds often struggle with financial constraints and diminished expectations from their families regarding the pursuit of HE. Nevertheless, these students exhibit remarkable resilience and resourcefulness in surmounting obstacles, a phenomenon also observed in the global discourse. Specifically, lower SES Vietnamese HE students adopt the mindset that HE was the only way for upward mobility; hence, they are inclined to try harder than their middle-income peers (Duong et al., 2023). Another earlier study led by the same first author (Duong et al., 2019) discovers that inequalities in SES, along with gender stereotypes and poorly structured university experiences, could negatively influence leadership efficacy among Vietnamese HE students from more underprivileged backgrounds, especially female students. These findings further underscore the complexity and dynamism of student agency in Vietnam, which could be influenced by an array of factors beyond SES, including personal values, aspirations, and social networks.

### **2.4. Interplay between Private and International Institutional Structures and Student Agency in HE**

Institutional structures in HE, encompassing policies, practices, norms and services, profoundly shape the educational environment and influence student agency through either enablements or constraints (Archer, 1999; Dornbusch et al., 1996; Klemenčič, 2015). For instance, policies that promote student participation in decision-making and pedagogical approaches encouraging critical thinking can enhance student agency, while rigid curricula and hierarchical power dynamics may limit it (Freire, 1970; Kezar & Eckel, 2002).

In Global Southern or Eastern countries, private and international HE institutions often emulate Western educational models (Shahjahan & Edwards, 2022), which can significantly differ from the cultural norms and educational traditions of their students. This creates a complex interplay as students navigate tensions between conflicting values and expectations in their HE structures (Marginson, 2016).

#### **2.4.1. Global Perspectives**

In a parallel vein to how insights from international migration studies can inform understanding of intranational migration, interactions between non-Western students' agency and Western educational structures can be partially illuminated by research conducted with non-Western students participating in Western HE systems outside of their home countries, as these studies are more abundant. In this regard, research has converged to show that HE institutions with predominantly white Western structures can present considerable challenges for non-white and/or non-Western students. These students may experience alienation and academic readiness issues due to language barriers, unfamiliar teaching practices, and off-campus housing challenges (Karkouti, 2016; Pewewardy & Frey, 2002; Milian & Davies, 2020). Particularly, Asian students may face both overt and covert racism within their HE institutions, leading to feelings of marginalisation and negative attitudes towards learning (Samuel & Burney, 2003; Samuel, 2004).

Despite these obstacles, non-white and/or non-Western students continue to enrol in such institutions, both abroad and at home. For those studying abroad, factors such as global reputation and overall satisfaction with the institution's brand name were crucial (Yaro & Smith, 2024). Moreover, these international students recognise benefits such as enhanced cultural awareness, increased competence, and opportunities for international internships (Peacock & Harrison, 2009; Sison & Brennan, 2012). Similarly, those opting for private or international home-based education may consider the institution's reputation, marketability of the degree, and cultural proximity when deciding to enrol (Ahmad & Buchanan, 2017; Wilkins & Huiman, 2011). Additionally, the flexibility in curriculum design, diverse extracurricular activities, and emphasis on critical thinking and innovation attract these students to these institutions in the first place (Sawir, 2013).

The enrolment decisions aside, past research suggests that private and international HE institutions can both enhance and constrain non-White and/or non-Western HE students' agency. In terms of advantages, these institutions, characterised by student-centred learning (Barr & Tagg, 1995), academic freedom (Rumbley et al., 2012), and diverse curricular offerings, can potentially foster student agency by promoting self-directed learning, critical inquiry, and exposure to diverse perspectives. Specifically, the American-style liberal arts curriculum, with its emphasis on broad-based knowledge and transferable skills, can empower students to explore their interests and develop autonomy (Nussbaum, 2009).

However, these structures can also challenge student agency. Standardised Western-style assessments, market-driven curricula (Giroux, 2003), and inequitable hierarchical power relations with relations to races (Rhoades & Sporn, 2002) may stifle creativity, limit intellectual exploration, and reinforce social inequalities. In addition, the dominance of Western educational models in non-Western contexts, often perceived as embodying 'whiteness as futurity,' can marginalise non-Western local knowledge and perspectives, potentially undermining the agency of local students from diverse cultural backgrounds (Shahjahan & Edwards, 2022).

#### **2.4.2. The Vietnamese Context**

In Vietnam, the recent advent of international, especially American, universities have exposed students to a novel educational paradigm that ostensibly prioritises critical thinking, independent inquiry, and intercultural dialogue (Nguyen et al., 2023). Nevertheless, while these institutional frameworks have advocated for such values, they may inadvertently perpetuate Western cultural norms and expectations, presenting a series of challenges for Vietnamese students (Nguyen et al., 2023).

Specifically, much like the broader East Asian context, traditional Vietnamese Confucian cultural values, which underscore collectivism, respect for authority, and academic excellence, may be at odds with the individualistic and egalitarian ethos inherent in the American-style liberal arts tradition (Tran et al., 2017). This cultural dissonance can generate a sense of discord for Vietnamese students enrolled in American-style HE institutions, potentially impeding their sense of agency and belonging

within the institutional confines. By consistently operating within a framework that implicitly contrasts and potentially devalues their cultural heritage, Vietnamese students might experience diminished self-esteem and a reduced capacity to assert their agency both within and beyond academic settings (Tran et al., 2017). Consequently, it is imperative to critically examine and address these institutional biases to foster a more inclusive and empowering educational environment.

## 2.5. Literature Review Summary

In conclusion, this literature review underscores the imperative for further research on the agency of intranational migrants and local students from diverse SES within Vietnam's private and international HE sector. Grasping the distinct challenges and opportunities encountered by these student groups is crucial for devising targeted interventions and support mechanisms that enable them to exercise agency and fulfil their educational aspirations. Insights drawn from global research and emerging studies in Vietnam contribute to a nuanced comprehension of student agency in this context.

First, the literature on MS and student agency reveals that migrants, whether traversing national or internal borders, encounter challenges like cultural adaptation, social integration, and financial constraints. Also, these students face unique stressors, including isolation and discrimination, which can hinder their ability to fully exercise agency. Despite these obstacles, intranational migrants often exhibit resilience and resourcefulness, indicating an enhanced sense of agency.

The review also highlights the intricate relationship between SES and student agency. Students from higher SES backgrounds typically have greater access to educational resources, parental support and opportunities, which can augment their agency, whereas those from lower SES backgrounds may encounter more barriers. Nevertheless, lower SES students can still achieve high levels of agency through robust support systems and personal determination. Specifically, resilience and resourcefulness are particularly significant in shaping educational choices and experiences for lower SES.

Moreover, literature elucidates the complex interplay between Western institutional structures and student agency in private and international HE. These structures can provide avenues for personal growth and global engagement, fostering the development of critical thinking, adaptability, and intercultural competence. Exposure to diverse perspectives and student-centred learning approaches can enhance students' ability to navigate and succeed in varied contexts. However, these benefits often come with challenges. The imposition of white Western (in this research's context, American) frameworks and cultural dissonance between institutional values and students' non-white non-Western (in this research's context, Vietnamese) backgrounds can potentially impede the authentic development of student agency.

All things considered, the literature review re-emphasises the necessity for this dissertation. Understanding these dynamics is essential for formulating educational practices that empower students to fully exercise their agency, continuously develop their capacities, and achieve their goals.

## 2.6. Research Questions

Drawing from discussions on Vietnam's privatising and internationalising HE context, the unique nature of FUV, the identified research gaps, as well as extensive literature review on different scales, this study focuses on deciphering how students' MS, SES, and institutional structures individually or collectively influence student agency at FUV.

**Quantitative Phase:** To what extent do MS and SES impact perceived agency among different groups of Vietnamese students at FUV?

**Qualitative Phase:**

1. How do Vietnamese students with different MS and SES exercise their agency in their self-development process at FUV?
2. In what ways do specific institutional structures at FUV facilitate or hinder student agency or self-development, as perceived by students?

3. Which other factors influence the perceived agency of the participants?

These questions strive to enhance understanding of the factors influencing student agency at FUV. They also aim to elucidate potential areas for student support and growth within a unique international HE environment like FUV, situated within Vietnam's traditionally public but gradually marketising, privatising and internationalising HE context.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

Utilising the explanatory sequential mixed methods approach, this study integrated quantitative and qualitative data to offer a comprehensive analysis of students' perceived agency, thereby addressing both objective patterns and subjective insights. Conducted under a pragmatic paradigm, the research allowed for the flexibility to incorporate both objective and subjective perspectives as dictated by the research question and provided immediate suggestions for FUV and similar institutions. This approach was particularly fitting given the researcher's combined positionality as a multiple-time international student and a seasoned HE administrative staff, as well as her aim to produce actionable findings that could immediately enhance institutional practices.

Moreover, the study adhered to ethical standards by the researcher's explicit acknowledgement of her former internal status at FUV, the research site, at all stages, obtaining informed consent from all participants, maintaining confidentiality, and complying with Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) guidelines. To ensure reliability and validity, the researcher employed rigorous data collection and analysis procedures.

### 3.1. Philosophical Paradigm and Positionality

Grounded in a pragmatic research paradigm (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), this study adopted a practical approach to explore the lived experiences of students at FUV, the research site. This philosophical orientation aligns with a pragmatic ontology, which acknowledges the existence of an external reality while dismissing the idea of a single, absolute truth (Feilzer, 2024; Subedi, 2016). Pragmatism, as explained by Morgan (2014), permits the integration of both objective and subjective perspectives, depending on the research questions. This requires an epistemologically flexible approach, viewing knowledge as constructed through iterative and dynamic processes, and advocating for the use of diverse methods suited to the specific context (Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

This pragmatic ontology and epistemology underpin the study's axiological focus on the practical utility of knowledge, rather than the pursuit of an absolute truth (Biesta, 2010). Such an

axiological stance prioritises research that generates actionable insights and addresses real-world problems. In line with Tashakkori and Teddlie (2011), pragmatism generally supports the effective combination of quantitative and qualitative methods within a mixed methods framework. This approach helps identify objective patterns through quantitative measures while also exploring subjective experiences through qualitative methods, thus fostering a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the phenomenon under study.

The researcher adopted this paradigm due to her positionality, which was deeply connected to the origin and execution of this study. With extensive experience as a seasoned HE administrator (specifically as a former Senior staff at FUV, the research site), she has cultivated a profound understanding of FUV and Vietnam's national HE system. Moreover, at FUV, she observed the remarkable agency of intranational migrants and lower SES students, fuelling her desire to explore the factors contributing to their resilience and success. Such insider knowledge, combined with a commitment to evidence-based practices, motivated her to undertake this research to generate findings that could directly improve the institution's practices for better student developments.

Professional experiences aside, the researcher's educational history as an international student in the United States, France, and the United Kingdom have enriched her understanding of the challenges and opportunities in navigating new cultural and academic environments. This factor strengthened her interest in the experiences of intranational migrants in Vietnamese HE. Thus, the conception of this study reflected a blend of her professional and personal experiences, her dedication to pragmatic research, and her aim to foster a more empowering HE landscape in Vietnam.

In summary, this study employed a pragmatic approach, which has set the stage for the subsequent discussion on the chosen explanatory sequential mixed methods design.

### **3.2. Methodology: Explanatory Sequential Mixed Methods**

Building on the established pragmatist positionality, this study used an explanatory sequential mixed methods framework, starting with a quantitative survey followed by qualitative interviews to elaborate on the survey findings. This two-step approach, recommended by Creswell and Plano Clark (2018),

Morgan (2013), and Tashakkori and Teddlie (2011), helps to fully understand the topic being studied. Although this method is complex and requires significant time and expertise to design, carry out, and analyse (Ivankova et al., 2006; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004), it aligns well with the researcher's pragmatic approach. One key benefit is its ability to combine data, thereby increasing the accuracy of the findings by identifying areas where the quantitative and qualitative results agree or differ (Bryman et al., 2008; Greene, 2007). While quantitative data shows patterns and relationships, qualitative data provides context, explaining why these patterns exist and offering a deeper understanding (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Additionally, the qualitative phase captures personal experiences and motivations, addressing a major limitation of quantitative methods (Creswell, 2014) and making it suitable for the research focus of this dissertation.

### 3.3. Operational Definitions

As this study examined how students' MS and SES affect their perceptions and experiences in relation to their agency, the following operational definitions were used to classify participants.

#### *MS:*

**Local Students:** Students holding permanent residency (hộ khẩu thường trú) in HCMC and having completed their upper-secondary education within HCMC.

**Intranational Migrants:** Students holding permanent residency outside of HCMC and having completed their upper-secondary education outside of HCMC.

#### *SES:*

FUV operates a need-based financial aid scheme where the aid package is determined through a Vietnam-contextualised application and an interview with specialists from the Office of Admissions and Financial Aid (Fullbright Admissions Booklet, 2023). Due to this rigorous assessment, the financial aid package was considered the most accurate indicator of students' SES for this study. Participants were requested to specify the amount of need-based financial aid granted by FUV, excluding any merit-based scholarships.

**Higher SES Students:** Students receiving a financial aid package between 0% and 55%.

**Lower SES Students:** Students receiving a financial aid package between 60% and 100%.

### 3.4. Data Collection and Analysis

#### 3.4.1. Quantitative Phase

##### *Measure*

To quantitatively assess the agency of HE students in this research, the researcher consulted Cavazzoni et al.'s (2021) comprehensive review of 34 quantitative measures titled *How do we assess how agentic we are? A literature review of existing instruments to evaluate and measure individuals' agency*. The criteria for shortlisting measures prioritised tools developed from cross-sectional studies involving participants in the college-going age group (i.e., between 18 and 30), due to their relevance to this study's nature and target demographic. Among the instruments reviewed, the Assessment Tool for Perceived Agency (ATPA-22; Lautamo et al., 2021) was selected. Cavazzoni et al. (2021) emphasise that the ATPA-22 distinguishes itself from other tools by focusing on the experienced features of agency: unlike other instruments that measure agency as a static trait or a set of behaviours, the ATPA-22 captures the dynamic process of agency as it unfolds in real-time by evaluating the transactional elements of perceived agency. This view of agency as an immersive process embedded in the ATPA-22 aligns with the conceptualisation of student agency employed in this dissertation (see *p. 15*).

The ATPA-22 consists of 22 items rated on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 4 = Strongly Agree). An attention-checking question "If you are reading this statement, please choose 4-Strongly Agree" was included to ensure data quality. The researcher decided to maintain the questionnaire in English to ensure consistency and comparability with the original research, with the insider consideration and knowledge that all FUV students were proficient in English. In this study, the Cronbach's alpha for the ATPA-22 was .907, indicating high reliability.

##### *Recruitment and Sampling*

The target population for this study was Vietnamese students at FUV. Given that part of the research focused on experienced features of student agency in interaction with structures as conceptualised, the

inclusion criteria were narrowed to only including actively enrolled junior (Class of 2025) and senior (Class of 2024) students, as they were at FUV longer than the younger classes. Students with HCMC household registration but who completed high school elsewhere, and those with household registration elsewhere but who completed high school in HCMC, and students who took a gap period before matriculating at FUV were automatically excluded by the setting that the researcher set up on Jisc Survey, and their data not recorded.

Participants were recruited on a voluntary basis through convenience sampling from the 28th of March to the 5th of May, 2024. This recruitment process utilised a variety of methods, including word of mouth among FUV students, emails and posts on social media platforms. Specifically, efforts were concentrated on the three FUV-owned Facebook groups frequently visited by individuals within the target demographics (i.e., Fulbright Undergraduate Students, FUV Class of 2024, FUV Class of 2025), where the researcher made one recruitment post for each group and utilised the everyone-tagging function once a week to remind potential participants to partake in the study. FUV students also helped share the researcher's posts among one another in the abovementioned period.

### *Participants*

The sample consisted of 52 students ( $N = 52$ ). Initially, 53 responses were collected, but one failed the attention-checking question and their data permanently deleted as a result. Among the final participants, 22 were from the Class of 2024 and 30 from the Class of 2025. Based on operational definitions, 14 were local students and 38 were intranational migrants. Self-reported financial aid data classified 23 as higher SES and 29 as lower SES (see *Table 1*).

	Frequency	Percentage
Class Year		
Class of 2024	22	42%
Class of 2025	30	58%
MS		
Local students	14	27%
Internal migrants	38	73%
SES		
Higher SES	23	44%
Lower SES	29	56%

*Table 1. ATPA-22 Participants' Demographic Information*

### ***Procedure***

Through the recruitment posts and emails, participants could access the Jisc Survey link, where they first read the participants' information sheet and provided consent for both the quantitative and qualitative phases (see *Appendix B & C*). They then completed the pre-screening demographic questionnaire to confirm eligibility, followed by the ATPA-22. The pre-screening questions were logistically set up with inclusion and exclusion criteria embedded on relevant questions to ensure that only eligible participants' data were recorded through Jisc (see *Appendix D*). Participants whose responses were excluded at this stage immediately received an automatic message on the system notifying them of the non-inclusion, and they were never shown the ATPA-22.

### *Analytic Strategies*

- **Dependent Variable (DV) - Individual participant’s perceived agency score:** Following the procedure outlined in Lautamo et al. (2021), each participant’s perceived agency score was calculated by averaging their responses across all 22 items of the ATPA-22. Prior to averaging, Likert scale responses for each item were assigned numerical values from 1 (“Strongly Disagree”) to 4 (“Strongly Agree”). The resulting perceived agency score is a continuous variable. A higher score indicates a more positive assessment of one’s own agentic power.
- **Independent Variables (IVs) - MS and SES:**
  - **MS:** This categorical variable has two levels differentiating between intranational migrants (coded as 1 for SPSS) and local students (coded as 0 for SPSS).
  - **SES:** This categorical variable has two levels dividing students into two groups: those from higher SES (coded as 1 for SPSS) and those from lower SES (coded as 0 for SPSS).
- **Statistical Analysis:** Descriptive and inferential statistics were run on SPSS to process data related to the research context and questions. Frequencies were calculated for all three variables (see *Table 3 & 4*). The distribution of the DV was visually inspected using a histogram to assess for normality and equal variance, both of which are the necessary assumptions for the usage of analysis of variance (ANOVA; Field, 2013). As these assumptions were met (see *Appendix G*), a two-way ANOVA was conducted to examine the effects of the IVs on the DV.

### 3.4.2. Qualitative Phase

#### *Protocol*

The interview protocol was developed between the 12th of May, 2024 and the 25th of May, 2024 based on the researcher’s initial analyses of quantitative results, supervisory consultation, as well as literature review on student agency, and the interplay of agency with MS, SES, and private and international institutional structures (see *Appendix F*).

Open-ended questions covering participants' MS (e.g., "What advantages or disadvantages do you perceive as a local student from HCMC or intranational migrant at FUV?"), SES (e.g., "How has your financial background influenced your university experience?"), and interactions with institutional structures (e.g., "How has the American liberal arts curriculum impacted you?"). Follow-up questions were added as needed (e.g., "Why did you undertake multiple internships simultaneously?"). Questions were tailored to participants' MS and SES, as well as designed to explore their engagements with faculty, staff, university services, and academic and social activities both on and off campus. Questions on each interviewee's outstanding responses to certain ATPA-22 items were also included (e.g., "You only strong disagreed with one statement, specifically on this question, how so?").

### *Recruitment and Sampling*

Following the quantitative data analysis, 52 participants ( $N = 52$ ) were grouped into four categories according to their self-reported MS (local student or intranational migrant) and SES (lower or higher) in the pre-screening demographic questions.

The initial interview invitation targeted the three respondents with the highest and lowest perceived agency scores of the whole pool and eight others—two participants whose scores were relatively close to their group average ( $\pm 0.25$ ) in the four groups described above. Hence, eleven ATPA-22 survey respondents meeting these criteria were invited to participate via email between the 26th of May, 2024 and the 29th of May, 2024. In this first round, the three extreme scorers declined due to scheduling conflicts and five out of eight other students confirmed their participation, leaving three vacancies to fill for one higher SES intranational migrant, one higher SES local student and one lower SES local students. Six additional respondents fitting these criteria were invited in two additional rounds of emails between 29th of May, 2024 and 1st of June, 2024, and three agreed to participate. As a result, eight online semi-structured interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams in total between the 3rd of June, 2024 and the 7th of June, 2024.

### *Participants*

The eight interviewees ( $n = 8$ ) were all ATPA-22 survey respondents who met the selection criteria and agreed to participate in online semi-structured interviews through Microsoft Teams. The specifications of the participants were as followed:

Participant code (according to the order in which participants responded to ATPA-22)	MS	SES	Class Year	ATPA-22 Individual Score (-Group Score)
A2	Migrant	Lower	2024	3.181 (- 3.038)
A4	Local	Higher	2025	3.000 (- 2.832)
A7	Migrant	Higher	2025	3.273 (- 3.052)
A8	Local	Higher	2024	2.863 (- 2.832)
A16	Migrant	Higher	2024	3.090 (- 3.052)
A21	Migrant	Lower	2024	3.000 (- 3.038)
A32	Local	Lower	2024	2.723 (- 2.636)
A47	Local	Lower	2025	2.909 (- 2.636)

*Table 2. Semi-Structured Interviewees' Information*

### *Procedure*

Participants selected an interview timeslot for the period between the 3rd of June, 2024 and the 7th of June, 2024 through Jisc Survey, where they were shown the Participants' Information Sheet again prior to slot selection. Subsequently, they received a calendar invite with a Microsoft Teams link for the interview via email. Before the interview officially started, participants were notified of the study information, the interview process and data handling procedures for the whole study. They could also ask any questions or raise any concerns. The researcher made the point to intentionally remind the interviewees to see her as an independent researcher at Oxford University and not as a former FUV staff prior to commencing. The researcher repeated all the important information on data

management and provided opportunities for questions when wrapping up the interview as well (see *Appendix F*).

All eight interviews were conducted in Vietnamese based on participants' preferences. The average interview length was 62 minutes. All interviews were audio-video recorded on Microsoft Teams. After audio files were extracted, videos were deleted, and after the researcher had finalised transcription and translation of the interviews, all the audio recordings were also deleted.

### *Analytic Strategies*

The qualitative data from the semi-structured interviews was thoroughly and iteratively analysed. Following Fereday and Muir-Cochrane's (2006) guidance, the researcher employed a hybrid coding strategy starting with deductive thematic coding followed by inductive thematic coding (see *Appendix H*). This approach blends data-driven and theory-driven codes, providing both flexibility and rigour in the analysis. Deductive analysis provides consistency and relevance to the research aims, while inductive analysis is particularly useful for uncovering new phenomena (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Swain, 2018). Furthermore, this hybrid approach has proven to be especially valuable in educational research (Xu & Zammit, 2020).

- **Deductive Thematic Coding:** Deductive coding for interview transcripts typically starts with the creation of a codebook based on existing theories or research questions (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2011). For this study, the initial coding framework was developed using key themes and concepts identified in the literature review (e.g., student agency, MS, SES) and quantitative phase results (e.g., significant differences in perceived agency scores based on MS). Key deductive codes included MS (local student, intranational migrant student), SES (higher SES, lower SES), and structural constraints/enablements (e.g., teaching and learning, institutional services, on-campus relationships).
- **Inductive Thematic Coding:** Following the initial deductive coding, the transcripts were re-examined using an inductive approach to identify emergent themes and patterns not captured

by the pre-existing framework. This involves a close reading of the data, noting recurring ideas, concepts, or language used by the participants, as described by Chandra et al. (2019). These emergent codes were then integrated with the deductive codes, leading to the refinement and expansion of the coding framework. Examples of emergent codes included: cultural adaptation, job insecurities, perceptions of the other group and other note-worthy findings.

### 3.5. Reliability and Validity

Given the challenges of mixed methods research, the researcher carefully planned, continuously self-trained, and consulted her supervisor and relevant departmental resources throughout the study.

In the quantitative phase, the researcher employed the ATPA-22, a validated instrument with strong internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = .907; Kiliç, 2016). An attention-checking question was included to maintain data quality and minimise the risk of inaccurate or misleading responses (Gummer et al., 2021). Participant confidentiality was ensured through secure storage protocols for anonymous data collection. To refine the data analysis process and ensure methodological rigour, the researcher attended the department's optional statistics surgery session to obtain feedback.

In the qualitative phase, the researcher maintained self-awareness throughout the process of conducting semi-structured interviews, taking careful notes during the discussions as well as documenting thoughts and potential biases in reflexive journals. Regular self-audits through re-reading the diaries and discussions with peers and the researcher's supervisor further improved reflexivity and ensured the accuracy of the findings, contributing to a thorough and transparent research process. This multi-pronged approach aligns with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) emphasis on the trustworthiness of qualitative research and Tracy's (2010) criteria for qualitative quality.

### 3.6. Ethics

The research prioritised ethical principles, ensuring the safety and welfare of all participants. The research design and protocols underwent rigorous review and approval by the Department of Education's CUREC (Reference: EDUC\_C1A\_24\_104, see *Appendix A*), adhering to established ethical guidelines. All participants provided informed consent only after perusing the Participants'

Information Sheet, ensuring that they were fully aware of the research's purpose, their rights, and potential risks and benefits. The researcher consistently reminded the participants of such information before and after the interviews as part of the interview protocol.

Furthermore, the researcher's former internal status at FUV was openly acknowledged at all stages (e.g., during the study's conception, for CUREC review, at participants' recruitment stage, before semi-structured interviews, etc.) and managed to mitigate any power imbalances or conflicts of interest. Participants were clearly informed that the researcher was acting as an Oxford researcher, not as an FUV employee. In addition, participants were notified clearly of their right to pause and stop the interview should discomfort arise, as well as their right to withdraw from the study by a certain time. Participants were also made aware that the name of the institution (FUV) would be revealed.

## Chapter 4: Findings

The combined quantitative and qualitative findings revealed that intranational migrants demonstrated greater perceived agency than local students, largely due to the resilience developed from adapting to cultural and financial challenges. Lower SES students displayed significant resourcefulness, effectively utilising available resources, which resulted in agency levels comparable to those of their higher SES counterparts. The liberal arts curriculum at FUV was lauded for its breadth but criticised for its lack of practical applications. Feedback on institutional support services and faculty-student relationships was mixed, while connections with staff and alumni were highlighted as crucial agency enablers. The pursuit of graduate employability was a strong motivator but also a source of significant stress, potentially hindering broader educational experiences. Active incorporation of contextualised spiritual practices was found to notably boost student agency.

### 4.1. Quantitative Results

#### 4.1.1. Descriptive Statistics

Adhering to the methodology of Lautamo et al. (2021), each participant's perceived agency score was calculated by averaging their responses to the 22 questions in the ATPA-22 questionnaire. The individual average scores of 52 participants were approximately normally distributed ( $M = 2.97$ ,  $SD = .39$ ), with no outliers detected upon visually inspecting a histogram (see *Appendix G*).

In line with the original guidance, students with higher individual scores perceived themselves as more agentic. Notably, the highest recorded score, an almost perfect 3.955 out of 4.000, was achieved by a higher SES intranational migrant. The lowest score, 1.636 out of 4.000, was shared by two local students with contrasting SES—one higher, one lower. Notably, lower SES migrants accounted for the majority of the top 10% scorers (see *Table 3*).

Individual average	Participants (each participant is represented with two symbols)
	MS: # intranational migrants, * local students
	SES: \$ higher SES, % lower SES
3,955	#\$ (intranational migrant + higher SES – similar coding to follow below)
3,591	#%
3,545	#%
3,455	#%
3,409	#%
3,364	#%
3,273	#\$
3,227	#%, *%, *\$
3,182	#%, #%, #%, #\$, *\$
3,136	#%, #\$, #\$, *\$, *\$
3,091	#%, #\$, #
3,000	#%, #%, #%, #\$, *\$
2,955	#%, *%
2,909	#%, #%, #%, #
2,864	#%, *\$, *\$
2,773	#%, #%, #\$, #\$, *\$
2,727	#%, #%, *%
2,682	#%, #%
2,545	#%
2,500	#\$, *\$
1,636	*%, *\$

*Table 3. Individual Participants' Scores Targeted by ATPA-22*

Subsequently, the groups' scores of perceived agency were calculated by averaging the individual scores of participants within each group (see *Table 4*). Among the four groups of students, higher SES intranational migrants had the highest average score at 3.052, followed by lower SES intranational migrants at 3.038. The lowest average score was observed among lower SES local students, at 2.636. Then, higher SES local students' average score ranked third overall, at 2.832.

MS	SES	M	N
Local students		2.776	14
	Lower SES	2.636	4
	Higher SES	2.832	10
Intranational migrants		3.043	38
	Lower SES	3.038	25
	Higher SES	3.052	13

*Table 4. Groups' Scores Targeted by ATPA-22*

Finally, an average score was calculated for each question based on the responses of all 52 students. In line with Lautamo et al.'s (2021) guidance, a higher score for a question means that the task is more achievable for students, whilst a lower score indicates that the task poses greater challenges to the students' perceived agency. Of all the questions, Question 17 "I feel that my loved ones support my choices" achieved the highest score at 3.442 out of 4.000, followed by two questions scoring 3.269: Question 9 "I do tasks that I feel are important and meaningful to me" and Question 18 "I feel I am accepted in my community." All these questions centre around the themes of community support and meaningful work. In contrast, the three lowest scoring questions all pertain to feelings of imbalances and the distribution of time and scheduling (see *Table 5*).

Score	Question	Content
3,442	Q17	I feel that my loved ones support my choices
3,269	Q9	I do tasks that I feel are important and meaningful to me
3,269	Q18	I feel I am accepted in my community
3,231	Q10	I do tasks that gives me a feeling of competence or satisfaction
3,212	Q21	I feel safe in my surroundings
3,173	Q15	If necessary, I can flexibly and fluently adapt my performance and routines
3,115	Q22	I manage to perform in my environment
3,096	Q12	I can handle problems and pressure (by discussing them or taking actions)
3,058	Q20	I can take care of my everyday tasks independently
3,019	Q8	I do tasks that I feel challenge me appropriately
3,000	Q13	I make active choices about what to do daily
2,981	Q11	I can solve daily challenges in a reasonable way
2,981	Q14	I feel that I have the ability to manage the challenges of work or studies
2,923	Q2	I have time and/or energy to take care of my wellbeing
2,923	Q3	I feel that I have a suitable amount to do on a daily basis
2,923	Q16	I can easily express my thoughts and opinions to other people
2,788	Q6	I do enough daily for others (not too much/not too little)
2,769	Q19	I can influence my living situation in satisfying ways
2,731	Q1	I feel that different areas of my daily life are balanced
2,558	Q5	I am satisfied with the amount of daily activities I manage to do
2,500	Q4	I am happy with the amount of time I have for rest and sleep
2,404	Q7	I feel that I have enough time to do tasks that I want to do

*Table 5. Questions' Scores Targeted ATPA-22 in Descending Order*

### 4.1.2. Inferential Statistics

A two-way ANOVA was conducted to examine the effects of MS (local student or intranational migrant) and SES (lower or higher) on individual average perceived agency scores, as measured by the ATPA-22 survey. The assumption of homogeneity of variances was met, as assessed by Levene's test ( $F[3, 48] = 1.617, p = .198$ ).

There was a significant main effect of MS,  $F(1, 48) = 5.777, p = .20$ , partial  $\eta^2 = 0.107$ , indicating that intranational migrants had higher average perceived agency scores ( $M = 3.04, SD = .32$ ) compared to local students ( $M = 2.78, SD = .53$ ). There was no significant main effect of SES ( $F(1, 48) = 0.656, p = .422$ , partial  $\eta^2 = 0.013$ ) on individual average perceived agency scores. Additionally, the interaction effect between MS and SES was not significant  $F(1, 48) = 0.489, p = .488$ , partial  $\eta^2 = 0.010$ , suggesting that the effect of MS on individual average perceived agency scores did not vary depending on SES.

## 4.2. Construction of the Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

The semi-structured interview protocol was carefully crafted to complement and enhance the quantitative findings, specifically focusing on the complex relationships between students' MS, SES, and their experiences within FUV's institutional framework (see *Appendix F*). This qualitative phase aimed to provide deeper insights into the factors influencing perceived agency, as highlighted by the initial quantitative analysis. Thus, the interview protocol acted as a crucial link between the numerical data and the participants' lived experiences, adhering to the principles of an explanatory sequential mixed methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

The interview protocol featured probing questions constructed based on both the ATPA-22 questionnaire responses and related literature to explore how participants' MS, SES, and institutional structures influenced their agency. The researcher reviewed each participant's ATPA-22 survey scores before the interview, tailoring questions to their unique profile for relevant and in-depth data through

noting any particularly high or low scores. Examples of questions added based on the quantitative findings include:

**MS:** “As an intranational migrant, how would you describe the process of adapting to life in HCMC when your first moved there – any notable challenges? Would you say the local students have similar or different experiences? How do you feel about your life there now?” —> This series of questions sought to delve into the significant main effect of MS on perceived agency scores where intranational migrants scored higher, as revealed by the two-way ANOVA in the quantitative phase.

**Challenges and Coping Mechanisms:** “Could you elaborate on any tasks or situations that you found challenging, problematic, or stressful during your undergraduate studies? What strategies did you employ to overcome these challenges?” —> This series of questions aimed to identify specific tasks or situations pertinent to questions that scored lower (i.e., tasks considered to be harder to reach for the participants).

**On-Campus Support Systems:** “Who comprised your support group during your time studying at Fulbright? Did you find it easier or more difficult to express your thoughts and opinions to others?” —> This series of questions aimed to explore the higher scores for questions related to community support and meaningful work, as identified by the questions with the higher scores in the descriptive analysis, and their relationship with institutional structures and student agency.

**Time Management:** “Which activities occupied your time during the day or week? Do you feel your life is generally healthy and balanced?” —> This series of questions addressed the lower scores related to time management and scheduling, aiming to understand the daily challenges that could potentially impact perceived agency.

Through these targeted questions, the researcher aimed to uncover the underlying mechanisms contributing to quantitative variations in perceived agency among FUV students.

### 4.3. Qualitative Results

Following both deductive and inductive coding processes (see *Appendix H*), the qualitative findings of this segment of the research, focusing on students' perceived autonomy and personal development during their three to four years at FUV were divided into four main categories: the influence of students' backgrounds, particularly (1) their MS and (2) SES; (3) the impact of the institution's frameworks and structures on the students; and (4) other significant observations.

#### 4.3.1. Interplay between MS and Student Agency

Primarily, FUV students' distinct demographic backgrounds in terms of MS significantly influenced their university experiences, perceived autonomy, and personal growth. Specifically, intranational migrants faced unique challenges, such as cultural adaptation and housing insecurity, while local students benefited from familial support and stability.

##### *Open-Mindedness and Cultural Adaptations for Intranational Migrants*

Both local students and intranational migrants mentioned the higher level of openness manifested in the ways of living in HCMC. Primarily, some intranational migrants reported having struggled with HCMC's individualistic culture when they first arrived and hence, longed for the sense of community that they left behind in their hometowns. One student vividly described this adjustment, noting that, unlike their local counterparts, they had to "*internalise all these new values such as respecting individuality and personal boundaries, and harmonise them with [their] previous very community-minded identity back home where there was no boundary,*" (A21) when they first moved to HCMC.

Despite the initial shock, this open-minded environment, which encouraged individual expression, was gradually perceived as a welcome deviation from the more conservative attitudes that certain intranational migrants had previously encountered in their hometown. However, this novel familiarisation presented challenges for some intranational migrants, who experienced reverse culture shock upon returning home. For instance, one intranational migrant recounted an incident:

*At home, people talk a lot. I still remember how some of my high school teachers would gossip about the way certain students behave or dress, even outside of the school context. Whenever I am home, I*

*have no privacy and have a constant fear of being judged. People also impose absurdly high standards on us students or alumni from the province's school for the gifted, like we must always be at our best behaviours.* (A2)

Another intranational migrant remarked:

*I was doing grocery at home, and I was wearing a crop top; it was short but not revealing or anything and people kept on weirdly staring at me, and I forgot how judgmental some people at home were. I would never experience anything like that in HCMC.* (A7)

Local students reported facing fewer challenges in transitioning to university life, as their primary task was solely adjusting to a new academic environment rather than acclimatising to a new city and its cultural landscapes. Their familiarity with the extracurricular activities available in the city and access to family support served as significant advantages. However, two local students disclosed feelings of envy towards their intranational migrant peers, as these migrants experienced “*less familial control over lifestyle and academic decisions due to their families residing in distant locations*” (A4).

### ***Accents and Discrimination***

All intranational migrants faced challenges adapting to HCMC's weather, and three experienced discrimination or inconvenience due to their accents. For instance, one migrant completely “*refrained from visiting local markets due to [their] lack of negotiation skills and the risk of being overcharged if [their] non-local accents were detected, so [they] decided to stick to the big supermarkets with fixed price tags only*” (A7).

A student from the Central region decided to switch to the standard Northern Vietnamese accent when communicating, rather than using their local dialect, “*not due to fear for discrimination but rather for the convenience of not having to constantly explain [themselves] or repeat what [they] say,*” (A21) as the locals in HCMC often found their regional dialect challenging to understand.

### *Housing Concern and Support System*

Housing during and after undergraduate studies at Fulbright was a shared concern among all students, particularly for intranational migrants of the Class of 2025. For context, on-campus accommodation was guaranteed for the Class of 2024 by FUV for their entire four-year period; however, for the Class of 2025, this was only the case for their initial two years due to a policy change. Local students, especially those from the Class of 2025, stated that they *“felt lucky having [their] parents’ home to move back to in the last two years, especially at the knowledge that the migrants suffered a lot”* (A4). In contrast, intranational migrants in this same class reported huge difficulties in finding housemates, as well as securing safe and financially viable accommodations for their final two years.

Furthermore, although all students reported finding socialising outside of school hours, such as going out for meals or grabbing coffee with friends, to be useful stress-relieving activities, this socialising aspect also revealed an MS divide, with migrants reporting *“feelings isolated on weekends when [their] local peers usually dedicated their time to family activities”* (A2).

### **4.3.2. Interplay between SES and Student Agency**

In addition to MS, SES had a profound impact on students’ lives: those from lower SES backgrounds experienced financial pressures and utilised more university services, whereas those from higher SES backgrounds led more relaxing lifestyles. However, the lower SES students showed significant resilience, which could account for why their perceived agency scores were not significantly lower than those of their higher SES counterparts despite significant adversities. The socio-economic divides also influenced classroom dynamics and peer-to-peer relationships, revealing a complex interplay between SES and educational experiences.

#### *Financial Strains*

The students’ SES backgrounds were found to greatly influence their university experiences. The lower SES students frequently wrestled with substantial financial strains, leading them to engage in paid on-campus work-study programmes or secure part-time jobs off-campus in the academic year. The pressure to achieve professional success and repay their families for the financial sacrifices made during their studies was a recurring theme among these students. One student remarked:

*Whenever the bill was due, my mum would often joke that she had to sell some gold to afford the tuition fee and humorously made me promise to repurchase it for her later. And I fully intend to do just that. It is genuinely my primary goal for my current professional endeavour: to buy back the things that my parents sold to pay for my fees. (A2)*

Three of the lower SES students proudly claimed not to have asked their parents or guardians for any additional money during their studies, citing their income from internships, work-study, and freelance work as sufficient for their expenditures.

Contrarily, students hailing from higher SES backgrounds, notably those not receiving financial aid, exhibited a much more laid-back lifestyle in terms of finance. If they held any paid roles either on or off-campus, their motivations and earnings were generally allocated to discretionary self-improvement purposes, such as “*networking, building up [their] resume, signing up for additional classes outside of school or shopping for self-upgrades,*” (A8) rather than towards essential needs.

#### ***Utilisation of University Services***

Notably, students from less affluent SES backgrounds made more comprehensive uses of the university services. They viewed these provisions as fundamental components of their educational opportunities. To illustrate, one student stated:

*As an actively enrolled student, services such as Wellness and Career Counselling are accessible to me free of charge. As such, I intend to fully utilise them before I depart from the university and must incur costs for similar services elsewhere. (A21)*

Conversely, students from wealthier backgrounds reported a lesser need for these services, often stating that they “*had not felt the requirement to use them at all*” (A7, A16). According to the lower SES students, this under-utilisation by their higher SES peers could stem from the students’ more laissez-faire attitude towards money, “*a mindset that has probably been ingrained in them from their privileged and abundant upbringing, which [the lower SES students] did not fortunately have*” (A47).

### *Classroom Dynamics and Peer Relationships*

Students from lower SES backgrounds could more distinctly identify the unwritten divide between those who have been receiving financial aid and those who have not, compared to their higher SES peers. These students also expressed somewhat negative feelings towards their higher SES counterparts. The students from lower SES backgrounds perceived their wealthier peers as having a less diligent approach towards their studies, which impacted both the shared classroom experiences and individual contributions to group projects. They also observed that those who paid higher tuition fees tended to adopt a consumer-oriented mindset, often providing more severe but less constructive criticism towards institutional services, coursework, and faculty members.

One student from a less affluent background reported experiencing substantial discrimination from higher SES peers due to their limited finances during their first year. However, the student also mentioned that the experiences, while difficult, contributed to their personal growth and agency.

*It was a difficult moment for me. I felt like everything was [messed] up... This situation initially caused me so much mental distress, but eventually led to the development of greater mental resilience and emotional intelligence. I have no regrets. I also care less about people's opinions now. I won't let anyone's words drag me down or get through to me like that again. (A47)*

### **4.3.3. Interplay between Institutional Structures and Student Agency**

The students' personal narratives offered an illuminating exploration of their experiences, interactions, and engagements with FUV's structures in terms of teaching and curriculum, support services and inter-personal relationships, revealing the complexities and nuances of their academic journey.

#### *The Two-Year Period Before Majors Selection and 'International' Teaching Styles as Enablements*

The American-style liberal arts educational model implemented by FUV was esteemed amongst all interviewees. This broad-based style of education was lauded for fostering “a vast knowledge across a myriad of subjects, particularly through the diverse assortment of obligatory Core Courses” (A4, A8, A16).

According to the interviewees, this approach has offered an extensive overview of numerous disciplines besides their chosen majors, effectively assisting students in identifying their unique interests and strengths. All eight students highlighted the flexibility of deferring their major selection for the first two years, allowing for a period of exploration, as a key factor in their initial decision to attend the university. One student went as far as to state that this approach prevented them from the *“pitfall of tunnel vision typically experienced by [their] peers at all other public universities in Vietnam, where students had to choose a major in advance”* (A32). Parents, particularly those from a higher SES, also appreciated the university’s curriculum. Notably, for two higher SES students, their decision to attend the university was primarily influenced by their parents who *“were even bigger fans of FUV than [they were],”* (A4) and *“considered its curriculum as comparable to those overseas, thus deeming it a worthwhile investment”* (A16).

Four students specifically praised the ‘American-style’ or ‘international’ nature of the faculty members’ conduct within classes and their interaction with students. When asked to expand on what they meant by ‘American-style’ or ‘international,’ one student explained that:

*Unlike other local professors and teachers, FUV faculty members generally did not impose their viewpoints onto students or provide fixed and pre-determined responses to ideas. Instead, they listened attentively to us students and facilitated engaging discussions through a series of thought-provoking questions. (A16)*

It is noteworthy that while elaborating on the ‘American-style’ and ‘international’ methods of teaching, these four students repeatedly contrasted them to the local Vietnamese way of teaching, based on their own experiences throughout their public high school education and those of their peers at other notable public Vietnamese HE institutions. That said, one other interviewee (A47) did not perceive FUV as particularly international, noting that apart from the all-around English instructions, most inter-personal daily communications were extensively in Vietnamese.

### *Gap between Curriculum and Employability and Faculty Turnover as Constraints*

Nevertheless, despite its manifold benefits, FUV's American-style liberal education model did possess certain restrictions to the interviewees. A prevalent concern amongst all eight students was the curriculum's excessive focus on theory. The students expressed dissatisfaction with the inadequate practical application in their coursework. This perceived disproportion between theoretical understanding and practical skills was seen as a disadvantage in preparing students for the demands of the job market. Students felt that this shortfall could potentially impede their personal growth and hinder their ability to effectively navigate the professional landscapes, compared to students at major public universities or other international universities whose curriculum were more field-specific.

Adding to the students' frustrations were the frequent alterations to the curriculum due to changes in faculty members. The constant revisions and adjustments to the coursework and faculty roster posed challenges for students in planning their studies effectively. Furthermore, two students complained that the curriculum lacked depth in certain areas. This was deemed a significant drawback, limiting students' ability to gain an in-depth understanding of specific subjects.

Another noteworthy observation from the discussion was the students' unique approach to discussing the monetary value of their courses. They humorously, yet pressurisingly, equated the value of their courses to specific monetary figures (e.g., *"We usually joke that a course at FUV is worth 50,000,000 Vietnam Dong (approximately 1,550 Pound Sterling) so naturally, I would not skip any of these expensive classes to do some random works for a bit of money;"* A21). This valuation method was prevalent in four interviews and was particularly noticeable when students discussed the necessity of providing feedback regarding courses or institutional services or their decision to engage in non-academic work.

### *University Services: Wellness Centre as Enablement and Other Centres as Constraints*

Five university services were identified by students as those students have frequently engaged with: Wellness Centre, Learning Support, Career Services, Student Engagement and Admissions.

The Wellness Centre was widely utilised and appreciated by seven students for mental health support, although one student found booking difficult, indicating a need for improved accessibility. The Learning Support service was briefly mentioned, with no strong opinions, indicating general

satisfaction or underuse. Despite prevalent career anxiety, the Career Services centre was largely unused and seen as unappealing, with students disappointed by the lack of field-specific job opportunities in the database as well as at Career Day. Negative experiences with the Student Engagement department were reported by four students due to perceived unresponsiveness and delays in payments for club activities, causing frustration and complete disengagement from on-campus activities among two interviewees. Positive feedback was given to Admissions services, with five students appreciating the tailored guidance during the application process. However, three students expressed disappointment that the Office of Admissions and Financial Aid has gradually but clearly shifted focus towards admitting students with more financial means in recent years, which according to one of them, *“has resulted in an entirely different student population, which has negatively affected the on-campus dynamic and the classroom environment”* (A16).

***Relationship with Alumni and Staff as Enablements, and with Some Faculty Members as Constraints***

The network with more senior students and alumni was reported to be a vital part of the students' university experience. This network served as a significant resource, offering a platform for potential job opportunities, career advice, industry insights, and networking possibilities. Through the experiences and connections of alumni, current students were assisted in preparing for their professional futures. One interviewee was successful in securing off-campus jobs and internships through these networks.

Additionally, students reported various benefits from forming close relationships with staff members through work-study programmes or consultation sessions. These benefits included a familial sense of belonging (e.g., *“it is like we are all one big family and the staff are like brothers and sisters to me”*; A2), frequent free meals, and job opportunities through the staff's extensive network. The pioneering spirit exhibited by the university's founding staff was recognised and appreciated by students. One interviewee stated:

*Considering that young founding staff like [a former Career Services staff] and yourself [the researcher] chose to come back from abroad to contribute to this new university in Vietnam... you*

*are all very entrepreneurial and dynamic and possess a strong network of like-minded professionals. I have been connected to multiple quality contacts through staff like yourself. (A32)*

According to the interviewees, student-faculty relationships had a significant influence on students' academic experiences and career opportunities. However, certain faculty members were reported to exhibit somewhat biased conducts. Such behaviours, which included showing favouritism or making inside jokes with select students, created an uncomfortable classroom dynamic. Furthermore, some faculty members were said to offer exclusive job opportunities to students they were close to, based on shared classes, projects, or mutual academic interests. The latter form of preferential treatments were viewed as justifiable and fair by certain interviewees (e.g., *"the interpersonal closeness is understandable considering how much time the lecturers spend with those students in class and then in individual research or academic projects outside of class;"* A47), but they also felt slightly marginalised as a result (e.g., *"I saw my friend's updated internship on LinkedIn and attributed the opportunity to our mutual professor's network and personal connections, and I just felt sad. I was not at all informed and it was my dream opportunity too;"* A7).

#### **4.3.4. Additional Influential Factors on Student Agency**

Besides the deductive themes of MS, SES and structures derived from the research questions, two other key factors potentially affecting student agency emerged in the transcripts, notably graduate employability, and spirituality.

##### ***Graduate Employability***

A theme consistently emerged in all the interplays between the interviewees' agency and MS, SES or institutional structures was graduate employability. All eight interviewees naturally brought up this topic in different questions not directly related to it (e.g., when commenting on the curriculum, daily time management or on-campus and off-campus engagements), showing how much they were preoccupied with this aspect.

To two interviewees with completely different backgrounds (one higher SES internal migrant and one lower SES local student), the prospect of a good job after graduation served as a motivator.

Both these students had sought part-time employment or internship opportunities throughout their enrolment at Fulbright, even during active term time. The former participant remarked:

*I have always tried to find different paid free-lance projects or on-campus work-study opportunities, sometimes multiple opportunities concurrently. Being consistently employed by different places has really relieved my insecurities, as now I believe I am pretty good. I will not have trouble finding a great job following graduation and building the life that I want. (A7)*

On the other hand, both lower SES internal migrants felt the need to secure professional placements before graduation to ensure financial stability while remaining in HCMC. An interviewee with the description above noted:

*I was under so much stress in February when realising that graduation was four months away. I knew we would be kicked out of the dorm at the end of June and I needed to find a job by then. If I had not, then I would have to choose between going home and finding a job in my province, or going home and commuting to HCMC for job interviews when invited, or lingering here to search for jobs - which would cost me a lot of rent. I felt tremendous pressure to find something. (A2)*

This student eventually spent all four months intensively applying for jobs and managed to secure one where the start date happened even before the graduation date, which they viewed to be positive despite their lack of break between studying and working. It can be observed that graduate employability, hence, was either a source of motivation or a stressor, inducing the students to make the agentic choice of actively seeking for and landing opportunities during and after their studies.

### ***Spirituality in Goals Realisation***

In addition to graduate employability, spirituality also surfaced as a unique factor at multiple milestones in students' undergraduate trajectories. Some students highlighted that they made spiritual commitments or performed certain rituals when awaiting FUV's admissions decision or when applying for a prestigious internship.

The spiritual activities could range from visiting an Eastern horoscope (tử vi) fortune teller, to adopting a karma-accumulating vegetarian lifestyle guided by Buddhism, to performing a ceremony to communicate with their ancestors. For instance:

*I never thought I would relocate to HCMC as it was not normal for people in my hometown to go that far southwards. However, my family had a spirit-summoning ceremony, and my ancestors psychically told me that I would move to HCMC and that I would be completely protected by them if I moved here. At that time, FUV was the only option I applied to in HCMC and I was not even sure if I was going to be shortlisted for the interviews, but that ceremony firmed up the notion that I would eventually end up at FUV in HCMC, and I did. (A21)*

Three students actively engaged in these acts as they believed such measures would positively influence their pathways in life. This unconventional approach suggests that students actively sought out well-established spiritual activities as a form of trajectory guidance and goals manifestation. The feelings of comfort brought about by these beliefs were shown to enhance student agency through solidifying certain aspects in their decision-making processes.

#### **4.4. The Synthesis of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings**

In summary, employing an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, this research explored various aspects of perceived agency among senior and junior Vietnamese undergraduates at FUV, particularly in relation to their MS, SES, and FUV's structural enablers or constraints.

In terms of MS, intranational migrants scored significantly higher on perceived agency than local students, as measured by ATPA-22. Through findings from the interviews, this heightened agency among intranational migrants could be attributed to the adaptation challenges they faced when transitioning to life in HCMC. All these navigations could have fostered these students' resilience and self-efficacy.

Then, although lower SES students had lower perceived agency scores compared to their higher SES peers, the results were not statistically significant. This could be because the lower SES students,

despite being disadvantaged, were more engaged with structural resources and took more initiatives to overcome greater pressures both in and outside of their learning experiences, as evident in the interviews. It should be noted that these difficulties were often exacerbated when lower SES was coupled with the MS of intranational migrants.

Institutional structures, such as curriculum, services, and relationships with staff, faculty, and alumni, played a dual role in shaping students' agentic development. These structures could enable the students' growth, as shown in the high scores in certain ATPA-22 questions pertinent to community engagements and structural immersions (e.g., Question 17, 18, 21 – see *Table 5*), as well as in the way students described the first two years of the American-style liberal arts curriculum, their appreciation for the Wellness Centre and their relationships with staff and alumni. Contrarily, these structures could also constrain the students' agency, notably evident in the overly theoretical curriculum, inadequate services in some departments, and certain inter-personal biases faced in the participation.

In addition to the aforementioned factors, graduate employability emerged as both an incentive and a source of pressure that has driven students' sense of agency. This was particularly prominent for intranational migrants and lower SES students, who felt a pressing need to secure professional placements before graduation to ensure financial stability in HCMC. Another factor potentially influencing student agency included the role of well-established spiritual practices (guided by Eastern horoscope, Buddhism or ancestral worshipping) in goal visualisation and decisions making.

## Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

### 5.1. Discussion

The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings in this explanatory sequential mixed methods study offered a comprehensive understanding of perceived agency among Vietnamese undergraduates at FUV. The research elucidated several key insights concerning the interplay of MS, SES, as well as private and international institutional structures on Vietnamese HE students' agency. As the researcher adopted a pragmatist philosophical underpinning, the implications for FUV and HE institutions of similar nature will be embedded at the end of each discussion subsection.

#### 5.1.1. Interplay between MS and Student Agency

Notably, the quantitative findings that intranational migrants exhibited higher perceived agency than local students were both corroborated and enriched by qualitative data.

##### *Intranational migrants*

Primarily, intranational migration, despite not involving the crossings of international borders, still necessitates significant cultural adaptation and a degree of separation from familial support (Sluzki, 1979). Particularly, this study found that intranational migrants faced various culturally and relationally related challenges, an observation that has long been observed among international students (Lewthwaite, 1996). That said, the study also revealed that the endeavour of navigating a new urban environment, acclimatising to diverse social norms, and establishing independence appeared to cultivate resilience and self-efficacy among intranational migrants. This aligns with research on international student mobility, wherein the experience of cultural immersion and personal challenges can enhance agency and self-determination of students who make the agentic decision to move, as highlighted by Bai & Ying (2022), Marginson (2014) and Tran & Vu (2018).

On this note, Marginson's (2014) conceptualisation of international HE as students' self-formation can be transferrable and applicable to the findings on intranational migration within this research. Through this study, the phenomenon of intranational migration was shown to greatly involve hybridity and multiplicity of the migrants' sense of self, similar to what international students

experienced in outward mobility. Notably, Marginson (2014) operationalises hybridity as the blending and integration of multiple cultural identities, while multiplicity involves the fluid negotiation between multiple identities in response to varying cultural contexts, at the new place and at home. For the former aspect, intranational migrants' mutual experiences of "*internalis[ing] new values*" and "*harmonis[ing] them with their previous identity*" (p. 43) vividly illustrate the process of hybrid identity formation. Then, this study revealed that intranational migrants went from feeling uncomfortable with to being appreciative towards the more individualistic and open culture shared by both FUV and HCMC, which in turn led to their reverse culture shock upon returning to their more communalistic and conservative hometowns. Such non-linear process implied multiplicity. Hence, it can be concluded that intranational migration also triggered a process of hybrid and multiple identities negotiation.

The mental challenges and reverse culture shock felt among intranational migrants also parallels findings on Vietnamese returnees who came back from studying abroad for a long time (Le & Lacost, 2017). That said, according to Presbitero (2016), post-migration reverse culture shock, despite causing some initial stress and confusion, can enhance students' cultural intelligence and increase their self-awareness through pushing students to rethink their identities and beliefs. This could serve as another explanation for intranational migrants' strong perceived agency scores in this study.

Finally, the qualitative probing indicated that while social support systems were crucial in fostering student agency for both groups of students, there was a notable disparity in the support network available to local students versus intranational migrants. Local students frequently benefited from being close to and having the backing of their families, which could provide a solid foundation for overcoming obstacles and developing independence (Crosnoe et al., 2014). Conversely, intranational migrants, who have been geographically distant from their families, often relied on their peers for support, even though this support was not always as reliable or varied (Zhou & Todman, 2009), particularly when local peers had family obligations. This echoes findings from past research on outward mobility, especially those comparing between local students and immigrants (e.g., Awang et al., 2014; Baker et al., 2018; Rafik et al., 2020). This disparity underscores the necessity for universities to offer specialised support services for intranational migrants to ensure they have equal access to resources and opportunities for personal growth.

### *Local Students*

Simultaneously, the experiences of local students in this study also carried noteworthy connotations. These students, despite boasting the advantages of familiarity with the locality and familial support, exhibited feelings of envy towards the perceived independence of their migrant peers. This situation underscores a possible conflict between the Vietnamese-Confucian cultural expectations of filial piety and communalism, which often prioritise conformity and respect for authority, and the personal aspirations for independence and self-determination that are commonly encouraged within Western educational frameworks, as observed by Hoang and Yeoh (2011).

This sentiment of envy can also be further understood through the lens of relative deprivation (as elaborated by Smith et al., 2012), where individuals perceive themselves as disadvantaged in comparison to a reference group. In this context, local students, despite the considerable advantages of being close to their families, envied their migrants peers, who were considered much more autonomous due to their physical distance from families. On this note, past research suggests that HE students experiencing relative deprivation tend to show lower educational expectations and aspirations, which can result in less fulfilling university trajectories (Niewenhuis & Chiang, 2021). This could partially account for local students' lower perceived agency scores.

### *Summary and Implications*

The interplay between MS and student agency revealed the multifaceted nature of student experiences at the research site. As a matter of fact, both intranational migrants and local students faced unique challenges and opportunities that necessitated tailored support, particularly for the former group. Considering this, FUV and similar institutions should provide resources that assist the process of cultural adaptation for intranational migrants, while also addressing the potential feelings of relative deprivation among local students.

By fostering an inclusive environment that recognises and mitigates these complexities, universities can enhance students' overall well-being. Furthermore, FUV should establish a dedicated support programme for intranational migrants to address their unique challenges in transitioning to both university life and a new urban environment. This programme could offer tailored resources for navigating the localities within HCMC, cultural orientation workshops, as well as mentorship

opportunities with senior students or alumni who are also intranational migrants to help students widen their social networks.

### 5.1.2. Interplay between SES and Student Agency

Although the quantitative analysis did not reveal a substantial direct influence of SES on perceived agency scores, the qualitative findings presented a more intricate picture.

#### *Lower SES Students*

As a matter of fact, lower SES students within the scope of this study exhibited significant resourcefulness: they actively engaged with money-earning opportunities during their undergraduate studies as well as institutional support services due to financial pressures and a strong sense of financially induced obligations with their families. This proactive behaviour might explain why their perceived agency scores in the ATPA-22 were comparable to those of their higher SES counterparts (as evident in the statistically non-significant results regarding the main effect of SES on individuals' scores), suggesting that resourcefulness and determination can function as mediating factors, thereby mitigating the adverse impacts of financial constraints on agency.

This observation aligns with global research on resilience and agency among disadvantaged students (Bowen, 2010; Gore et al., 2015; Li & Yeung, 2015), which underscores the importance of internal resources such as self-efficacy and problem-solving skills in overcoming external challenges. Furthermore, this finding lends support to Lautamo et al.'s (2021) original framework of "occupation as identity" (Christiansen, 1999), which acknowledges the pivotal role of personal resources and coping strategies in navigating challenging situations. In this instance, the resourcefulness exhibited by lower SES students might be perceived as a manifestation of their agency, as they actively seek out and utilise available resources to achieve their personal objectives.

Nevertheless, the qualitative data also underscored the additional unique pressures these students faced, particularly regarding post-graduation employment and housing. This is consistent with findings from past research in different contexts (e.g., Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2018; Elman & Angela, 2002; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2017). The constant needs to balance academic pursuits with financial responsibilities, coupled with anxiety about future career prospects, could create considerable

psychological burden (Jury et al., 2017). This burden was further exacerbated for lower SES students who were also intranational migrants, as they often lacked established social networks. The findings from this study and the corresponding results in the existing discourse underscore the importance for HE administrators to consider the intersectional nature of social disadvantages in Vietnam, where factors such as SES and MS can interact to create unique challenges for certain HE students.

Finally, the qualitative data of this study also notably revealed some tension in the attitude of lower SES students towards higher SES students. Specifically, lower SES students often felt a sense of division and, at times, resentment towards their higher SES peers, whom they perceived as less academically committed but more unreasonably critical of faculty members and institutional services. This sentiment aligns with existing research on the social and psychological impact of class differences in educational settings (Reay et al., 2005). This resentment can once again be explained by the concept of relative deprivation as described above, where people feel worse off when comparing themselves to others (Smith et al., 2012).

### *Higher SES Students*

Before turning the attention to the other group of students in this study, it must be noted that in Vietnam, academic research has predominantly targeted underprivileged students, thereby creating a notable gap in studies concerning higher SES students (Duong et al., 2023). This focus may be driven by the urgent need to address pressing social issues, as lower SES students continue to encounter significant educational barriers such as poverty and discrimination (Hayden & Pham, 2015).

Government bodies and educational institutions prioritise this demographic to foster equity and reduce social inequalities, and this prioritisation has been further reinforced by the accessibility of data through government programmes and NGOs (Dang & Glewwe, 2018). Moreover, general research unproductivity in the social sciences and humanity fields due to funding limitations and approval mechanisms also contributes to this imbalance (Pham & Hayden, 2019). The acknowledgement of this gap in the Vietnamese HE studies discourse, especially in the context of rising privatisation and internationalisation, highlights the growing necessity for future research to explore the experiences and needs of higher SES students participating in Vietnamese HE towards providing a more nuanced understanding of the interplay between SES and educational outcomes.

On this note, this study found that higher SES students often had a more relaxing attitude towards university services and financial pressures. This aligns with existing research showing that wealthier students generally experience less stress at university due to their financial stability and access to resources (Ball, 2003). This behaviour may stem from a sense of entitlement, a lack of awareness about available resources, or reliance on personal networks outside the university, as mutually suggested by the lower SES participants in this research as well as by Reay et al. (2005) and Bathmaker et al. (2016). Furthermore, the higher SES students also viewed working opportunities during studies as either extracurricular activities or networking opportunities to enhance their CVs, rather than addressing essential financial needs. This hints that they are more likely to have more diverse job options (e.g. unpaid or low paid internships) that, although do not yield immediate wage, may look better on paper. Consequently, socio-economic disparities influence not only short-term university experiences but also long-term career trajectories and professional opportunities (Archer, 2007).

### *Summary and Implications*

In summary, the study revealed that lower SES students demonstrated significant resourcefulness and resilience, which mitigated the negative impacts of financial constraints on their perceived agency. However, they faced unique pressures, particularly concerning housing and employment (especially for those who also internally migrated), which added to their psychological burden. Conversely, higher SES students experienced reduced stress due to their financial stability and often prioritised self-upgrades over essential needs. The findings also highlighted a notable gap in research focusing on higher SES students in Vietnam, emphasising the need for future studies to explore their experiences. Additionally, the social dynamics between students from different SES indicate a need for more inclusive and equitable campus environments.

The implications for FUV and similar institutions are clear: there is a pressing need to provide tailored support to lower SES students, particularly those who are also intranational migrants, to help them navigate their unique challenges. This could include targeted financial aid, housing support, and career counselling services. For higher SES students, there should be a focus on fostering awareness and engagement with available resources to ensure that they are also well supported and that their demands

are met. Importantly, universities must cultivate an inclusive environment that values and respects all students, regardless of their SES (and MS), to enhance overall student agency and well-being.

### **5.1.3. Interplay between Institutional Structures and Student Agency**

The institutional structures at FUV, encompassing curriculum design, service provision, and relationships with staff, faculty, and alumni, emerged as both enablers and constraints of the participating students' perceived agency.

#### *Academic Aspects as Both Enablers and Constraints*

The American-style liberal arts framework at FUV had a complex effect on student agency, offering both significant benefits and notable challenges. On one hand, all interviewees appreciated the curriculum's broad and flexible nature, which has fostered exploration, critical thinking, and a holistic education. This aligns with current research that suggests how liberal arts HE model is well-known for nurturing intellectual curiosity, adaptability, and a broad perspective of disciplines (Nussbaum, 2009). However, it should also be noted that participants and some of the higher SES parents' appreciation for the American-style liberal arts curriculum may reflect the notion of "whiteness as futurity," as posited by Shahjahan and Edwards (2022). This framework suggests that Western educational models are often idealised as pathways to future success, thereby reinforcing the dominance of Western ideologies as more investment-worthy than traditional Eastern values. The students' favourable reception of the liberal arts curriculum could indicate an easier, albeit still critical, acceptance of these norms due to their American or international origins. This sentiment appeared periodically but frequently enough in the findings, where some interviewees consistently compared this model with that of major public universities in Vietnam without noting any of the latter's advantages.

Nevertheless, participating students remained critical of the model, as qualitative findings from this study highlighted concerns about the curriculum's relevance and depth in relation to the job market. Specifically, all participants expressed a need for more practical knowledge and opportunities to apply their learning in real-world contexts. This gap can undermine students' confidence and perceived readiness to enter the workforce, as graduates struggle to translate a liberal arts education into career success (Barrett & Helens-Hart, 2022; Zeid et al., 2015). This sentiment underscores a

persistent issue not only in this model but also in HE more broadly: the disparity between theoretical knowledge and practical skills (Kolb et al., 2006). While the American-style liberal arts education framework undeniably promotes intellectual development, it may require additional practical elements to better prepare students for both immediate and long-term employment.

Additionally, students expressed significant concerns regarding the frequent changes in coursework and faculty members, which posed substantial challenges to their academic planning and the consistency of their learning experiences. High faculty turnover, a concern echoed in the literature (e.g., Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005), disrupts the continuity of education, adversely affecting students' academic performance and overall satisfaction with their educational experiences. These disruptions impede the formation of stable relationships with teaching staff, thereby hindering students' full engagement with their coursework. Research has consistently demonstrated the crucial role of lasting mentor relationships and ongoing academic support from a stable teaching force in fostering student growth (Astin, 1999; Tinto, 2012). Hence, maintaining consistent academic mentorship and institutional stability is paramount for creating a nurturing learning environment that enhances student agency and performance.

### *University Services and Student Support*

The varied feedback on the university's services highlighted the need for FUV to critically assess and align their support structures with the diverse needs and aspirations of their student body. It is essential to acknowledge the all-around acclaim received by FUV's Wellness Centre for its effective approach to interviewees' well-being, a recognition that aligns with existing research underscoring the critical role of wellness centres in HE. Specifically, these facilities are instrumental in promoting holistic well-being by addressing a spectrum of physical, mental, and emotional health challenges, thereby enhancing job satisfaction, productivity, and academic performance (Scalora et al., 2020; Shetty & Bhat, 2023; Yeravdekar & Yeravdekar, 2014). This observation is particularly significant within the Vietnamese HE landscapes, where wellness centres are rare and usually under-utilised in the public sector (Pham et al., 2021), thus highlighting the substantial benefits that well-structured wellness initiatives can offer.

Conversely, significant criticisms were directed at Student Engagement, for lack of transparency and responsiveness, and Career Services, particularly regarding the lack of field-specific guidance and

opportunities. The latter issue, which aligns with other studies documenting the challenges faced by liberal arts graduates in transitioning into the workforce (Barrett & Helens-Hart, 2022; Zeid et al., 2015), is especially worth paying additional attention to given the students' pronounced anxiety about employability as evident in findings concerning intranational migrants and lower SES students. In summary, a lack of coordination between what students expect and the support provided by institutions can cause frustration and disillusionment, which can then impede the progress of student empowerment.

To avoid this, past research suggests that universities can enhance student engagement and agency by fostering a student-centred environment where holistic support services are provided, encompassing both immediate remedial support and long-term personal development (Picton & Kahu, 2021). Such a comprehensive approach to student support would be crucial for bridging the gap between diverse student expectations and institutional offerings, thereby facilitating a more fulfilling and empowering educational experience (Dhillon et al., 2008).

### *Admissions, Faculty Bias, and Equity Concerns*

Students' dissatisfaction with FUV's recent admissions processes, perceived to favour wealthier individuals, aligns with studies showcasing ongoing inequalities in university admissions that tend to benefit students from higher socio-economic backgrounds (Boliver et al., 2022; Boliver et al., 2023; Warikoo & Fuhr, 2014). Literature suggests this perceived bias can undermine students' sense of agency by implying that wealth and social connections outweigh academic merit (Bathmaker et al., 2016; Reay et al., 2005).

Moreover, interviewees' reports of bias and favouritism among some faculty members have raised significant concerns about equity and power dynamics within the institution. Such practices can undermine students' trust in the academic environment and hinder their educational experience, necessitating intentional institutional reforms to ensure fairness and inclusivity. On this note, past findings indicate that faculty biases can significantly impair students' motivation, engagement, academic performance, and overall agency (Gonzalez et al., 2018; Njiecar et al., 2020). These inequalities can severely impact students' ability to act, particularly for individuals from underprivileged backgrounds who may feel disempowered and marginalised. Additionally, if students

perceive their efforts as undervalued compared to classmates engaging in the same activities, it can erode their sense of independence and influence over their academic path (Ancis & Phillips, 1996; Perez et al., 2020). This, in turn, weakens students' drive, involvement, and overall control.

Indeed, there is substantial evidence to underscore the importance of fostering a sense of belonging and inclusivity in HE. Specifically, research consistently shows that students who feel valued and supported by their institution are more likely to make more agentic engagements in their studies, have a sense of purpose, and take ownership of their educational journey; on the contrary, students who feel marginalised or excluded tend to disengage and exhibit lower motivation (Slaten et al., 2016; Strayhorn, 2018; Tinto, 2012). In the Vietnamese context, it is particularly crucial for institutions to promote fairness and equity, as cultural values such as collectivism and respect for authority can deter students from addressing injustices or advocating for their needs (Truong et al., 2017).

#### *Staff and Alumni Network as an Enabler*

Conversely, the staff and alumni network were reported to play a pivotal role in enhancing student agency. Primarily, participants in this study stated that alumni guidance and opportunities were crucial in advancing their personal growth in terms of career development. Alumni connections provided more than just career guidance; they also offered essential internships and helped secure jobs, showcasing the significant influence of a strong alumni network. This observation aligns with previous research, which highlights the critical role of robust alumni connections in supporting students and facilitating their entry into the workforce (English et al., 2021; Kuh et al., 2011). The alumni network thus acts as a bridge between academic life and professional realms, helping students transition smoothly and confidently.

In addition to alumni support, the quality of relationships between university staff and students emerged as a vital factor in promoting student empowerment and success in HE. Students who experienced supportive interactions with university staff reported higher levels of engagement, resilience, and persistence, underscoring that these relationships were not merely transactional but also involved genuine mentorship and guidance. This dynamic is reflective of the findings by Hardy & Bryson (2016), who assert that the nature of student-staff interactions evolves over time, mirroring the students' academic and social integration. Such adaptive support networks are indispensable in creating

an environment where students feel valued and motivated to excel, thereby helping students navigate the complexities of HE and achieve their full potential (El Yakim et al., 2020; George et al., 2020; Hardy & Bryson, 2016).

### *Summary and Implications*

The study revealed that institutional structures at FUV, encompassing curriculum design, service provision, and relationships with staff, faculty, and alumni, served as both enablers and constraints of students' perceived agency. The American-style liberal arts curriculum, while fostering exploration and critical thinking, were expected to have more practical elements to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and real-world application. Additionally, frequent changes in curriculum and faculty turnover presented challenges to academic continuity and planning, suggesting a need for institutional stability and consistent academic mentorship.

In terms of the FUV's support services, the Wellness Centre should continue their good works and take steps to make the services more available to more students, whereas Student Engagement and Career Services require greater realignments to meet diverse student needs effectively.

The perceived bias in admissions and favouritism among faculty members underscore ongoing inequities that can undermine student agency, particularly for those from less privileged backgrounds. To address these issues, FUV and similar institutions must try to intentionally implement more merit-based admissions policies and make these policies known to both prospective and current students alike. Training for faculty on unconscious bias and inclusivity must be offered, in addition to creating clear avenues for students to address instances of any perceived or overt favouritism.

On the contrary, staff and alumni network emerged as a significant enhancer of student agency, providing valuable career guidance, connections and opportunities. This underscores the importance of fostering robust alumni networks and supportive relationships between university staff and students to enhance student engagement, resilience, and success.

#### **5.1.4. Additional Influential Factors and Student Agency**

In addition to MS and SES, the qualitative data revealed two more aspects which could influence the participants' agency, specifically: graduate employability, and spirituality.

### *Graduate Employability as Both Motivators and Stressors*

Primarily, graduate employability and job insecurities made recurrent appearances in almost all interviews, especially in those with underprivileged students as participants. As a matter of fact, for some of these students, the prospect of securing a well-paying job post-graduation acted as both a strong motivator and a great stressor, driving their academic efforts and decision-making throughout university. This instrumentalist approach to HE, viewing a degree as a pathway to financial stability and upward mobility (Wright & Horta, 2018; Zimmerman, 2009) has been found to often encourage agentic behaviours among disadvantaged students (Gilliam, 2015).

That said, this drive also comes with its drawbacks. The psychological stress could be significantly increased by the pressure to find a job, especially due to financial obligations and family expectations, as seen in the qualitative findings of this study. Placing emphasis on career-based tasks might detract from the opportunity to participate in other valuable university activities. These results are consistent with the idea of the “hidden curriculum” in HE, which values professional achievement more than personal and intellectual development (Giroux, 1988). As a result, continuously seeking employability could limit students’ agentic freedom by focusing their academic and personal exploration on one specific objective.

Moreover, previous research suggests that an overemphasis on securing employment can erode students’ sense of agency by reducing their perceived control over their educational journey. Indeed, the discourse points out the risk of students becoming excessively preoccupied with career outcomes, thereby overlooking other enriching aspects of their education, such as intellectual pursuit and personal development (Butterwick & Benjamin, 2006; Knights & Clark, 2014). Moreau & Leathwood (2006) neatly put that the pressure to be employable can create a sense of ontological insecurity among students, where they feel incessantly compelled to prove their worth in the job market. Such sentiment can lead to anxiety, a loss of agency and a generally less fulfilling academic experience, as students prioritise external validation over intrinsic motivation.

### *Spirituality*

Ultimately, the significance of spirituality in decision-making and coping strategies underscores the complexity of agency within the Vietnamese context. Vietnamese culture is deeply rooted in

spirituality, often manifested through ancestor worship and traditional rituals (Malarney, 2020). Engaging in these practices provided some students with a sense of direction, support, and control in uncertain situations. This finding is consistent with research on how spirituality aids individuals in managing stress and challenges (Pargament, 2006).

By embracing spiritual practices, students may be drawing on a well-established source of support and resilience, leveraging their socio-cultural heritage to enhance their agency towards navigating the HE-related pressures. This can be seen as a form of empowerment, with students actively seeking out and utilising culturally meaningful tools to manage stress and make decisions that align with their values and beliefs. More importantly, this finding aligns with the observation that socio-cultural aspects can act as a mediating factor in the cultivation of agency (Inouye et al., 2023), a perspective embraced by the conceptualisation of student agency in this study.

### *Summary and Implications*

Both the quantitative and qualitative data identified various factors influencing the agency of Vietnamese undergraduate students beyond migration history and SES. First, FUV and similar institutions must acknowledge the dual impact of graduate employability on student empowerment. While the prospect of a rewarding job serves as a significant motivator, it is crucial to prevent students from experiencing excessive stress due to career expectations. In line with findings regarding students' frustrations with Career Services, FUV and similar universities need to offer more diverse, extensive, detailed and tailored career guidance, but also continuously advocate for education as a tool for individual growth and overall advancement, rather than just a pathway to work. Moreover, institutions' acknowledging and supporting the role of spirituality in students' lives in an appropriate manner can offer a culturally relevant source of strength.

## **5.2. Conclusion**

### **5.2.1. Summary of Findings and Discussions**

In summary, this explanatory mixed methods research combines quantitative findings from the ATPA-22 questionnaire and qualitative observations from semi-structured interviews with some

questionnaire respondents to present an extensive analysis of perceived agency among different groups of Vietnamese undergraduates at FUV, shedding light on the intricate interactions between MS, SES, institutional structures and other potential factors in shaping student agency.

Like international students in past studies, intranational migrants in this study displayed elevated perceived agency compared to local students, a result of the former group's resilience and self-efficacy developed through navigating cultural mismatches and financial constraints. Similarly, lower SES students exhibited notable ingenuity despite facing considerable hardships and tended to utilise available resources to a higher extent, resulting in generally comparable perceived agency levels with their higher SES peers.

Moreover, the American-style liberal arts curriculum at FUV was both liberating and limiting, with students appreciating its broad scope but desiring more practical applications. The efficacy of institutional support services and faculty-students relationships received mixed feelings, while the interpersonal connections involving staff, and alumni emerged as significant enablers. The drive for graduate employability served as a strong motivator but also introduced substantial stress, potentially curtailing broader educational experiences. Moreover, a keen reliance on established spiritual practices within the Vietnamese socio-cultural context could potentially enhance student agency.

To foster an agency-enhancing and all-around empowering educational environment, universities need to provide intranational migrants, especially those with a lower SES, with specifically tailored resources for cultural adaptation and identity formation. These institutions also need to ensure all students have equitable access to resources and create a collaborative environment where students from different MS and SES do not feel discriminated against or experience a higher degree of relative deprivation. As for curriculum, theories need to be in sync with practicality wherever possible and faculty members' retention must be prioritised. All teaching team members, staff and students must be trained on and familiarised with inclusive practices and conducts to avoid biases or prejudices against one another. Lastly, universities should strike a balance between providing applicable career-oriented guidance and emphasising holistic academic development, as well as attempt to thoughtfully incorporate spirituality-related practices into the curriculum and services.

### 5.2.2. Broader Implications for Global HE Institutions

The findings of this study extend beyond the immediate implications for FUV as discussed to include broader implications for HE institutions the world over. First, intranational migration and its impact on student agency highlights the needs for more serious considerations towards intranational migrants besides international students, especially in countries where provincial disparities are marked and where both groups of migrants are simultaneously present such as Canada, China, the United States, India (King & Sheldon, 2010; Rajan, 2021). This insight can be particularly helpful in informing institutional policies, especially when institutions with diverse student bodies recognise that their intranational migrants may face as many challenges as their international students.

Secondly, the observation of both internal migrants and lower SES student tending to be more resourceful underscores the need for a more holistic approach to supporting disadvantaged students. While material support such as financial aid is still crucial, institutions should also focus on cultivating and broadening this sense of self-efficacy through tailored and targeted programmes for students of different disadvantaged backgrounds (McKay & Devlin, 2016; Devlin et al., 2012).

Ultimately, the complex attitudes of students from different MS and SES towards one another underscore the importance of fostering an inclusive campus environment where negative relative deprivation (Smith et al., 2012) is reduced to a minimum. This involves systematic research towards gaining a comprehensive understanding of how students make social comparisons, between and within their own ethnic-racial or provincial-national groups, especially for HE institutions with a diverse student body (Carter et al., 2020).

In conclusion, this research highlights the significance of universities implementing a more inclusive, fair, and coordinated strategy for student development. By acknowledging the unique experiences of different student demographics, HE institutions can improve student empowerment, resilience, and overall development.

### 5.2.3. Contributions

This study is the first to directly compare the perceived agency of intranational migrants and local students within the broader HE studies discourse and in the Vietnamese HE context. This comparison

and the encompassed findings constitute significant conceptual contributions. The results also strengthen the literature that challenges migration, be it international or intranational, as a process that only comes with drawbacks (Marginson, 2014; Tran & Vu, 2018), showing that it can enhance student agency. Additionally, the research emphasises the intricate connection between MS, SES and international institutional structures on local students' agency, the complex dynamics of which are crucial to Vietnam's privatising and internationalising HE scene.

#### 5.2.4. Limitations

While this research offers significant insights into the factors affecting student agency at FUV, it is not without its drawbacks.

**Sample Size and Generalisability.** The sample sizes of 52 participants in the quantitative phase and eight in the qualitative phase may limit the generalisability of the findings to different contexts. Detecting subtle differences or relationships between variables could be challenging due to the small sample sizes, leading to findings that may not accurately represent the wider student population (Ercikan, 2009). Furthermore, the binary categorisations of participants—such as local vs. intranational migrants and lower SES vs. higher SES—may miss the nuances and complexities of their experiences (Pepanyan et al., 2019). These simplistic categories do not capture the full spectrum of student backgrounds and may overlook important variations within each group. For example, there are significant differences between urban-urban migrants and rural-urban migrants, as well as among students with varying degrees of SES. Further research with larger samples and more nuanced categorisations is needed to confirm and expand upon these findings.

**Data Collection and Potential Biases.** The ATPA-22 scale was utilised for quantitative data collection, but it may not fully capture the nuances of agency in the Vietnamese cultural context, despite being validated in different settings as well as internally within this study. The English language phrasing of certain questions might lead to varied interpretations from participants who speak Vietnamese as their mother tongue, despite their English proficiency. This could introduce slight inaccuracies in measurement, impacting the precision of the quantitative findings.

Moreover, the qualitative data was gathered through semi-structured interviews, which can be influenced by interviewer bias and subjective analysis (Rajendran, 2001), despite the researcher's attempt to mitigate both aspects. As mentioned in the Ethics section, it is crucial to consider the potential influence of the researcher's former internal status during the data collection process. Even though the researcher tried to stay impartial and establish a secure environment for open discussions, their past professional ties with FUV could have impacted the direction of the interviews. Specifically, some interviewees may have still viewed the researcher as a university staff member and utilised the interviews as an opportunity to give feedback to the organisation, which could have led to a social desirability bias (Grimm, 2010) and restricted the honesty and thoroughness of their answers.

### **5.2.5. Future Directions**

Addressing the limitations identified in this study provides a pathway for future research to offer more robust and generalisable insights into student agency at FUV and similar institutions.

Given the relatively small sample sizes in both the quantitative and qualitative phases, future studies should aim to involve larger and more diverse participant groups. This would enhance the statistical power of the findings and allow for more nuanced analysis across different student demographics. Such an approach is crucial for capturing the diversity of experiences and perspectives within the Vietnamese HE landscapes. Moreover, dividing students into more distinct groups with different levels rather than binary categories could provide a deeper understanding of their experiences.

To mitigate potential biases in data collection, future research should consider the cultural context more thoroughly when employing tools like the ATPA-22 scale. Instruments could be adapted to the languages of the participants being studied and validated for the context of each HE systems to ensure they accurately capture the complexities of agency within the socio-cultural framework.

The potential for interviewer bias implies the potential future employment of researchers with no prior professional connections to the participants. This would help ensure the neutrality and authenticity of the collected data.

Future research should also explore the long-term effects of intranational migration and SES on student agency by conducting longitudinal studies. While the current study examines students'

perceived agency after immersion, which is inherently subjective and requires reflections on past experiences, longitudinal studies could offer a more objective understanding of how these factors influence agency over time and across different stages of the students' academic journeys.

By addressing the limitations of the current study and embracing potential trajectories, future research can broaden the currently limited discourse and provide more actionable insights that contribute to the creation of more equitable HE systems.

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# Appendices

## Appendix A: CUREC Approval Email and Letter

**RE: CUREC application: EDUC\_C1A\_24\_104/Revisions**

Stuart Cadwallader <stuart.cadwallader@education.ox.ac.uk>

Tue 3/26/2024 3:05 PM

Cc:Xin Xu ;Student CUREC <student.curec@education.ox.ac.uk>

1 attachments (119 KB)

CUREC\_Approval\_Uyen Le\_EDUC\_C1A\_24\_104.pdf;

Dear Uyên,

Many thanks for updating the documents and clarifying your approach to informed consent – really helpful, clear and reassuring. I can see that, in redrafting the information sheet, you have removed the bit about using your data for further (unspecified) research, which was the bit that was making me slightly nervous. Thank you for engaging so conscientiously with the feedback.

Please find attached a letter of approval - I wish you all the very best with what sounds to be a very interesting piece of research!

Best wishes,

Stuart

**SOCIAL SCIENCES & HUMANITIES  
INTERDIVISIONAL RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE  
DEPARTMENTAL RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE**

Department of Education  
15 Norham Gardens, Oxford OX2 6PY  
[student.curec@education.ox.ac.uk](mailto:student.curec@education.ox.ac.uk); [staff.curec@education.ox.ac.uk](mailto:staff.curec@education.ox.ac.uk)



Uyen Nguyen Phuong Le  
Department of Education, Social Sciences Division  
University of Oxford

26 March 2024

Dear Uyen,

**Research ethics approval**

**Research title:** Comparison between Vietnamese local and intranationally migrating students' self-formation at Vietnam's first and only US-styled liberal arts university: Same 'white' structure, different perceived agencies?

**Research ethics reference:** EDUC\_C1A\_24\_104

The above application has been considered on behalf of the Education Departmental Research Ethics Committee (DREC) in accordance with the University's procedures for ethical approval of all research involving human participants.

I am pleased to confirm that, on the basis of the information provided to the DREC, ethics approval has now been granted for this study.

Please note the following:

**Personal data:** It is the responsibility of the PI to ensure that all personal data collected during the project is managed in accordance with the University's [guidance and legal requirements](#).

**In-person activities:** Any data collection involving in-person interactions with participants must have an up-to-date fieldwork risk assessment in place; further guidance is available from the Safety Office's [website](#).

**Amendments:** Please notify the committee if you intend to make any amendments to the information in your ethics application as submitted at date of this approval, as all changes must receive ethical approval prior to implementation. The amendment form is available on the [SSH IDREC webpage](#).

We welcome feedback on your experience of the ethical review process and suggestions for improvement. Please email any comments to [staff.curec@education.ox.ac.uk](mailto:staff.curec@education.ox.ac.uk) / [student.curec@education.ox.ac.uk](mailto:student.curec@education.ox.ac.uk) or [ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk](mailto:ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk).

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'S. Cadwallader'.

Dr Stuart Cadwallader, DREC Member

## Appendix B: Participation Information Sheet

This is the first section when participants accessed the link to the questionnaire (hosted on Jisc).

### PERSONAL DECISIONS AND DEVELOPMENT OF VIETNAMESE STUDENTS AT A US-STYLED LIBERAL ARTS UNIVERSITY IN HCMC

*Investigator: Uyen Nguyen Phuong Le - Under the supervision of Dr. Xin Xu*

#### PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Central University Research Ethics Committee Approval Reference: [Insert]

#### 1. Introductory paragraph

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether you wish to take part. You may ask any questions before deciding to take part by contacting the researcher [Uyen Nguyen Phuong Le, details in Section 14].

The Principal Researcher is Uyen Nguyen Phuong Le, who is attached to the Department of Education at the University of Oxford. This research is being completed under the supervision of Dr. Xin Xu.

#### 2. Why is this research being conducted?

This study is about the decisions and growth that Vietnamese students who pursue their undergraduate degree at a US-styled liberal arts university in Vietnam have made and undergone.

#### 3. Why have I been invited to take part?

As the focus of the study concerns the self-development of the students through their engagement with the institution and the geographical location in which the university is situated in, actively enrolled senior (Class of 2024) and junior (Class of 2025) students of Fulbright University Vietnam are invited to participate in this study.

#### 4. Do I have to take part?

No. Please note that participation is voluntary. If you do decide to take part, you may withdraw at any point for any reason before submitting your answers by pressing the 'Exit' button/closing the browser (for the questionnaire), or inform me verbally (during the interview). However, only participants who meet the inclusion criteria and complete all the questions in the questionnaire will be entered into the raffle. The deadline by which you can withdraw any information you have contributed to the research is 23:59 GMT on Monday, July 1st, 2024. If you decide to withdraw, any data relating to you will be destroyed.

**5. What will happen to me if I take part in the research?**

You will be asked to complete a web-based questionnaire which we estimate will take you approximately 15 to 20 minutes. You may also wish to agree to a follow-up online interview, which we estimate will last about 45 to 60 minutes, to find out more about your responses.

**6. What are the possible disadvantages and risks in taking part?**

Given the nature of this study, it is highly unlikely that you will suffer any disadvantages or risks by taking part. That said, you will be asked to reflect on your academic and social engagements with both the university and its geographical settings in the interview. Depending on your experiences, a variety of emotions may arise during the conversation. You can choose to not answer any questions that make you feel uncomfortable, or you may wish to temporarily discontinue or permanently end the discussion at any point in time without giving any reason at all.

**7. Are there any benefits in taking part?**

While there are no immediate benefits for those people participating in the research, it is hoped that this research will lead to a better understanding of international higher education as students' self-formation in the specific context of Vietnam.

**8. Expenses and payments**

There will be no payment for taking part in this research, but all participants who submit their answers to the questionnaires will be entered into a raffle for a chance to win a Starbucks or Rang Rang voucher of 100,000VND (~3.2GBP).

**9. What information will be collected and why is the collection of this information relevant for achieving the research objectives?**

The researcher is interested in your academic and social experiences as an undergraduate student pursuing studies at Fulbright University Vietnam and living in HCMC. The information you provide will help the researcher better understand the personal choices and growth of students from different regions in Vietnam throughout their higher education trajectory.

All information which you provide for the purpose of this research will be kept confidential within legal limitations. Only the researcher and her supervisor will have access to the research data.

#### **10. How will my data be used?**

The data I will collect that could identify you will be your name, university email, university class year, financial aid information, hometown, living situation, and video-audio recording and transcripts. (\*)

The responses you provide will be stored in a password-protected electronic folders on Nexus 365 OneDrive for Business (University of Oxford approved secure servers).

Your IP address will not be stored. I will take all reasonable measures to ensure that data remain confidential.

(\*) For the interviews, both audio and video will be recorded. After audio files have been extracted, the video recordings will be permanently deleted and after transcription has been finalised, the audio recordings will be destroyed as well.

Identifiable information will be deleted as soon as it is no longer required for the research. Other research data will be stored for six (06) years after publication or public release of the work of the research.

You will not be identified in any publications based on the research.

For the questionnaire, your name and contact details will be removed, and your financial aid information as well as your hometown if you are not from HCMC will be grouped under the phrase "Other City/Province" or alphabetically codified where applicable (e.g., City A or Province B) before data analysis. Your name will be pseudonymised. Your class year and your hometown if you are from HCMC will be kept as they are for data analysis.

For the interview, the researcher would also like your permission to use direct quotations but without identifying you in any research outputs. Your class year and your hometown if you are from HCMC

will be kept as they are, but your name will be pseudonymised and great care will be taken to ensure that no quotation can be attributed to you.

Research outcomes based on the analysis of your responses may be published as academic publications, conference presentations and websites, after removing any identifiable information.

### **11. Who will have access to my data?**

The researcher and her supervisor will have access to the research data. The University of Oxford is the data controller with respect to your personal data, and as such will determine how your personal data is used in the research. The University will process your personal data for the purpose of the research outlined above. Research is a task that is performed in the public interest. Further information about your rights with respect to your personal data is available from the University's Information Compliance web site at <https://compliance.admin.ox.ac.uk/individual-rights>.

The researcher would like to use the data in both the current study and her future doctoral studies. Data will have identifying information removed before the results of any of these studies are made public.

The findings from the research will be written up in a Master's dissertation and may be written up for academic publications, conference presentations and websites. Please let the researcher know if you are interested in reading a summary of the findings. A copy of the researcher's dissertation will be deposited both in print and online in the [Oxford University Research Archive](#) where it will be publicly available to facilitate its use in future research.

### **12. Who has reviewed this research?**

This research has received ethics approval from a subcommittee of the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee. (Ethics reference: **xxxxx**).

### **13. Who do I contact if I have a concern about the research or I wish to complain?**

If you have a concern about any aspect of this research, please contact Uyen Nguyen Phuong Le at [uyen.le@education.ox.ac.uk](mailto:uyen.le@education.ox.ac.uk) or Dr. Xin Xu at [xin.xu@education.ox.ac.uk](mailto:xin.xu@education.ox.ac.uk), and we will do our best to answer your query. We will acknowledge your concern within 10 working days and give you an indication of how it will be dealt with. If you remain unhappy or wish to make a formal complaint,

please contact the Chair of the Research Ethics Committee at the University of Oxford who will seek to resolve the matter as soon as possible:

The Chair, Education Departmental Research Ethics Committee; Email:

[student.curec@education.ox.ac.uk](mailto:student.curec@education.ox.ac.uk); Address: Department of Education, University of Oxford, 15 Norham Gardens, Oxford, OX2 6PY

#### **14. Further Information and Contact Details**

If you would like to discuss the research with someone beforehand (or if you have questions afterwards), please contact:

- Uyen Nguyen Phuong Le, MSc in Education (Higher Education)
- University of Oxford Department of Education
- Postal address: Uyen Le – Green Templeton College, 43 Woodstock Road, OX2 6HG, Oxford, Oxfordshire, UK

## Appendix C: Consent Form

This is the second section on Jisc after the participants had read the Participation Information Sheet.

### CONSENT FORM

Please read this section carefully before proceeding with the study.

- I confirm that I have read and understand the Participant Information Sheet.
- I have had the opportunity to ask questions and had them answered.
- I understand that all personal information will remain confidential and that all efforts will be made to ensure I cannot be identified (except as might be required by law). My name will not be recorded anywhere in the database or appear in any reports, articles or presentations. I understand that individual participants will not be identified (or will be identified only by codes or pseudonyms).
- I agree that data gathered in this study may be stored anonymously and securely, and may be used for future publications and research.
- I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw by 11.59pm GMT on Monday, July 1st, 2024 (including after consenting to participate or having participated) without giving a reason.

1. Please note that you may only participate in this research if you are 18 years of age or over.

- I certify that I am 18 years of age or over

2. If you have read the information above and agree to participate with the understanding that the data (including any personal data) you submit will be processed accordingly, please tick the box below to start.

- Yes, I agree to take part in this study

3. Please type your full name (as written in your national ID without accent marks) to indicate your consent to participating in this study:

4. Your Fulbright university email address (We will only contact you for the purpose of this study):

## Appendix D: Pre-screening Demographic Questions

This is the third section on Jisc after the participants had read the Participation Information Sheet and indicated Consent. Respondents were automatically ruled out by Jisc (and their data deleted) if they chose the red response for any applicable question(s) below.

### PRE-SCREENING DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONS

5. Do you have Vietnamese citizenship? Yes/**No**

6. Was your high school located in Vietnam? Yes/**No**

*If you attended multiple high schools, please choose the option that describes your most recent high school.*

7. Please note that you may only participate in this survey if you are actively enrolled as an undergraduate student at Fulbright University Vietnam (FUV) Class of 2024 or Class of 2025.

- I am a Class of 2024 undergraduate student at FUV
- I am a Class of 2025 undergraduate student at FUV
- **I am neither a Class of 2024 nor Class of 2025 undergraduate student at FUV**

8. Did you attend Fulbright University Vietnam immediately after your graduation from high school? Yes/ **No**

9. Which city/province are you residentially registered with? Please select an option (drop-down list which contains all 63 major cities and provinces in Vietnam and an Other option)

10. Which city/province was your high school located in? Please select an option (drop-down list which contains all 63 major cities and provinces in Vietnam and an Other option)

*If you attended multiple high schools, please choose the option that describes your most recent high school.*

11. Was your high school also located in HCMC? Yes/No

*If you attended multiple high schools, please choose the option that describes your most recent high school.*

12. How much is your need-based financial aid package from Fulbright University Vietnam?\*

*Please do not include any merit-based scholarship amount. If you do not receive a financial aid package, please put in "0".*

13. What is your current living situation in HCMC? Living with parent(s)/guardian(s)/relative(s) OR Fulbright-owned housing OR Off-campus private housing

## Appendix E: ATPA-22 Questionnaire

This is the last section on Jisc after the participants had read the Participation Information Sheet, indicated Consent and met the inclusion criteria to participate in the study. The researcher retained the exact same wordings from Lautamo et al.'s (2021) original study but added an attention-checking question (Question 17 - If you are reading this statement, please choose 4-Strongly Agree).

### SELF-EVALUATION QUESTIONNAIRE

Please read the statements carefully and share your evaluation on each statement (1-Strongly Disagree; 4-Strongly Agree)

Questions	1- Strongly Disagree	2 - Disagree	3 - Agree	4 - Strongly Agree
Q1. I feel that different areas of my daily life are balanced				
Q2. I have time and/or energy to take care of my wellbeing				
Q3. I feel that I have a suitable amount to do on a daily basis				
Q4. I am happy with the amount of time I have for rest and sleep				
Q5. I am satisfied with the amount of daily activities I manage to do				
Q6. I do enough daily for others (not too much/not too little)				
Q7. I feel that I have enough time to do tasks that I want to do				

Q8. I do tasks that I feel challenge me appropriately				
Q9. I do tasks that I feel are important and meaningful to me				
Q10. I do tasks that gives me a feeling of competence or satisfaction				
Q.11. I can solve daily challenges in a reasonable way				
Q12. I can handle problems and pressure (by discussing them or taking actions)				
Q13. I make active choices about what to do daily				
Q14. I feel that I have the ability to manage the challenges of work or studies				
Q15. If necessary, I can flexibly and fluently adapt my performance and routines				
Q16. I can easily express my thoughts and opinions to other people				
Q17. If you are reading this statement, please choose 4-Strongly Agree				
Q18. I feel that my loved ones support my choices				

Q19. I feel I am accepted in my community				
Q20. I can influence my living situation in satisfying ways				
Q21. I can take care of my everyday tasks independently				
Q22. I feel safe in my surroundings				
Q23. I manage to perform in my environment				

## Appendix F: English Translation of Interview Protocol

### I. Warming Up & Introduction:

Hello again, my name is Uyen. I'm currently a Master's student at the University of Oxford in Department of Education. In my study, I want to investigate decisions and self-developments of Vietnamese junior and senior students at a US-styled liberal arts university in Vietnam. Thank you for agreeing to partake in the interview today. As you may have read in the Interview Information Sheet that came with the email, here is what will happen:

- Interviews description: I will conduct this online interview with you today on Microsoft Teams in about 45 to 60 minutes where I will ask a range of questions about your academic and social experiences in your undergraduate trajectory at Fulbright University Vietnam and HCMC.
- Audio recording/ notes: With your permission, I would like to make a video-audio recording of our discussion to make sure I'm getting an accurate record of the interview. Alongside recording you, I will also take notes in my notebook.
- Data management: After all interviews have been concluded, I will extract the audios and delete the videos. After I have finalised transcriptions and translations, the recordings will be deleted as well.
- Risks: Depending on your undergraduate experiences, a range of emotions may arise during the interview. Please feel free to skip any questions that make you uncomfortable or request to pause or stop the conversation at any point in time without giving any reason.
- Permissions to direct-quote: I would also like to direct-quote some of your sharings if they are applicable to the findings or any part of the research. You will of course be given a pseudonym or a participant code, and I will do every-thing in my power so that none of the quote or any details shared in my writing can be traced back to you.

Alright, do you have any questions?

Are you happy to take part?

Do you prefer to be interviewed in English or Vietnamese?

Before we start, I would like to remind you to view me as an independent researcher from Oxford University and not as a former FUV staff, and to have an open conversation with me. Are you happy with that?

Ok, thanks, let's start.

## II. Interview questions:

### Section 1: On MS

Blue questions are reserved for intranational migrants and orange questions are reserved for local students

Question 1. What were your primary options for higher education institutions when you finished high school?

Question 2. Given such options, why did you choose to move to HCMC to enroll in Fulbright University Vietnam specifically?/

Given such options, why did you choose to enrol in Fulbright University Vietnam specifically?

- What, according to you, make this institution unique compared to other universities?
- (If not mentioned) As we all know, this university is a US-style liberal arts university. Did this factor count in your consideration?

Question 3. As an intranational migrant, how would you describe the process of adapting to life in HCMC when you first moved here – any notable advantages or challenges?

- Would you say the local students have similar or different experiences?
- How do you feel about your life in HCMC now?

How do you compare your experiences as a student here with those who internally migrated from other cities or provinces in terms of any advantages or disadvantages?

- Would you say your friends who migrated from other provinces and cities to HCMC have similar or different experiences?
- How do you feel your experience as a student might have been different if you were not from HCMC?

### Section 2: On SES

Question 4. How would you describe your and your family's socio-economic backgrounds?

- How has this background influenced your experiences at the university?

Question 5. Have you ever felt limited or advantaged by your socio-economic status while pursuing your studies or participating in activities? Can you provide some examples?

Question 6. Based on your observations, do you think there are any FUV activities which could potentially hinder or exclude certain students from participating on the financial grounds?

Question 7. Have you noticed any variations in the SES of the student body at Fulbright?

- If yes, would you say that those differences have greatly impacted your or any other friends' experiences at FUV?

### Section 3: On Institutional Structures

Question 8. What types of academic engagements and social activities do you participate in on campus?

Question 9. What types of FUV services do you make use of (for instance, Career Services, Learning Support, Wellness Centre)?

- How have your experiences been with the services that you use (positive/negative and why)?

Question 10. What types of academic engagements and social activities do you participate outside of campus? (internships/part-time jobs/research projects/other social activities?)

Question 11. What do you perceive to be the biggest advantages and disadvantages in your status as an FUV student thus far, within FUV and outside of the FUV community?

### Section 4: On Balance and Personal Networks

Question 12. Which activities have occupied the most of your time during the day and the week?

- Do you feel your life is generally healthy and balanced?
- Do you feel like you have enough time for self-care? What are your strategies for self-care?

Question 13. Could you elaborate on any tasks or situations that you found challenging, problematic or stressful during your undergraduate studies?

- What strategies did you employ to overcome these challenges?

Question 14. Who has comprised your support group during your time at Fulbright (for instance, friends (housemates)/alumni/families/staff/faculty members)?

- Do you feel like it is easy for you to express your thoughts and discuss your problems with other people? Why or why not?

Section 5: Other Questionnaire-related Questions: Questions on students' individual choices on some questions: For instance, "I notice you chose Strongly Agree for that question, can you elaborate more on your choice?"

### III. Wrapping Up:

Do you have any questions about the interview or anything else you would like to discuss that we haven't already covered?

Okay, I would like to thank you for your time and for sharing your experiences with me today. Your participation is greatly appreciated. Once again, I will share some direct quotes and some details in your sharing in my dissertation, but I will make sure that none of the information can be traced back or attributed to you. Both your video and audio files will also be deleted once I have wrapped up transcription and translation of today's interview.

Depending on whether you are up for it or now as you have indicated in the Consent Form, I may contact you for clarification of your responses.

I want to remind you that you have the right to withdraw your participation until end of day 01/07/2024 (GMT, which corresponds to 7AM 02/07/2024 Vietnam time). If you wish to do so, please contact me via email at [uyen.le@education.ox.ac.uk](mailto:uyen.le@education.ox.ac.uk).

## Appendix G: SPSS Outputs

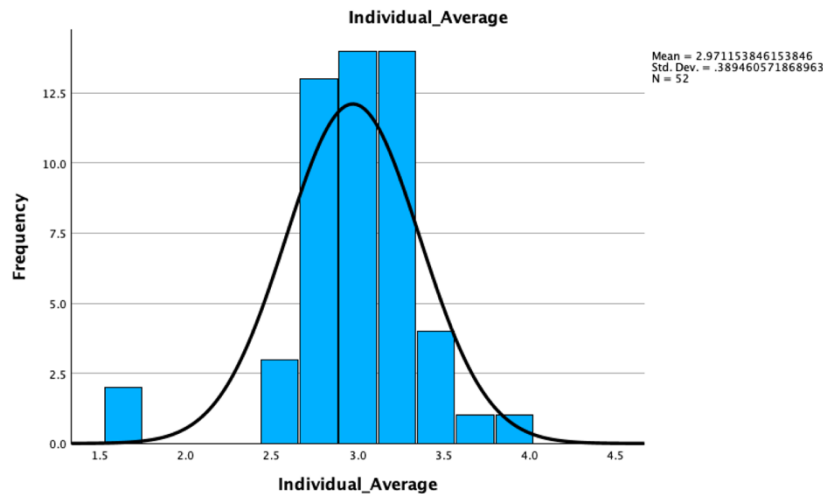
### 1. Assessment of ANOVA Assumptions: Testing Normality and Homogeneity of Variance of the DV (Individual Average Score)

#### Frequencies

		Statistics		
		Individual_Average	Migration_Status	SES
N	Valid	52	52	52
	Missing	0	0	0
Mean		2.971153846154	.73	.44
Median		3.000000000000	1.00	.00
Std. Deviation		.3894605718690	.448	.502
Skewness		-1.170	-1.072	.239
Std. Error of Skewness		.330	.330	.330

This table presents the descriptive statistics for the continuous DV (individual average scores) and the categorical IVs (MS and SES). Statistics include the number of valid cases (N), mean, median, standard deviation, skewness, and standard error of skewness.

Histogram



This histogram illustrates the distribution of the continuous DV (Individual Average Score), with a superimposed normal curve. The data visually appears to be approximately normally distributed, with most scores clustering around the mean of 2.97.

### Levene's Test of Equality of Error Variances<sup>a,b</sup>

		Levene Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.
Individual_Average	Based on Mean	1.617	3	48	.198
	Based on Median	.954	3	48	.422
	Based on Median and with adjusted df	.954	3	26.953	.429
	Based on trimmed mean	1.364	3	48	.265

Tests the null hypothesis that the error variance of the dependent variable is equal across groups.

a. Dependent variable: Individual\_Average

b. Design: Intercept + Migration\_Status + SES + Migration\_Status \* SES

This table displays Levene's test results across groups (defined by the IVs - MS and SES). In all cases,  $p > 0.05$  (outlined in red), indicating the assumption of equal variances is met, supporting the use of two-way ANOVA.

## 2. Results of Two-Way ANOVA

### Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Dependent Variable: Individual\_Average

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	.841 <sup>a</sup>	3	.280	1.951	.134	.109
Intercept	286.142	1	286.142	1992.010	<.001	.976
Migration_Status	.830	1	.830	5.777	.020	.107
SES	.094	1	.094	.656	.422	.013
Migration_Status * SES	.070	1	.070	.489	.488	.010
Error	6.895	48	.144			
Total	466.779	52				
Corrected Total	7.736	51				

a. R Squared = .109 (Adjusted R Squared = .053)

This table presents the results of a two-way ANOVA examining the effects of the IVs (MS and SES) on the DV (individual average scores). The analysis was conducted using Type III sums of squares. The results reveal a significant main effect of MS ( $p = .020$  – outlined in red), but no significant main effect of SES ( $p = .422$ ) nor a significant interaction effect between MS and SES ( $p = .488$ ).

## Appendix H: Coding Scheme

Theme	Deductive Codes	Inductive Codes
Student Agency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Active decisions-making</li> <li>* Active engagements/immersions</li> <li>* Active problems-solving</li> <li>* General activeness</li> </ul>	
Migration Status	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Local students</li> <li>* Intranational migrants</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Initial shock (IM)</li> <li>* Reverse culture shock (IM)</li> <li>* Graduate employability (LS &amp; IM)</li> <li>* Housing problems (LS &amp; IM)</li> <li>* Financial struggles (LS &amp; IM)</li> <li>* Familiarity with HCMC (LS)</li> <li>* Relative deprivation (LS)</li> </ul>
SES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Higher SES</li> <li>* Lower SES</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Financial struggles (L)</li> <li>* Continuous employments (L)</li> <li>* Relative deprivation (L)</li> <li>* Graduate employability (L)</li> <li>* Self-upgrades (H)</li> </ul>
Structures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Structural enablements</li> <li>* Structural constraints</li> <li>* Teaching and learning</li> <li>* Liberal arts curriculum</li> <li>* Institutional services</li> <li>* On-campus relationships</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* First two years</li> <li>* Faculty-related information</li> <li>* Biases and prejudices</li> <li>* Course values in money</li> <li>* Graduate employability</li> <li>* Negative experiences</li> <li>* Positive experiences</li> </ul>
Perceptions of the Other Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Migrants → Local students</li> <li>* Local students → Migrants</li> <li>* Lower SES → Higher SES</li> <li>* Higher SES → Lower SES</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Negative</li> <li>* Positive</li> <li>* Relative deprivation</li> </ul>
Other Noteworthy Findings		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Graduate employability as stressor</li> <li>* Graduate employability as motivator</li> <li>* Spirituality</li> </ul>